

Parents' Influence on Adolescents' Sexual Behavior

Summary

Research suggests that parents can strongly influence their teens' sexual behavior. Parents' marital status, their disapproval of and discussion with teens about the standards of behavior and the social and moral consequence of teen sexual activity as well as parental monitoring all appear to impact teens' decisions to engage in sexual activity.

- **Parent-Adolescent Communication.** Adolescents whose mothers discussed the social and moral consequences of being sexually active are less likely to engage in sexual intercourse. The more mothers communicated with their adolescent children about the social and moral consequences of sexual activity, the less likely adolescents were to engage in sexual intercourse.¹
- **Parental Monitoring.** Children whose parents monitor them more closely are less likely to be sexually active when they are in their teens. Adolescents whose parents report stricter monitoring of their children's behaviors during pre-adolescence are 30 percent less likely to be sexually active when compared to adolescents whose parents reported less strict monitoring of their children's behaviors during preadolescence.²
- **Unwed Birth.** Teenage girls are less likely to be sexually active if their parents were married at the time of their birth. Adolescent females age 15 to 19 whose parents were married at the time of the adolescent's birth were 42 percent less likely to report having engaged in sexual activity when compared to similar adolescents whose parents were cohabiting at the time of the adolescent's birth and 26 percent less likely to report having engaged in sexual activity when compared to similar adolescents whose parents were not living together at the time of the adolescent's birth.³
- **Single-Parent Socializing.** Teenage boys whose mothers date more often and more quickly after a divorce are more likely to be sexually active. Among a sample of recently divorced mothers and their adolescent children, mothers' dating behaviors (number of dating partners, frequency of dates, length of time began dating after divorce) were directly related to their son's sexual activity. Sons whose divorced mothers dated often, had multiple dating partners, and dated soon after divorce were more likely to report having been involved in heavy petting or sexual intercourse.⁴
- **Parents' Attitudes.** Teenagers who feel their parents strongly disapprove of their being sexually active are less likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection. Adolescents who felt that their parents strongly disapproved of their having sex were less likely to have a sexually transmitted infection (STI) than peers who did not perceive their parents' strong disapproval.⁵
- **Transitions in Family Structure.** The likelihood that teenaged girls will become pregnant increases with each change in family structure that they experience. Among sexually active adolescent females, after accounting for current

family structure and family structure at birth, each transition in family structure (parental marriage, divorce, remarriage, etc.) experienced by adolescent females increased their risk of pregnancy by 11 percent.⁶

- **Intact Family.** Adolescents in single-parent households are more likely to be sexually active than peers in two-parent families. Compared to adolescents from two-parent families, adolescents from single-parent families were significantly more likely to report having ever had sexual intercourse.⁷
- **Family Stability.** On average, adolescents whose mothers divorced tend to have more sexual partners than peers who did not experience parental divorce. Adolescents whose mothers had a premarital pregnancy, adolescents whose mothers had divorced, adolescents whose mothers were married at a young age, and adolescents whose mothers expressed more accepting attitudes about teen sexual activity tended to report having had sex with more partners than their peers.⁸
- **Parental Involvement.** Teens whose parents watch television with them more frequently and limit their TV viewing are less likely to be sexually active. The more often parents watched television with their teens and the more they limited television viewing, the less likely adolescents were to have sex.⁹
- **Parental Guidance.** Adolescents whose parents talk with them about standards of sexual

behavior are more likely to be abstinent. Youths whose parents talked to them about what is right and wrong in sexual behavior were significantly more likely to be abstinent than peers whose parents did not.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Vincent Guilamo-Ramos *et al.*, "Parental Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Accessibility: Parent-Adolescent Communication and Adolescent Risk Behavior," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, No. 5 (December 2006): 1229-1246.
- 2 M. A. Longmore, W. D. Manning and P. C. Giordano, "Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens' Dating and Sexual Initiation: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, No. 2 (2001): 322-335.
- 3 D. P. Hogan, R. Sun and G. T. Cornwell, "Sexual and Fertility Behaviors of American Females Aged 15-19 Years: 1985, 1990, and 1995," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, No. 9 (2000): 1421-1425.
- 4 L. B. Witbeck, R. L. Simons, and M. Y. Kao, "The Effects of Divorced Mother's Dating Behaviors and Sexual Attitudes on the Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of Their Adolescent Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 56, No. 3 (1994): 615-621.
- 5 Carol A. Ford *et al.* "Predicting Adolescents' Longitudinal Risk for Sexually Transmitted Infection," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 159 (July 2005): 657-664.
- 6 Hogan, "Sexual and Fertility Behaviors of American Females," 1421-1425.
- 7 E. W. Young *et al.*, "The Effects of Family Structure on the Sexual Behavior of Adolescents," *Adolescence* 26, No. 104 (1991): 977-986.
- 8 A. Thornton and D. Camburn, "The Influence of the Family on Premarital Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Demography* 24, No. 3 (1987): 323-240.
- 9 Melina Bersamin *et al.*, "Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70 (February 2008): 97-112.
- 10 Cheryl B. Aspy *et al.*, "Parental Communication and Youth Sexual Behavior," *Journal of Adolescence* 30 (2007): 449-466.



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