

Family Structure and Teen Sex

Summary

Adolescents raised in intact families are less likely to engage in sexual activity, to be involved with an older sexual partner, or to become pregnant or give birth in their teens. They also tend to form more stable romantic relationships. Neighborhood characteristics are also associated with youths' likelihood of being sexually active.

- **Teen Romantic Relationships. Family structure is related to the stability of teens' relationships.** Compared with teenagers in intact families, peers in married-stepparent and single-father families tended to have less stable romantic relationships. This association between family structure and teenage dating was mediated by (i.e., operating through) the higher number of family transitions, that is—divorce, remarriage, cohabitation—that were associated with non-intact family structures. This was true taking into consideration adolescents' gender, age, race/ethnicity, parental marital status at birth, residential stability and parental education.¹
- **Sexual Initiation. Family structure was associated with youths' sexual behavior.** Even after accounting for a set of parental involvement variables, adolescents living with two biological parents were significantly less likely to transition into sexual activity when compared to adolescents from all other family structures. Adolescents from other family structures were between 40 percent and 198 percent more likely to transition into sexual activity than adolescents living with two biological parents.²
- **Parental Marital Status at Birth. Adolescents whose parents were married at the time of their birth are less likely to engage in sexual activity.** Adolescent females age 15-19 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
- **Older Partners. Family structure was related to adolescent girls' sexual behavior and partner choice.** Adolescent girls who lived with both biological/adoptive parents had, on average, reduced odds (46 percent) of initiating sexual activity with older (by at least three years) partners versus remaining abstinent compared to peers who lived in non-intact families.⁴
- **Neighborhood Context. The family composition of a neighborhood appears to be associated with individual teen sexual behavior.** Adolescent females were especially likely to engage in premarital intercourse if they live in neighborhoods with relatively high levels of female labor force participation, or if they live in neighborhoods in which a high percentage of women are separated or divorced. The percentage of religious adherents in the community

population was inversely related to the likelihood of adolescents' sexual activity.⁵

- **Family Transitions.** Family disruption or transition is related to youths' sexual behavior. For male adolescents, each change in parental marital status (e.g. divorce, remarriage, separation, etc.) between age six and 11 increased the males' odds of engaging in sexual intercourse by 37 percent.⁶
- **Childhood Family Structure.** For adolescent girls, the proportion of childhood lived with a single parent is linked to teen sexual activity. For female adolescents, the percentage of time from birth to age 11 spent in a single-parent home was related to age at first sexual intercourse. For each additional year spent in a single parent household, the likelihood that females would engage in sexual intercourse during adolescence increased by roughly 8 percent.⁷
- **Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy.** Family disruption and transition during childhood is associated with women's likelihood of having a nonmarital pregnancy. In this study, women who had experienced more transitions in their living arrangements during childhood and adolescence were more likely to become pregnant out of wedlock. This effect was significant regardless of race, ethnicity, parental education, and the age of the adolescent.⁸
- **Teenage Pregnancy.** Adolescent boys in intact families are less likely to cause a teen pregnancy than peers in single-parent families. When compared to adolescent males that lived with both biological parents at age 14, those living with a single mother at age 14 had almost twice the odds of ever having impregnated a girl. Those living with their mother and her partner (a male other than the biological father) also had greater

odds of ever having impregnating a girl, but the difference was not statistically significant.⁹

- **Teenage Birth.** Teenage girls in intact families are less likely to give birth in high school than peers in other family forms. Compared with adolescent females from all other family types, girls living with two married biological parents during their eighth-grade year were roughly 50 percent less likely to give birth before the end of their twelfth-grade year (high school dropouts included).¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Shannon Cavanagh, "Family Structure History and Adolescent Romance," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, No. 3 (August 2008): 698-714.
- 2 J. Pearson, C. Mullet, and M.L. Frisco, "Parental Involvement, Family Structure, and Adolescent Sexual Decision Making," *Sociological Perspectives* 49, No.1 (2006): 67-90.
- 3 D. P. Hogan, R. Sun and G. T. Cornwall, "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 Jennifer Manlove, Suzanne Ryan, and Kerry Franzetta, "Risk and Protective Factors Associated with the Transition to a First Sexual Relationship with an Older Partner," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 40, No. 2 (February 2007): 135-143.
- 5 John O. G. Billy, Karen L. Brewster, and William R. Grady, "Contextual Effects on the Sexual Behavior of Adolescent Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56, (1994): 387-404.
- 6 B.C. Miller, M. C. Norton, T. Curtis, E. J. Hill, P. Schvaneveldt, and M.H. Young, "The Timing of Sexual Intercourse among Adolescents: Family, Peer, and Other Antecedents," *Youth & Society* 29, No. 1 (1997): 54-83.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Kyle Crowder and Jay Teachman, "The Risk of Premarital Pregnancy Increases Significantly with the Number of Changes in Living Arrangements During Childhood and Adolescence," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, No. 3 (August 2004): 721-738.
- 9 L. Ku, F. L. Sonenstein, and J. H. Pleck, "Neighborhood, Family, and Work: Influences on the Premarital Behaviors of Adolescent Girls," *Social Forces* 72, No. 2 (1993): 479-503.
- 10 K. A. Moore, J. Manlove, D. A. Gleib, and D. R. Morrison, "Nonmarital School-Age Motherhood: Family, Individual, and School Characteristics," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 13, No. 4 (1998): 433-457.

