

PREVENTING TEEN PREGNANCY

Key Messages for Teens and Parents

Three out of ten girls in the United States get pregnant before age 20. That's two thousand girls every day. We have the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates in the fully developed world. 1 in 10 babies in the United States is born to a teen mother. **And it's 100% preventable.**

Preventing teen pregnancy solves a host of other social problems. It is the most effective way to reduce child poverty and improve the lives of this generation and the next. If more children in this country were born to parents ready and able to care for them, we would see lower levels of academic failure, crime, child abuse and neglect, and healthier, more successful children and families.

The teen years must be for education and growing up, not pregnancy and parenthood. Babies need and deserve adult parents, not parents who are children themselves. All grown-ups—parents, coaches, clergy, teachers, relatives, and even media leaders—must help teens commit to the idea that teen pregnancy is not okay. We need to help young people understand that being a parent is one of the most important things they will do with their lives, and waiting until they're older will help them be the best parents they can be.

Unlike so many other situations that can derail an education, put dreams on hold, change the trajectory of generations of lives, and shake a family to its core, teen pregnancy is preventable. In fact, over the past two decades, teen pregnancy and birth rates in the U.S. have declined by more than one-third. But progress has slowed and we need to reach teens now more than ever. **Teen pregnancy is a problem we can solve.**

The messages in this memo offer specific ideas and talking points for teens and adults to help prevent teen pregnancy. They are based on the most current research and expertise available.

74% of teens say that when a TV show or character they like deals with teen pregnancy, it makes them think more about the consequences of sex.

MESSAGES FOR TEENS:

1. Not everyone is doing it. Some are, some aren't—and some are lying. In fact, more than half of high school-aged teens are virgins. The younger teens are, the less likely it is that they have had sex. Despite what most teens think, not everyone is in a rush to have sex. When asked whether they would rather lose their virginity as soon as possible or wait and lose their virginity with someone they love, three-quarters of teen boys ages 15-18 said they would prefer to wait for a girl they love. Among teens who have had sex by age 18, two-thirds say that they wish they had waited longer.

2. Thinking "it won't happen to me" doesn't count as protection. Have a plan. There are only two ways to prevent pregnancy: either don't have sex at all, or use protection carefully and correctly every single time. Plan on one or the other, and stick to it. Figure out how you will handle a sexual situation before you're in the middle of one. Sex happens—so think about what you will do when it does: Will you insist on waiting? How will you say no without hurting someone's feelings? If you do have sex, what kind of contraception will you use? How will you get it? Will you know how to use it properly? Think about all of this before you're caught up in the heat of the moment.

3. You can always say "no"—even if you've said "yes" before. Just because one relationship included sex doesn't mean all relationships will. You don't even have to continue having sex with your current partner if you don't want to. In fact, more than half of teen guys say that they are "relieved" when their female partner wants to wait to have sex. You always have the power to say no, regardless of your sexual history or your reputation.

4. Being prepared for sex doesn't make you pushy or easy—it makes you smart. A sexually active teen who does not use protection has an **85% chance of pregnancy within a year.** More than half of teen guys say girls who carry condoms are being responsible, and more than 8 in 10 teen guys say they would gladly wear a condom if asked. Girls need to know they have power in this situation. Still, 17% of sexually active teen girls (aged 15-19) did not use contraception the last time they had sex.

"Guys at school all talk like they're having sex—Monday mornings, it's all 'did you hit that?' if you went out with some girl. But most of it is just talk. They feel like they're not cool if they're not having sex all the time."

- Guy , 17

5. Surprise! Guys actually value relationships over sex.

Two out of three teen guys say that they could be happy in a relationship without sex—and that they would *rather* have a girlfriend but no sex than sex but no girlfriend. Most guys want what girls want—love, connection and a relationship with someone they can trust. In fact, more than half of teen guys say they would not have sex with someone unless they really loved her. Contrary to what most people think, the majority of high school-aged guys have not had sex, and the average age that guys lose their virginity is 17.

6. It only takes once. One of the most common myths among teens is that pregnancy can't happen the first time you have sex. Actually, it can, and it does. Even if you're both virgins. When teens become sexually active, the sex is almost always unplanned and sporadic; communication between partners is often poor; and denial and guilt may stand in the way of getting and using protection. Whether you're having sex for the first time or the 50th time, if you're not using contraception, there is a chance of pregnancy. If that sounds like a risk you don't want to take, you can always decide you're just not ready for sex.

"Things were moving so fast. We didn't stop to think about protection. I wish I'd taken five minutes to buy a condom—instead I'll be working to support my son for the rest of my life."

- Guy , 16

7. If you're drunk or high, you can't make good decisions about anything—especially sex. Drinking alcohol and using drugs makes teens more likely to have unplanned or even unwanted sex. Having sex while drunk or high means you are much less likely to use protection. Even if you had meant to wait or use protection, those plans go out the window fast if you're not thinking straight. Lots of teens say they've done something sexually when using drugs or alcohol that they might not have done if they'd been sober. If you're going to a party with your friends, agree ahead of time to look out for each other. Step in if you see someone you care about losing

control—before they do something they might not remember or might really regret.

8. Sexting isn't harmless. Before you hit "send," remember that nothing in cyberspace ever really goes away. One in five teen girls ages 13-16 has sent (or posted online) nude or semi-nude images of themselves. Think that sexy photo is just between you and your guy? Think again: one-third of teen boys and one-quarter of teen girls have had nude or semi-nude photos—originally meant to be private—shared with them. Those photos are not only embarrassing, they're potentially dangerous: one-third of teens think that those who send sexy texts and images of themselves are expected to hook up in real life, and 15% of those who admit to sexting have done so with someone they know *only* online. Not to mention that having naked photos of a minor could land you in jail—even if it's a photo of someone you know and love. The safest sext is no sext.

"I told my boyfriend, 'We have a son.'"

He said, 'No, we don't. YOU have a son.'"

- Girl , 15

9. Girls: Sex won't make him yours, and a baby won't make him stay. One of the worst reasons to have sex is because you think your boyfriend will dump you if you don't. Sex and pregnancy don't guarantee a lasting, loving relationship—in fact, three-quarters of guys say that sex won't make them stay in a relationship they don't want to be in. Babies don't keep a relationship glued together—they are more likely to tear them apart: 8 out of 10 of teen fathers don't marry their babies' mothers, and most guys don't stick around at all.

10. Guys: You can say "no," too. Girls aren't the only ones who feel pressure to have sex. Nearly 8 in 10 teen guys say there is way too much pressure on them to have sex—from friends, from girls, and from society—and 1 in 5 teen guys admits to going farther sexually than they really wanted to because of pressure from a girl. You don't have to have sex to prove anything. Having sex doesn't make you a man: waiting until you're ready and acting responsibly does.

11. Older teens: Younger teens are listening to you. Talk with your little sister or brother or younger cousin—let them know they can ask you anything. Kids who have positive, close relationships with older siblings are less like to take risks with sex. They look up to you, and you don't carry as much baggage as a parent or another grownup. You can make a big difference. In fact, the younger teens are when they first have sex, the more they wind up regretting it. Let younger teens know that they should take their time and not feel pressure to grow up too fast. They're listening to you.

MESSAGES FOR ADULTS (Parents, Teachers, Coaches, etc.):

1. Teens want to know what their parents think. Even if they don't act like it. Adults are powerful figures in the lives of young people and hold the key to preventing teen pregnancy. Teens have said that parents are the #1 influence on their decisions about sex—more influential than peers or the media. Yet parents still think peers have more sway. Parents: you are your teens' first and best teachers. They're waiting to hear from you. And if you're not talking to them about sex, love and relationships, remember that everyone else is.

"You get influenced by your family. My older sister was 17. She had a kid and she didn't get to go to college like she was planning—she had to take care of her kid. I am not going to make that same mistake."

- Girl , 16

2. Forget about "The Talk." It's an eighteen-year conversation about love, relationships, values, and sex. Start early, in an age-appropriate way, and let your kids know that they can ask you anything. Don't freak out if they ask you questions, or they might be afraid to ask you anything again. And just because they're curious doesn't mean they're doing it. Teens tell us that their parents tend to give them information too late and in much too vague terms. They want to know what their parents' values are—about **sex and love, and how to tell the difference**. They can look anything up online (and they may know more about sex than you think) but what they really want are parents who can help them sort out relationships, handle peer pressure, and learn how to say "no" without hurting feelings.

3. Despite the overwhelming amount of information out there, myths about sex and pregnancy are rampant. You'd think that having access to information about anything any time anywhere might help eliminate some long-held myths about sex and pregnancy. Not so. For example: many teens still don't realize that a girl can get pregnant the first time she has sex; many guys and girls still think that if you have sex standing up you can't get pregnant (yes you can!) and 1 in 3 teen boys still think two condoms are better than one (wrong! Two condoms are worse—they can cause friction and tear). No wonder more than one-third of teen boys age 15-18 who have had sex say they've also had a pregnancy scare. **Parents: you don't need to be a biology text book, but you do need to help your teens understand exactly what they need to do to prevent pregnancy.**

"My friend is dating an older guy—he's out of high school and takes her to bars and clubs a lot. I know she feels like she has to sleep with him because he's already so experienced. She's afraid he'll dump her if she doesn't."

- Girl , 15

4. Don't let your daughter get involved with a much older guy. Protect your son from older girls. Teen girls who date guys three or more years older are less likely to use contraception and are more likely to report later that they didn't really want to have sex in the first place. Of young teen mothers, about one in four had a partner who was at least 5 years older. Older guys can lead younger girls into very risky situations. Talk to your sons, too—don't let them go out with much older girls and don't allow them to date girls a lot younger than themselves. Getting attention from someone who is older is very appealing, but also dangerous, if you're a young teen. That's why setting boundaries for your teens about age differences is important. Set the rules BEFORE there is a specific boy or girl you're worried about, so your kids know it's not personal, it's just the rule.

5. Set rules about online behavior. Even if you don't know how to post a photo on Facebook, you are still the expert on parenting your teen. Just as you set limits on what they can wear and how late they can stay out, you have to set boundaries about what is acceptable online and what isn't. Your kids may not fully understand the long-term consequences of a text or photo sent on a dare or as a joke. About half of all teens have received sexually suggestive text messages; one-third of teen boys and one-fourth of teen girls have received a nude/semi-nude image electronically, originally meant for someone else. Know what your kids are doing online, how they define "friend" (online vs. offline) and help them understand that they lose control once they hit "send." Don't want your son texting or talking all night to his girlfriend? Make his bedroom a cellphone-free zone. Worried that your daughter is staying up all night IM'ing with boys? Tell her that the laptop stays on the kitchen counter when it's time for bed. Setting boundaries doesn't make you a nag. It makes you a good parent.

"Our parents need to tell us about their experiences. It helps us to understand ourselves and avoid mistakes—and it takes the focus off us. That can open up a way to communicate better."

- Guy , 14

"My parents and I never had the "sex talk." The most they've ever said has been, 'Have sex and I'll kill you.' I've always known what could happen and how it worked, but we just never had that conversation. The only person who I can say taught me about sex, safe sex, and boys is my older sister. She has a really big impact on the way I handle my sex life. What I really wish, though, is that it was my mom or dad who talked to me."

- Girl , 15

6. Sometimes, all it takes for teens not to have sex is not to have the opportunity. Many teens say that if they have something to do after school that's fun and interesting, they are less likely to experiment with sex, drinking and other risky activities. Some kids are having sex because there's nothing better to do. If parents can't be home with kids after school, they need to make sure their kids are busy doing something constructive and engaging, and know that others expect something of them.

7. Pay attention to your teens before they get into trouble. Let your kids know they are valued and important. Too often, teens feel like adults treat them as if they're problems waiting to happen. Tell your daughters they're valued for something other than their looks. Tell your sons that you won't be disappointed in them if they want to take it slow when it comes to dating. You can't give your kids self-esteem, but you can give them opportunities to develop it. **Teen girls who are active volunteers throughout their high school years have half the teen pregnancy rates of their peers.** If your teens know that you expect them to succeed, and if you give them something positive to say "yes" to, they'll be much more likely to say "no, not yet" to sex and pregnancy.

8. Talk to your sons as well as your daughters. The 750,000 teen girls who got pregnant last year didn't do it alone. Boys need to know that teen pregnancy is their problem, too. We need to talk with boys about consequences, responsibility, sex, love, and values. Most prevention programs focus on girls—what they should and shouldn't say and do. Surveys show that boys want to do the right thing too, so help them understand they **must do whatever it takes to be sure they don't get someone pregnant.**

9. Show your teens what good, responsible relationships look like, and help them learn the signs of an unhealthy relationship. Parents are important role models and can help teens understand what makes a relationship strong and positive: one-third of teen girls say that their parents serve as an example of a healthy relationship. However, 1 in 6 teens say they don't know anyone who serves as an example of a healthy relationship. Since 85% of teens say they think sex should only happen in long-term, committed relationships, help them understand the difference between sex and love, and see that trust, communication and respect are worth waiting for.

10. Parents agree: "I think you should wait. But if you don't, protect yourself." Nine out of ten parents agree: teens should wait to have sex, but if they are sexually active, they must be informed about and have access to contraception. Talking to your kids about waiting and also telling them that contraception is important are complimentary messages – NOT contradictory ones. Not having sex at all is the only 100% foolproof way to prevent pregnancy, but the next best thing is to use contraception – carefully and consistently, every single time. No exceptions. Make sure your kids know that. It's like setting rules about drinking, or drinking and driving, or getting in a car with someone who has been drinking: be clear about your values and expectations, but that you also want them to be equipped to do whatever it takes to protect themselves and their futures. **One of the primary reasons teens don't use birth control is that they don't want their parents to find out.** It may be awkward, but talking with your teen about contraception is a lot easier than dealing with an unplanned pregnancy.

For more information, please contact:

Amy Kramer

Director, Entertainment Media
and Audience Strategy
Tel: 202.478.8517 / Cell: 202.236.9191
Email: akramer@thenc.org

Marisa Nightingale

Senior Advisor, Entertainment Media
and Audience Strategy
Tel: 202.478.8521 / Cell: 202.607.4666
Email: mnightingale@thenc.org

Free parent tips and resources are available at www.TheNationalCampaign.org.
Please visit our teen website at www.StayTeen.org.