

UNPLANNED PREGNANCY AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Why You Should Care. What You Can Say.

Unplanned pregnancies don't just happen to teens. In fact, **young adults have twice as many unplanned pregnancies** (1.5 million) as teens do (750,000) and the consequences for their babies are similar. It's a largely untold story.

Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned and the majority of those are to women in their 20s. In fact, a full **70% of pregnancies to single women in their 20s are unplanned**—which leads to personal and professional complications, relationship turmoil, family problems, and significant challenges for their children.

There is no magic in turning 20 or 25 that automatically prepares you for parenthood when you're not ready. Without an education, some financial stability, or a supportive partner, the difference between being pregnant at 17 or 22 isn't very big. Like many teens, women whose pregnancies are unplanned are less likely to seek out prenatal care. Babies born from teen and unplanned pregnancies are at increased risk for physical and emotional challenges and enter a cycle of poverty that becomes harder and harder to break. Teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy cost taxpayers billions each year and cost young people many of their dreams. Both teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among young adults usually result in a single parent raising a child she isn't ready for. **And both teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy are 100% preventable.**

Children need and deserve two parents who are committed to raising them. When compared to children who grow up in stable, two-parent families, kids with one parent are more likely to grow up poor, endure father absence, drop out of high school, become teen parents, have lower educational aspirations, and divorce when they are adults. **Reducing teen and unplanned pregnancy is one of the most effective ways to reduce child poverty.**

However, unlike teen pregnancy—which has declined by one-third in the past two decades—unplanned pregnancy among young adults has seen no similar progress. In fact **there has been no progress at all.** Half of all unplanned pregnancies happen because couples don't use any contraception at all; the other half happen to couples who say they are using some sort of birth control, just not using it very well. Or every time.

The vast majority of single young adults (86% of men, 88% of women) say they **want to avoid pregnancy** right now, and they overwhelmingly (94% of men, 86% of women) believe that pregnancy is something that should be planned. But only about half of sexually active single 20-somethings use contraception consistently. Misinformation about birth control and fertility is widespread and there are **huge knowledge gaps about contraception.** Ambivalence about pregnancy plays a major role as well.

Unplanned pregnancy is common, current, relevant, and real. It is about love, sex, relationships, human emotion, human biology, economics, family and adulthood. It is a story that needs to be told and one that provokes intense responses. Reducing unplanned pregnancy means a larger proportion of children are born into wanted and welcoming circumstances—which is better for children and families. Reducing unplanned pregnancy also reduces the need for abortion.

These insights and messages for young adults can help reduce unplanned pregnancy and may be helpful in your work. All material is based on the most current scientific research.

1. If you're not actively trying to prevent pregnancy, it will probably happen.

If you're having sex and not being really, really careful about birth control, you ARE essentially trying to get pregnant. **If a sexually active couple doesn't use contraception, there is an 85% chance of getting pregnant within one year.** Pregnancy is possible every single time. Thinking "it won't happen to me" is common but foolish—ask any one of the more than 3 million American women who got pregnant last year unexpectedly. Seven out of ten of single women ages 18-29 say many of their friends have had an unplanned pregnancy. More than half of births fathered by men ages 20-24 are unplanned. More than half of unmarried men who had sex in the past month say they used a condom none of the time. Do the math.

- ▶ "Yeah, we use condoms every time. Well, most of the time." Male, 26
- ▶ "I guess I've had pretty good luck not getting anyone pregnant. ... It's kinda like 'this can't happen to you.'" Male, 18

2. Unplanned pregnancy is more likely to unravel a relationship than it is to save it.

Sex won't make him yours, and a baby won't make him stay with you. The idea that a pregnancy will bring a couple closer (or even lead to marriage) is often more of a fantasy than a reality. Couples who have unplanned pregnancies and births report more frequent relationship conflict and depression than those whose children were planned. More than half (54%) of women who are single when they have an unplanned pregnancy are still single at the child's second birthday. Similarly, 1 in 4 couples who are living together at the time of an unplanned pregnancy break up before the child is two years old. Too often, unplanned pregnancy can stress a relationship to the breaking point, especially when the partners aren't on the same page about starting a family in the first place.

- ▶ *"Do I know where my boyfriend stands on unplanned pregnancy? Yeah, he doesn't want it either. But I guess if it did happen maybe that would be the thing our relationship needs to bring us closer."* Female, 24
- ▶ *"I really, really thought I was going to be with him. I thought that this was going to be my husband, my baby's father, the one I was going to be with. So we did have unprotected sex, not always, but sometimes. I trusted him."* Female, 19
- ▶ *"You just feel like they want [sex] so badly that's how you're going to keep them. That's how he's going to keep dating you."* Female, 23

3. Have you talked to yourself about pregnancy? To your partner? You need to know where you both stand.

Many people who find themselves pregnant when they didn't want to be say they'd never really thought about it. So ask yourself: Is unprotected sex okay with you? How careful are you about birth control? Are you using it correctly and consistently? If not, why not? Do you want to be a parent? When? How would you *really* feel if you got pregnant or got someone pregnant? What would you do? Do you avoid thinking about it? Is it because you might be on the fence about whether you want kids right now? As important as it is to talk to your partners about these issues, it's crucial that you **talk to yourself first**.

Most single young adults say it's important to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now, **but many (42% of men and 29% of women) admit it is likely they will have unprotected sex in the next few months**. 43% of men say they would be at least a little bit pleased if they found out today that their partner was pregnant, though only 20% of women say they'd be pleased with

a pregnancy now. The time to start thinking about pregnancy is before you have unprotected sex. Not when you're panicked over a late period.

- ▶ *"The reality is that people talk about getting pregnant after the fact, not before."* Male, 23
- ▶ *"I don't want to get pregnant again... but at the same time, I'm not on any birth control."* Female, 27

4. Don't leave protecting yourself up to someone else.

Communication about contraception can be awkward—but not as awkward as telling a partner that you're pregnant. Among your friends, consider: does he wait for her to insist on a condom? Is she shy about insisting because she doesn't want him to think she doesn't trust him? Does she think he should pay for half the cost of her birth control pills? If she's prepared with condoms or the pill or another method, what does he really think of her? That she's easy? Or that she's savvy? You know that 'friend with benefits' you pretend not to know in public? Imagine being stuck with them for the next 18 years. If it's hard to talk openly about birth control, think about how hard it would be to have a child together.

- ▶ *"A guy who uses a condom without having to be asked is thoughtful and caring. And sexy."* Female, 25
- ▶ *"If a girl insists on a condom it's okay. If you don't have any and she says no to sex, that's okay. But if you don't have any and she says has a whole bunch of condoms ready, I would wonder about her."* Male, 27

5. Unprotected sex leads to pregnancy, not intimacy. Being in a serious relationship is a good reason to use birth control, not a good reason to stop.

Feeling closer to someone is an emotional state and has no bearing to the presence or absence of a condom. If you want to feel comfortable and close, take care of birth control beforehand—so that you're not preoccupied or worried in the heat of the moment. And if you don't have any birth control, how bad would it really be to postpone sex for just one night? It doesn't mean you'll never have sex again. And it might just make you feel closer. People often get lax about contraception as a relationship gets more serious and feelings become more intimate. Condoms start to feel too reminiscent of high school and you're ready to ditch them. Which is the perfect time to use a longer-acting method and to be more careful, not less. Pregnancy is a game-changer in every relationship, and it's worth preventing a pregnancy until you're both committed to

the idea of raising a family together. **And if you break up with your boyfriend, it doesn't mean you should break up with your birth control.**

- ▶ *"You do things you know you shouldn't but you do it anyway." Female, 24*
- ▶ *"We were careful at first. Then we trusted each other and stopped. Then we got pregnant." Male, 25*
- ▶ *"I would say the birth control methods [changed] as our relationship evolved. The first couple times, we did use a condom.... And then, uh, after that, we both agreed that we don't like them as much 'cause they don't feel good. And, you know, you got to unwrap it and put it on and stuff like that. So it's kind of an inconvenience." Male, 21*

6. "If it happens, it happens" is not a good way to start a family.

Planning is power. Planning a pregnancy—that is, when to get pregnant and when not to—isn't just for rich people or old people or people who have fertility problems or people different from you. It's for *all* people who care about their future, know that starting a family is a big step, want to have a hand in how their lives unfold, and not just let things happen to them. Nearly all single young adults—94% of men and 86% of women—believe pregnancy should be planned. After all, you plan where you're going on vacation, you plan how to get ahead at work, you plan what outfit to wear to at a party—you can plan how to protect yourself once those clothes hit the floor.

- ▶ *"When it comes to planning a pregnancy you can put everything else in place first, then stop planning and let it happen." Female, 27*
- ▶ *"I don't want to [get pregnant] right now, but if it was to happen, I guess it would be okay. But I would rather for it not to." Female, 18*
- ▶ *"I definitely don't want to get pregnant. But if it happens, it happens." Female, 24*
- ▶ *"I don't want to get pregnant but it wouldn't be a big deal if it happened." Female, 23*

7. When you're drunk or high you can't make the best decisions about anything, including birth control.

Teens aren't the only ones who think having sex with someone when you're drunk doesn't "count." **Young adults have higher rates of drug and alcohol use than any other age group**—and that leads to higher rates of unprotected sex. Nearly half of full-time college students report binge drinking in the past month—and that can lead to sexual situations they might re-

gret or might not even remember. However, if you don't want to be in a situation that requires game-time decisions about contraception, there are plenty of methods you can choose. The ring, the pill, the patch, the shot, and IUDs all allow for carelessness or forgetfulness in the moment. Take birth control out of the equation by taking care of it ahead of time.

- ▶ *"We were both so drunk I don't remember if we even ended up having sex... so I'm pretty sure we didn't use any protection." Female, 22*
- ▶ *"You know alcohol blurs the vision and I mean we had been pretty flirtatious throughout our friendship, but he has a girlfriend. So, I didn't think that anything would be happening, but um, I don't know. We just couldn't drive because we were drunk and... It just sort of happened." Female, 20*

8. What you don't know about contraception can hurt you. Cut through the myths and misinformation and get the facts straight.

Even if you think you know everything, what you don't know might surprise you. By the time you're in your 20s, you've probably had sex. And you've probably had sex ed. But that doesn't mean you know everything you need to know. For example, 30% of young adults say they know "little or nothing" about condoms and 63% say they know "little or nothing" about birth control pills. Awareness and understanding of some of the better (but lesser known) methods—like the IUD, implant, and the Depo Provera shot—lags even farther behind. Admitting there are knowledge gaps can be embarrassing, maybe that's why 66% of single young adults strongly agree they have "all the information they need to avoid pregnancy."

Myths are rampant:

- ▶ Half of single young women believe the pill causes serious health problems, which makes them less inclined to use it.
- ▶ Nearly 1 in 5 men think having sex standing up reduces the risk of pregnancy.
- ▶ Among women who have ever relied on birth control pills, 1 in 7 think the pill is still effective even if a woman misses taking them for 2 or 3 days in a row.
- ▶ Among young adults who have ever used condoms, more than one-third (37%) say it's okay to use petroleum jelly as a lubricant with latex condoms (it's not!) and one quarter (24%) says using two latex condoms at the same time provides extra protection (actually, it causes friction and can lead to tearing).
- ▶ *"I heard birth control gets you fat. Also that it is bad for you. And I don't know if it is true, but I heard that it can affect you if you want to get pregnant in the future." Female, 22*

- ▶ *“When my girlfriend told me she was on Yaz, I looked it up. I wanted to know what it was—and I still don’t understand what it does.”* Male, 19
- ▶ *“Everything I know about birth control I learned from TV commercials for the pill.”* Male, 25
- ▶ *“How much more is there to know about sex?”* Male, 18

- ▶ *“At first I was on the Pill, and I didn’t necessarily want to use that. It was just recommended to me by my OB/GYN that it would be the best. But I was ... forgetting to take it a lot, so we switched from that to the injection, Depo-Provera, and I was on that for a good 2-3 years.”* Female, 26

9. Just because you haven’t been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant yet doesn’t mean you won’t. Or can’t.

If you have been having unprotected sex and have never gotten pregnant or gotten someone pregnant, don’t assume that you’re infertile. What it really means is that you’ve been lucky, so far. The actual rate of infertility among people ages 18-29 is about 8%, but more than half (59%) of women and nearly half (47%) of men say it is at least slightly likely they are infertile, which may contribute to lax attitudes about contraception. Three-quarters of those who express such concerns are not basing them on information from a doctor.

- ▶ *“I haven’t gotten pregnant yet, so it’s probably not possible.”* Female, 26
- ▶ *“He told me he can’t get me pregnant. I hope he’s right!”* Female 24
- ▶ *“It didn’t look like she was going to get pregnant, so there wasn’t too much concern with it.”* Male, 26

10. Think outside the condom. You have more birth control options than you might realize. There is one that’s right for you.

There are many types of birth control, so you can find the one that best suits your body and your life. There are lots of different formulations of the pill, and there are many more options than just the pill. Don’t let horror stories or urban myths scare you away from finding the one that’s best for you. You wouldn’t swear off lipstick because a friend had an allergic reaction and you wouldn’t stop getting your hair colored because your mom had a bad dye job. **Work with your doctor to find the birth control that makes the best sense for you.** Learn about the ring, the patch, the shot, and IUDs. Did you know that new IUDs—which are long-acting and reversible—are safer than ever before and more effective than anything else? And that lots of female OB/GYNs personally use them? Remember: if the idea of mood swings or weight gain scares you away from using birth control, think about how pregnancy will feel. If your doctor is too busy to work with you on this, or you just don’t like her attitude, then find one who will help you find your ideal birth control. You’re worth it.

11. Babies are wonderful. But they are also expensive, and they need your lifetime commitment.

Babies give unconditional love, but more importantly, they require it. And a whole lot more. Being a parent is one of the most important things anyone can do—it’s also a big financial commitment as well as an emotional responsibility. It’s harder to get on your feet financially when you’re caring for a child and the costs only increase as a child gets older. In the first year of a baby’s life—between doctor visits, clothing, food, and everything else, a parent can expect to spend more than \$10,000. Multiply that by 18 years. Then think about all the things you won’t be buying for yourself as a result. So much of what you love about your life—the freedom to come and go as you please, stay out late, sleep all day, watch TV for hours at a time, spend time with friends, build a career, go to the movies, go back to school, take cool vacations, play, read, exercise, get crazy, be serious, take chances, give back—all of it is much harder to do when there’s a baby. But it’s not the baby’s fault—you can decide when you want to start your family. **Do whatever it takes be sure you become a parent because you want to.**

- ▶ *“Your girlfriend totally gets all involved with the baby and stops paying attention to you and that sucks.”* Male, 24
- ▶ *“He wants more kids, but I’ve seen him with his daughter and he is rarely with her and the mother takes care of her. He only sees her once in a while so, in my mind, I am not having kids with him ‘cause having kids with him does not mean he is going to stay... He wanted to have unprotected sex and he was like, ‘If you have my kid, I’ll be happy.’ I was like NO.”* Female, 20
- ▶ *“I love babies but I don’t want one right now.”* Female, 19

Final thoughts:

Today’s 20-somethings don’t have much of a rulebook to follow.

Options are infinite. Expectations and pressure can be high. Marriage happens later than it used to and so does financial independence. Career instability is the norm. In a lot of ways young adulthood is the new adolescence. No other life stage is changing so rapidly. Young adulthood is defined differently

now than it used to be. The teen years are still dominated by parents, peers, school, and pop culture. Later adulthood is still defined by spouses, kids, career, and community. But emerging adulthood is more and more like an extended adolescence. And the consequences of unplanned pregnancy to these young adults and their offspring are strikingly similar to those of teen pregnancy.

We need Sex Ed for grownups.

Knowledge is power. Most young adults know everything about how their bodies *look*, but how much do they know about how their bodies *work*? Their last sex ed classes were 5 or 10 or 15 years ago and they were most likely boring and forgettable. There are still some fundamentals that young adults need to know about sex and fertility:

- ▶ More than 1 in 5 young adults say they never had sex education in school and of those who did have it, more than a quarter had it before age 15.
- ▶ *"You fall off the sex-ed bandwagon as soon as you are out in the world on your own. We need some sex-ed for the 21st century!"* Male, 24
- ▶ *"They ovulate a couple of days before their periods. Or weeks. Which is it?"* Male, 25
- ▶ *"We took sex education, but I don't even remember what they taught us. I think they taught us how to put on a*

condom and I wasn't having sex in high school so I wasn't interested." Female, 22

Young adults still don't want to disappoint their parents.

Well after their teen years are over, and after they've left home and started to make their way in the world, young adults say that disappointing their parents is still one of the worst things they could do. **Parents need to continue to talk with their young adults about the seriousness of pregnancy and parenthood.** For some, the thought of telling their parents about a pregnancy is incentive enough to prevent it.

- ▶ Although more than 70% of young adults say it is okay for an unmarried woman to have a child, only about half that many say it is acceptable in their own families.
- ▶ *"I don't know what they would do. They would probably be very sad."* Male, 18
- ▶ *"If I get pregnant, that's going to mess up my future, my school, it's going to mess up my social life. And then my mom is going to be disappointed in me. You know, it just messes up the whole—everything... It's like the foundation of my failure."* Female, 19
- ▶ *"I don't want to disappoint them. I want to go through marriage and everything before I have a pregnancy."* Male, 23

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