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Parents and teen sex

New research shows parents play a significant role in teen sexual decisions

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Are you anxious about having ‘the talk’ with your teen? A new study by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada suggests that parental influence over teenage sexual behaviour begins long before the ‘sex talk.’ The data analysis by IMFC Research Fellow Dr. Frank Jones, suggests that parental attitudes and behaviours during childhood significantly influences sexual choices in the teen years.

The study based on Statistics Canada data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth compared responses from parents and their children age six to eleven and then again eight years later as teens.

The data reveals that 39.9 per cent of teens age 14 to 19 have had consensual sexual intercourse, which by gender is 41.6 per cent of girls and 38.1 percent of boys. Considering the risk of disease, unexpected pregnancy and emotional upheaval, most parents would prefer their teens delay sexual activity. Here are four parental lifestyle choices that may influence children’s future sexual activity.

1. Parental substance use

Sometimes actions speak louder than words. Children of parents who drank to excess two or more times a year were more likely to be sexually active as teens. This was particularly true for girls who were 38 per cent more likely to be sexually active than the national average. [1] Similarly, children of smokers were 22 per cent more likely to be sexually active as teens.

Those children whose parents didn’t drink or get drunk were less likely to be sexually active than the national average by 18 per cent and 15 percent

respectively. Children of non-smokers were also 15 per cent less likely be sexually active compared to the national average.

Previous studies have suggested teen sexual activity is often accompanied with drug and alcohol use, and teens often take their cues on substance use from their parents. [2] Intoxicated teens can quickly find themselves in sexually vulnerable and risky situations.

2. Parent-child relationships

A large body of research reveals that a parenting style that is warm, communicative, supportive, and involves supervision and setting limits, protects teens against risk behaviour, and helps young people develop into healthy, autonomous adults. [3] The IMFC data suggests that frequently disciplining children when angry or being inconsistent in discipline results in an increased likelihood of sexual activity in the teen years. This may be symptomatic of larger parenting style issues.

Fostering strong relationships acts a protective factor against risk behaviours. Boys and girls who reported having a close relationship with their father were less likely to be sexually active as teens. Another finding correlated reading to children daily with a 23 per cent reduced likelihood of sexually active during the teen years.

3. Community involvement

Children of parents who reported not volunteering at church, school, or in the community were 13 per cent more likely to be sexually active as teens. Conversely, Parents who were devoted to volunteerism and attended weekly worship with their children were correlated with having teens who were 40 per cent less likely to be sexually active compared to the national average. Boys who attended weekly worship during childhood were 29 per cent less likely to be sexually active in their teen years, while girls who worshiped weekly during childhood were 22 per cent less likely to be sexually active as teens. Community involvement and commitment to a faith community or ethnic community communicates shared values to kids.

4. Family formation

Rutgers sociologist David Popenoe has called married-biological parents "the gold standard for insuring optimal outcomes in a child's development." [4] There are many reasons families breakup, sometimes for tragic reasons. The fact remains

that research shows family arrangements affect children. [5] When our analysis held other factors constant, living with two biological parents rather than one influenced a decreased likelihood of sexual activity. Strong correlations between teen sexual behaviour and growing up with common-law parents were observed among boys, while correlations between sexual activity and growing up in divorced or separated homes were observed among girls.

Recommendations

Parents' behaviour and attitudes during childhood shape a teen's sexual choices. Based on our findings we recommend:

- Parents should be the prime sex educator. Parents are the most influential force in a teens life
- Parents should work to create a healthy, stable home characterized by warmth, open communication and clear expectations
- Parents should model a healthy lifestyle and positive choices. Your children are watching
- Sex education should engage parents and recognize their role as the primary sex educators
- Sex education should acknowledge that girls face unique risks compared to boys when it comes to early sexual engagement

While it may seem daunting to see correlations between family behaviours years ago and sexual activity in your children today—the news is positive. Teens do listen and want to listen to their parents, as indicated by surveys and polls. It's something to remember next time your teen slams the door and turns up the music.

Endnotes

[1] Note that the percentage difference is between the national average and percentage of sexually active respondents who share the variable in question, not the "percentage point" difference between the two. For percentage point difference see the full study.

[2] The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2009, August). National survey of American attitudes on substance abuse XIV: teens and parents. New York: CASA

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (1997). Substance abuse and the American adolescent: a report by the Commission on Substance Abuse Among American Adolescents.

[3] DeVore, E.R., Ginsburg, K.R. (2005, August). The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. Current Opinion in Pediatrics, 17(4). Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.percdublin.org/Files/Protective_effects_good_parenting.pdf

[4] Popenoe, D. (2007) Essay: The future of marriage in America. The State of Our Unions 2007; The social health of Marriage in America. Rutgers State University. Retrieved October 15, 2009, from <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2007.htm>

[5] For a literature review on the relationship between teen sexual behaviour and family structure, see Sturgeon, S.W. (2008). The relationship between family structure and adolescent sexual activity. Special Report no.1., Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation.

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