

TEENS AND SEX



“I’m sure my son isn’t interested in sex, yet. He’s really very immature in that way.”

“I’m sure my daughter is still a virgin—we’ve taught her right from wrong. Besides—she’s very active with her youth group at church.”

“My daughter is wearing a purity ring—that’s how I know that she is not doing anything wrong.”

I hope that you are right. My work with adolescents tells me that you may be very wrong. Teenagers are often very good at fooling the adults in their lives into thinking they are doing what the adults want, while living a double life when they are out in the world.

Some Statistics

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC.gov), in the United States:

- In 2007, 48% of high school students had had sexual intercourse at least once, and 15% of high school students had had four or more sex partners during their lives
- In 2007, 39% of currently sexually active high school students did not use a condom during their last sexual intercourse
- In 2002, 11% of males and females aged 15-19 had engaged in anal sex with someone of the opposite sex
- In 2002, 55% of males and 54% of females aged 15-19 had engaged in oral sex with someone of the opposite sex
- In 2006, an estimated 5,259 young people aged 13-24 in the 33 states reporting to the CDC were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, representing about 14% of the persons diagnosed that year
- Each year, there are approximately 19 million new STD infections, and almost half of them are among youth aged 15 to 24
- In 2002, 12% of all pregnancies, or 757,000, occurred among adolescents aged 15-19

Additionally, young people in the United States use alcohol and other drugs at high rates. When under the influence of these substances, adolescents are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as unprotected sex. In 2007, 23% of high school students who had sexual intercourse during the past three months drank alcohol or used drugs before their last sexual intercourse.

Demographics do matter. In the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (advocatesforyouth.org), students in 9th and 10th grades were significantly less likely to report having had sexual intercourse than those in 11th and 12th grades (34.4, 40.8, 51.9, and 60.5%, respectively). Male students (48.5%) were significantly more likely than female students (42.9%) to report having had sexual intercourse.

Among male high school students, 68.8% of African Americans, 53.0% of Latinos, and 45.1% of whites reported having had sexual intercourse. Among female high school students, 53.4% of African Americans, 44.0% of Latinas, and 41.3% of whites reported having had sexual intercourse. Asian American and Pacific Islander students were significantly less likely than members of other ethnic groups to have had sexual intercourse.

Rural and urban youth differed in sexual experience. For example, nearly 33% of high school students in mostly rural areas of Illinois reported ever having sexual intercourse compared to 58.1% of students in Chicago.

Regardless of demographics, you can see that each statistically-represented group indicated a minimum of 1/3 of the youth were sexually active. This means, when you look at your child's class, out of every 30 students, 10 are sexual active. Yours may be one of them.

Factors that Affect Sexual Behavior

According to the *National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults* (sexedlibrary.org):

- 60% of female participants and 66% of male participants ages 15-17 “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that waiting to have sex is a nice idea but nobody really does
- 58% of female participants and 66% of male participants ages 15-17 “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” there is pressure to have sex by a certain age
- 47% of female participants and 56% of male participants ages 15-17 “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that once you have had sex it is harder to say no the next time
- 27% of female participants and 50% of male participants ages 15-17 “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that if you have been seeing someone for a while it is expected that you will have sex
- 38% of female participants and 54% of male participants ages 15-17 “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that oral sex is not as big of a deal as sexual intercourse



When asked their reasons for having sex, adolescents cited first sexual pleasure, then intimacy, and finally social status (*Greater Expectations: Adolescents' Positive Motivations for Sex*—sexedlibrary.org). Seventh graders in serious relationships with teenagers 2 or more years older had an increased likelihood of having sexual intercourse in the ninth grade (*Early Predictors of Sexual Behavior*—sexedlibrary.org).

Parenting Can Change the Odds

Parenting practices are highly connected to adolescent development. Good parenting can help an adolescent reach their full potential, while less desirable parenting may be a factor in high-risk adolescent behaviors.

Authoritative parenting, (lots of parental warmth and support, firm limit setting, open communication, and high levels of supervision), has long been considered the ideal

parenting style. Research in middle-class white families found that youth from families high in authoritative parenting generally had higher academic performance across ethnic groups. In risky urban settings, studies have shown that an authoritarian parenting style (expectation of high level of achievement with low levels of affection and nurturing) may lead to greater overall adjustment, less delinquency, and less sexual activity (DeVor and Ginsburg).

Research with a predominantly white population showed that teens from families with high levels of parent-family connectedness had a later start of sexual activity, and were less likely to become pregnant, smoke cigarettes or marijuana, or drink alcohol (DeVor and Ginsburg).



Children look at their parents' behavior to define what is "normal." Risky parental behavior is associated with risky adolescent behavior and risky/early sexual behavior in children. If adolescents think their parents use drugs, the adolescents themselves are more likely to use drugs. Postponement of sexual activity is strongly linked to high parental expectations (DeVor and Ginsburg).

"Parental Monitoring" incorporates both supervision and communication with adolescents. Parental monitoring means how much parents know where their kids are, who they are with, and what they are doing. These parental behaviors have been found to prevent deviant adolescent behavior. In a recent study, teens with high levels of parental monitoring were less likely to have tried or currently use marijuana or inhalants. They were less likely to use alcohol or have risky driving behavior (DeVor and Ginsburg).

Because we know that alcohol or other drug use is connected with teenage sexuality, and because we know that risky behaviors are connected with risky sexual behaviors, it could be expected that parental monitoring could alter the course of teenage sexual behaviors.

Find a way to talk to your teen. Stay in the loop (gently and lovingly) of what your teen is doing, and with whom they are doing it. They may not like you checking up on them, but you will be increasing the odds of them delaying drug use and sexual activity until they are at a better age to handle the repercussions.

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Sources:

http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id+413Itemid=336

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/sexualbehaviors/index.htm>