

Teens look to parents, clergy for guidance on sex

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (ABP)—More than three quarters of teens think religious leaders should do more to help prevent teen pregnancy. And that's even more than the 64 percent of adults who think the same.

But while 76 percent of teens think religious leaders should do more to educate them about the risks of teenage sex, teens consistently say parents most influence their decisions about sex, according to an independent study commissioned by the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy](#).

“One of the primary findings here is really good news for parents—that they are more influential on the topic than they thought they were.”

Forty-seven percent of teenagers say parents influence their decisions

more than friends, religious leaders, siblings, teachers, media and sex educators, said Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign.

"One of the primary findings here is really good news for parents—that they are more influential on the topic than they thought they were," he said. "The science here is relatively clear. The kids who are most close with their parents are less likely to do some of the crummy things kids do."

According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than 60 percent of teenagers have sex before graduating from high school. About 800,000 teenage girls in the United States get pregnant each year, even though in the past 10 years the government has spent more than a billion dollars on abstinence-only programs.

All told, teen pregnancies in the United States cost federal, state and local taxpayers more than \$9 billion in 2004, according to analysis from the report.

Despite the influence they wield in the lives of their children, however, parents simply do not believe they affect a teen's perceptions about sex, Albert said.

The survey, which included responses from 1,037 children age 12 to 19 and 1,162 adults 20 years and older, said only 34 percent of parents think they influence teenage decisions about sex. But the proportion of teens who say parents most influence their decisions about sex increased from 37 percent in 2004 to 47 percent in this year's survey. And the proportion of teens who say they had a "helpful conversation" with their parents about delaying sex increased from 63 percent in 2004 to 71 percent in 2006.

"I think in some ways that parents are in a full state of denial," Albert said. "These issues of sex, love and relationships are difficult. What this survey shows is that what the opposite of most parents believe is actually true. While they may not act like it, most teenagers actually think their parents

are the most influential.”

Kate Ott, associate director of the [Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing](#), said much the same thing. She works to encourage parents and religious leaders to provide education on sexuality, and her organization recently sent an open letter to 2,000 clergy and denominational heads nationwide calling for a faith-based approach to helping teens “understand their sexuality, develop their own moral agency, and make informed choices about their sexual behavior.”

The institute is an organization comprised of 2,600 religious leaders from more than 40 denominations, including Baptists. The open letter developed through a colloquium of theologians sponsored by the institute.

“Adolescents have sexual rights too,” Ott said. “We’re sexual beings from birth until death. Sexuality doesn’t start when you’re married. We want to portray it as a positive, healthy part of their lives.”

During adolescence, teens try to understand their own sexuality based on determining what other people believe, she said. That’s where parents and religious leaders come in.

Religious leaders have a role to play in helping parents address sex directly with their children, and the role should be tailored to fit specific faith backgrounds, Albert said.

The message is different in a lot of homes. Some parents believe sex outside of marriage is wrong. Others simply teach their children that sex is something for adults. Ultimately, even if religious leaders only go so far as to encourage parents to talk with their children about sex, that could reduce teen pregnancies in the entire community, Albert said.

“Young people’s sense of right and wrong plays a large role in their sexual lives,” he said. “Faith communities and religious leaders may

underestimate the influence they have here. The research seems to make the connections between delayed sexual activity and religious belief."

Even without a religious background, an overwhelming number of adults think abstinence should be taught as a first option for avoiding pregnancy. A full 93 percent of adults and 90 percent of teens think young people must receive a "strong abstinence message," according to Albert's report.

What's more, adults and teens often do not see abstinence and contraception as competing strategies. Instead, respondents indicated that teens should be encouraged to delay sex but also be given information about contraception.

"When asked whether teens should be getting more information about abstinence, contraception, or both, three-quarters of adults and about six in 10 teens said young people should be getting information about both, rather than either/or," the report said.

The report went on to acknowledge that some adults think encouraging young people to abstain from sex while also advocating contraception sends a confusing message that implies approval of teenage sex. Still, Albert said, evidence indicates that sex education programs including messages about both abstinence and contraception do not hasten the onset of sex, increase the frequency of sex, or increase the number of sexual partners. Instead, teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States have declined by one third since the early 1990s, according to the report.

A key factor discussed in the report "underscores the critical importance of understanding why sexually active teens do not use contraception consistently and carefully." Experts have suggested that it could be due to embarrassment, the use of alcohol or apathy. According to the report, 18 percent of teens said the primary reason they don't use contraceptives is fear that their parents will find out.

For parents hoping to delay or prohibit their teenager's sexual activity, the important thing is to be "aspirational," Albert said. It is realistic to expect a child to not have sex at least until he or she moves out of the home, he said, but parents should also realize the pervasive culture surrounding their child.

"You need to at least be aware of the possibilities of what's going on here," he said. "By the time a teenager graduates from high school, about 60 percent of them have had sex at least once. That's gone down. It used to be higher. So yeah, of course, it's realistic (for teens to abstain from sex). But I wouldn't double-down your bet on it."

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