

# Why It Matters



## Teen Pregnancy and Responsible Fatherhood

**R**educing teen pregnancy is closely connected to the goal of promoting responsible fatherhood. Research shows that involved and committed fathers are important to the well-being of their children. Unfortunately, children born to teen parents are often denied a close connection with their father because the relationship between their parents frequently dissolves over time.

- Children who live apart from their fathers are five times more likely to be poor than children with both parents at home.<sup>1</sup>
- Boys and girls without involved fathers are twice as likely to drop out of school, twice as likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, twice as likely to end up in jail, and two to three times more likely to need help for emotional or behavioral problems.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Teen girls who don't have a father in their life are two times more likely to initiate sexual activity early and are seven times more likely to get pregnant compared to girls with fathers present.<sup>3</sup>
- Also, teen girls who have a higher quality relationship with their fathers are less likely to initiate sexual activity compared to those who report a lower quality relationship with their fathers.<sup>4</sup>
- Teen boys who live with both parents initiate sex at an older age compared to teen boys in other family situations.<sup>5</sup>
- Over two decades of research confirms that parents – both fathers and mothers – are an important influence on whether their teenagers become pregnant or cause a pregnancy.<sup>6</sup>

There is growing attention to the responsibilities of boys and young men in preventing teen pregnancy. At last

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count, 40 states had strategies to prevent unwanted or too-early fatherhood. This emphasis on primary prevention for boys and men is a welcome trend. Still, too many young men are not waiting until they are ready – emotionally and financially – to become fathers:

- The good news is that sexual activity among teenage boys is declining; in fact, less than half of all teen boys report that they have ever had sex.<sup>7</sup>
- More teen boys are also using condoms when they have sex, and almost one in four sexually active teen boys report that they used dual methods the last time they had sex (they used a condom and their partner used a hormonal method).<sup>7</sup>
- When it comes to marriage, divorce, and non-marital childbearing, teen boys tend to have slightly more traditional attitudes compared to teen girls—only about half of teen boys approve of non-marital childbearing compared to almost two-thirds of girls; close to three-quarters of teen boys think that getting married is better than staying single compared to about half of teen girls; about 4 in 10 teen boys approve of divorce as a solution to marriage problems while close to half of girls agree.<sup>8,9</sup>

- The best available data show that after increasing 32 percent between 1986 and 1991, the teen birth rate for fathers aged 15 - 19 decreased 31 percent between 1991 and 2004.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Eight of ten teen fathers *do not* marry the mothers of their first children.<sup>12</sup>
- These absent fathers pay less than \$800 annually for child support, often because they are quite poor themselves.<sup>12</sup>
- Some research suggest that teen fathers have lower education levels and suffer earning losses of 10-15 percent annually.<sup>12,13</sup>

Clearly, there is more that could be done to send a strong message to teen boys and young men that they should wait to become a father until they are ready to have a lasting — ideally married — relationship with the mother of their children and are able meet their financial and emotional responsibilities to their children. In addition, there is more that could be done to build on efforts within the teen pregnancy prevention field to reach out to boys and young men through what are sometimes called “male involvement programs.” It is also important to recognize and support the important role that fathers can play in helping their own sons and daughters avoid becoming teen parents.

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