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For Adults Working with Teens

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When Falling Is a Good Thing: The Decline in Teen Pregnancy

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Imagine it's the year 1990. As you walk down the hall to your next class, you see a girl carrying her books over her stomach. She's about your age, 16 or 17, but something seems—*different*.

You take a closer look and see that her stomach is out of proportion to the rest of her body, slightly larger. Your eyes widen and you avert your glance to keep from making eye contact when you realize that she's pregnant.

Numerous thoughts begin running through your head: *How did it happen? Why didn't she use protection? Why didn't anyone talk to her about sexual activity?*

Fast forward ten years and that sight would not be as common. In 1990, 117 out of every 1,000 teen girls aged 15-19 became pregnant. Since then, there has been a steady decline in the U.S. teen-pregnancy rate, and in 2000, it dropped to 83 teen girls out of 1,000, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, in New York City.

Behind the Decline

Obviously American teens are doing something right to contribute to this reduction, but what, exactly, and how can we keep this trend going?

"Research suggests that there is no one reason why the rate dropped so dramatically," says Elizabeth Terry-Humen, senior research analyst at Child Trends, in Washington, D.C. "Two main contributing factors that we can measure, however, are abstinence and contraception."

“Abstinence” and “contraception”—two words students are bludgeoned to death with in sex-education classes—have indeed made a vast difference. What has changed in teens’ mentality for these two words to finally have the drastic impact they were meant to?

Virgin Status

One change is that teens aren’t ashamed to be virgins and wait to have sexual intercourse.

“This past decade we have seen the percentage of teens who’ve had sex decline,” says Terry-Humen.

In 1991, 54 percent of all high-school students had engaged in sexual intercourse; in 2001, the rate dropped to 46 percent, according to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Many teens today do decide to hold off on sex,” says 17-year-old Brian, of Chula Vista, CA. “They feel they aren’t ready until they know for a fact that they truly are. They don’t want to be rushed into anything.”

No Glove, No Love

Another change is teens’ perceptions of getting and using birth control. The image of a mortified teen screaming “I need condoms!” to an elderly, near-deaf pharmacist, as other shoppers turn a disgusted eye in his direction, is no longer seared into the minds of most sexually-active teens.

In 2001, 58 percent of all high-school students who were currently sexually active used a condom the last time they had intercourse (up from 46 percent in 1991), according to the YRBS.

“Society has made getting birth control more acceptable,” explains Jen, 17, of Ewing, NJ.

Bill Albert, senior director of communications, publications, and technology at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, believes that “more teens understand that if they believe they’re mature enough to have sex, they need to be mature enough to discuss, obtain, and use contraception.”

Teens are also choosing more reliable and long-term birth-control methods, like the Pill and Depo-Provera. And many feel that standards have changed, so it’s no longer only the girl’s responsibility to make sure she and her partner use birth control.

“Guys are usually the ones who wear condoms, but girls are starting to realize that pregnancies are happening out there and they don’t want it to happen to them,” says 16-year-old Catherine, of Maine.

Brian adds that “teens are probably less embarrassed to get birth control, because they know they’re doing the right thing in practicing safe sex. If having sex is what the couple really decides on, then practicing it safely is the right choice, and they don’t have to hide that.”

Keep It Up

Despite the impressive decline in the teen-pregnancy rate, the United States still has the highest teen-pregnancy and teen-birth rates in the industrialized world. Each year, there are nearly 900,000 teen pregnancies, and eight out of ten are unplanned.

Some teens believe that the “it could never happen to me” mentality keeps the teen-pregnancy rate so high.

“Teens in the U.S. don’t take into consideration that no matter how unlikely something seems, there’s always the possibility that it can happen to you,” says Whitney Larsen, 17, of Yuma, AZ.

Teens need to continue to make smart decisions about sex by either choosing abstinence or always protecting themselves during oral, vaginal, or anal sex.

Until adolescents stop turning their backs on reality, teen pregnancies will continue. Just because the rate is going down, there is no reason to become careless.

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