Don’t Ignore It… It Won’t Go Away:
Discussing Teen Pregnancy with Young People

Suggestions for Educators

Teen pregnancy has once again been thrust into the national spotlight with the announcement that Bristol Palin, the seventeen-year-old daughter of VP nominee of the Republican Party and Alaska Governor, Sarah Palin, is expecting a baby. Whenever a private moment such as this becomes fodder for public discussion, it raises questions about how to address the issues with one’s students. It also provides an extraordinary opportunity for educators and other caring adults to create open communication with the young people in their lives.

How should adults respond to the inevitable questions that arise? To help, Answer, a national organization dedicated to providing and promoting comprehensive sexuality education based at Rutgers University, has created this series of tips, talking points and compiled resources for teachers.

Underpinning these points—and all the work that Answer does—is the belief that the healthiest option for teens is to postpone sexual activity. Research has consistently shown that young people tend to delay sexual activity and to use contraception once they are sexually active when they have been given a full and accurate range of sexual health information (Kirby, 2007). Answer is committed to making sure that young people receive the information they want and need to make healthy, responsible choices – and to clarify their values and beliefs as they work to make the best decisions they can.

Some educators will prefer to have a discussion rather than simply answering questions. In those cases, educators can use this document to formulate questions that will have the students share their own values and beliefs. This is a very sensitive topic for many, so educators need to tailor their responses to fit the age and developmental levels of their students, and check their local school policies about discussing sexuality-related issues, before initiating a discussion about this topic. They also need to be prepared to provide parents and adult caregivers with guidance about how to do the same at home. Resources for parents appear at the end of this document.

Q: Is it okay for teens to have sex?

A: The healthiest decision for teens is to wait to have sex of any kind until they are old enough to be able to handle all of the possible consequences associated with making such an important decision. Many adults believe that it’s best for teens to wait until they have at least graduated from high school to have sexual intercourse because of the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among teens, and the high rate of teen pregnancy.

The reality, however, is that some teens choose not to wait – and that others are forced to have sex against their will. Every person has to make her or his own decisions, and that includes deciding when and whether to have sex. Forcing someone to do something sexual is never okay.
**Q:** You keep saying “old enough” and “better to wait” -- Bristol Palin is 17. Is that the right age to start having sex?

**A:** There is no one right time that is the same for everyone. Some people choose to wait to have sex until they are adults, or until they are married or in a committed, lifelong relationship. Others choose to have sex while they are teens.

The healthiest decision for teens is to wait to have sex of any kind until they are old enough to be able to handle all of the possible consequences associated with making such an important decision. Regardless of when someone decides to become sexually active, however, all people must take responsibility for these important life decisions by becoming educated about preventing pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections. In addition, when young people are given the knowledge and skills they need to be able to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and infections, they use that information wisely and make healthier decisions.

**Q:** If a girl gets pregnant as a teen, and she and her baby's father decide to get married anyway – isn’t it okay then?

**A:** A married teen couple who become parents face the same challenges as a single female teen and her male teen partner. They are still teens. They still face the same changes to their social lives, the same sleepless nights feeding and changing the baby over and over again, the same costs of diapers, medical visits, clothes, toys, babysitters, and so on. Saying that it is okay to be pregnant or to get someone pregnant as a teen as long as one is married ignores the reality of how challenging it is to BE a teen parent. Teen parents – married or unmarried – face much greater challenges, including reduced chances for completing high school or going on to college. Children of teen parents also face greater challenges than children born to adults (Healthy Teen Network, 2008; Advocates for Youth, 1995; Maynard, 1996).

**Q:** Why is everyone making such a big deal out of Bristol Palin’s pregnancy? Isn’t it her business what she does?

**A:** Absolutely. Sexual decisions are private decisions. At the same time, however, you’ve probably noticed that when people’s jobs force them to lead public lives – whether they’re politicians, celebrities, or anyone else – their private lives often become reported on in the media. In politics, the public tends to look for whether a candidate is consistent and honest. Because this girl’s mother has made such strong stands on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs which often stigmatize teens who have sex outside of the context of marriage, the fact that her own teen daughter is pregnant became an enticing news story for the public.

**Q:** If her mom supports teaching abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, doesn’t this mean that these programs don’t work to prevent pregnancy?

**A:** Research shows that educational programs that emphasize abstinence but also include discussions of other topics help do two things. They help young people to delay starting to have sex, and they help them to learn how to avoid pregnancy and STIs once they do start having sex.
(Kirby, op.cit.). There is no research showing that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are effective at preventing teen pregnancy.

**Q:** What should a teen girl do if she becomes pregnant, or if a teen guy gets his female partner pregnant?

**A:** We strongly recommend that teens talk with a parent or other trusted adult about the pregnancy – as soon as possible. There are always three options for anyone who is facing an unplanned pregnancy – abortion, adoption or parenting. Regardless of the decision made, it needs to be made as early in the pregnancy as possible.

This is a very serious situation and, even though many teens worry that their parents will freak out, most parents polled say they want their kids to come to them if a situation like a pregnancy should ever occur. Teens facing a pregnancy need help and support, no matter what they choose to do about the pregnancy.

**Q:** What if a girl is raped or her parents are abusive and she can’t talk with them about her pregnancy?

**A:** There are many resources available for any girl who does not feel she can talk with her parents(s) about her pregnancy – as well as for a girl who became pregnant because she was raped. She can talk with a teacher here or the school counselor – or any other adult she knows well and trusts. She can also visit teen Web sites like www.sexetc.org or, if she has been abused, www.rainn.org. No teen has to face an unplanned pregnancy alone.

**Q:** What rights does the baby’s father have? What are his responsibilities?

**A:** When a girl or woman gets pregnant, she gets to decide what to do about the pregnancy. Ideally, the couple should talk together about what they want to do – but in the end, it is the girl’s decision. The male partner has no legal say in her decision.

If the female partner decides to become a parent, her male partner will be expected to help pay for raising the child – even if the guy did not want to become a parent. This is another good reason why people of all ages need to think really carefully before having sex – and to talk about what they will do to avoid pregnancy and diseases.

**Resources for Educators**

Lesson Plans on Abstinence and Sexual Decision-Making
http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/decisions

Lesson Plans on Pregnancy Prevention
http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/pregnancy
Educators may also choose to have their students read the following articles about teen pregnancy before discussing this topic:


How to Tell Your Parents You’re Pregnant [http://www.sexetc.org/story/pregnancy/4770](http://www.sexetc.org/story/pregnancy/4770) and


**Resources for Parents and Adults Caregivers**

Parents should be encouraged to talk about this topic at home with their teens. Many will appreciate having resources for discussing teen pregnancy and other sexuality-related topics with their young people. Here are a few of the many resources you can suggest to parents for doing so:

**Books:**

*Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens from Middle School to High School and Beyond* by Debra Haffner.

*Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense about Sex* by Deborah Roffman

*Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Sex and Character* by Pepper Schwartz and Dominic Cappello


For more books for parents, visit the Answer Web site at [http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/books/](http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/books/)
Web Sites:

Advocates for Youth – Parents’ Sex Ed Center: http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents/index.htm

Children Now -- http://www.talkingwithkids.org/sex.html

Families Are Talking -- http://www.familiesaretalking.org/

References


Healthy Teen Network (2008). Unique Needs Of Children Born To Teen Parents. Accessible online at http://www.healthyteennetwork.org/vertical/Sites/{B4D0CC76-CF78-4784-BA7C-5D0436F6040C}/uploads/{C55038AC-056D-4D1A-9AC3-D1C7D72BBE4B}.PDF


About Answer

For more than 26 years, Answer (http://answer.rutgers.edu) has been committed to supplying resources, advocacy, training and solutions in support of honest and balanced sexuality education. We fulfill our mission – to provide and promote comprehensive sexuality education to young people and the adults who teach them—through two primary programs:

The Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project, which uses the power of teen-to-teen communication to reach hundreds of thousands of teens every year, through our Sex, Etc. magazine and Web site, Sexetc.org.

The Sexuality Education Training Initiative, which helps more than 2,700 teachers and other youth-serving professionals a year create dynamic and effective educational experiences for young people.