

Are You Responsible?

Analyzing the Teen Pregnancy Crisis

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Teenage pregnancy is a big concern in society today. In each generation, the amount of pregnant teens increases. This is not just a problem in America, but a worldwide problem that seems to have no solution. The question is what can be done to effectively explain to teenagers that unsafe sex is a bad idea, and to show them that there are other options besides engaging in sexual activities at such a young age. Although society makes it possible for teenagers to learn about the risk and harms of engaging in sexual activity through sexual education programs, apparently such classes are insufficient because the rate of teen pregnancy continues to rise. Teenagers tend to believe that having sex is harmless and that the negative consequences they learn about in school will not happen to them. Parents should take more responsibility in making sure that their teenagers are taking precautions and not engaging in sexual activity. No child is exempt from the teen pregnancy crisis; therefore, parents should feel obligated to talk to their children about how to handle and avoid sexual situations. Teen pregnancy is a growing problem among families, and parents should become more aware of what is causing this problem in order to help prevent it.

Becoming pregnant is supposed to be a happy time in a woman's life, and in the life of her family. However, when a teenager becomes pregnant the reaction is the complete opposite. Becoming a teenage mom causes chaos and stress in the life of the young woman and her family. Most teenagers do not fully understand what they are getting themselves into when they engage in sexual activity and become pregnant. They do not see being pregnant as a serious issue until it happens to them personally, and they have the stress of trying to care for themselves and someone else. From personal experience, I have seen more and more teenage pregnancies in my family and in my classmates in the past few years. I have seen the effect that it has on the girl and her family. Most of them experience great struggle—with no job and the everyday expenses of caring for a child. When asked if the result is anything like they thought it would be, most answer no. These girls wish they had waited to become a mother because it is too much to handle. Teenage pregnancy is an unwanted situation that is expensive for the parents and for society in general. Jeanette Koshar describes her findings on the financial cost of teen pregnancy by stating "teen pregnancy is financially costly. It is estimated that 7 billion dollars a year is spent on adolescent childbearing" (505). This is a great amount of money that could be used on other important issues instead of pregnancy caused by adolescent mistakes.

The government has tried to reduce the amount of teen pregnancies through the administering of sexual health classes at school. In her article on understanding policy changes on teenage sexual activity and pregnancy, Claire D. Brindis discusses the amount of money the government has spent on promoting sexual education in schools. She states that "approximately \$620 million have been spent nationally since 1998, representing approximately \$168 million in FY 2005. These programs require teaching that abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage is the expected standard for all school-aged children" (282). The students seem to understand the message behind the programs, but still choose to follow a different path. This is most likely due to the amount of social pressure that teenagers face to follow the "in-crowd." In viewing the adolescent-peer relationship, it is said that "several studies have demonstrated that peers' sexual norms and attitudes are associated with an adolescent's sexual behavior" (Manguen and Armistead 260). If a teenager has a friend who is engaged in sexual activity, then chances are the teenager is going to want to be like the friend and try it out as well. Teenagers are prone to

follow the actions of people they are close to, and normally their friends are the ones they follow most. The messages shared during sex education classes are normally ignored because teenagers feel that they will not fall victim to the negative results that are taught. They continue to live a carefree lifestyle, not thinking about the consequences they could possibly receive for their actions. They tend to listen to what their family says about sex while they also try to keep up with the actions of their friends. Today's teenagers have more and more sexual conversations with their peers, which make the number of sexually active teens increase. Sexually active teens tend to improperly engage in sexual activity—without the use of birth control and condoms, which means the chance of teenagers becoming pregnant is higher than if teenagers applied safety measures. The way teenagers think and act is only a part of human nature. During the adolescent years, the teenagers are trying to find out who they are and develop a lifestyle for themselves—a lifestyle typically modeled by peers and family. However, this lifestyle may get interrupted by an unwanted pregnancy.

Most would place the entire blame on the teenagers, because they chose the wrong path. Although this statement is partially true, what some people fail to realize is that the parents of the teenagers deserve blame as well. Manguen and Armistead discuss the factors that parents associate with the reasons adolescents engage in sexual intercourse. Such factors include the “parent-adolescent relationship and parental attitudes about sexual behavior” (260). They go on to state that in “the context of a better parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents are less likely to have sex, and parents with more restrictive attitudes about adolescent sexual behavior are more likely to have children who are not yet engaged in sexual intercourse” (260). It is imperative for parents to understand that developing a good relationship with their children will have a stronger influence on them, and their children will value their opinion about sexual health. It is apparent that many parents think that it is enough for the student to hear about sexual health through school programs. Even though the school shares information about sexual health in the curriculum, parents seem to forget that parents themselves have more influence on their children with appropriate communication, rather than placing all the responsibility on a teacher.

Parents often find it difficult and intimidating to talk to their kids about sex and other related topics. I do not know if they just feel that their opinion is insignificant or if their children just will not listen, but they are wrong. In her article about how words can work, Lunquist states “It’s no secret! Young people whose parents talk with them openly and honestly about sexuality are much more apt to make wise decisions about sexual behavior. In fact studies demonstrate that kids who have strong relationships with their parents are much less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy or to get a sexually transmitted infection” (92). Teenagers do value their parents’ opinions, and will normally do the right thing if parents communicate clearly and consistently about what is right. One factor that will control how teenagers respond to what their parents tell them is the parent’s approach. In her article, Jeanette Koshar states that one way to prevent teen pregnancy is to get to know the new teen culture and how teenagers act and think (508). Parents must remember that times have changed since their peers were teenagers, thus they cannot use real life examples all the time. They must also understand that time has changed and things are different in the modern generation. For example, merely telling teenagers that sex is bad and is not allowed in the household is not enough because they are exposed to more sexual situations, such as sexually active and pregnant friends. The amount of peer pressure has risen, and it is much harder to resist temptation. Another factor that controls how obedient teenagers are to their parents is how much say the teenagers have in the issues in the household. Teenagers tend not to rebel as much when their parents do not demand them to obey without an explanation or a choice. The idea that we as people like to be given choices, not told to do things all the time, is a common theory in psychology. Carlson and Tanner explore how parental beliefs and attitudes can influence their child’s sexual behavior. They discover that children follow the family rules more when parents are authoritative, which means parents balance children’s rights and responsibilities by not only granting autonomy to children for some decisions, but also expecting adherence to family rules. If teenagers

understand what their parents expect of them, then they will incorporate their everyday decisions with respect to their parent's authority.

A possible solution to the teenage pregnancy issue is to have parents become more involved in the lives of their children. When teenagers feel that they have great communication with their parents, they are more willing to say no to peer pressure and things they know are wrong. Being involved in numerous activities will also limit the risk of unwanted behaviors. Howard Seidman describes how parents can keep their children out of trouble and make sure that they are following the right path. He gives tips for parents to make sure that their children are safe. Some examples he gives are encouraging group activities, not leaving the children home alone all the time, and knowing who the children are hanging out with (Seidman). When parents know what their children are doing and who they are with, it maximizes the trust that they have with the teenager and will help them feel confident that the teenager is making wise decisions.

Another solution to this problem could be to emphasize parental education on the topic of sex and make it possible for parents to have a better understanding of the lifestyle their teenagers may live. This parental education should start in middle school, the time when the child is about to become a teenager. There should be a time during orientation, before the students actually start school where the parents and teachers come together to discuss the expectations of the students' sexual behavior, as well as academics. The parent meeting should go over how to talk to the child about sex and consequences of sex, as well as ways to prevent unwanted pregnancies and STDs. By having this education class, the parents will be able to talk effectively about sexual issues that are most prevalent now for their child's age group and have a productive discussion with their child on a level that they can fully comprehend.

I believe that effective parent-adolescent communication is the key to ending the teenage pregnancy crisis. Parents must be willing to make sure their children understand that participating in sexual activities at a young age is risky for one's health and can have lifelong effects. Talking with individuals who have become teen mothers emphasizes communications and provides personal experiences through which young teens may become aware of possible consequences. After conducting an experiment on victims of teen pregnancy, Susan L. Lloyd discovered that the majority of teenagers who get pregnant feel that it was a result of a lapse in communication between the parents and teen, along with unstable family relationships. This poor communication made it difficult for the teen to relate their experiences with their parents. However, most teens said that after the pregnancy, the communication between their families became stronger (Lloyd 245-48). This is most likely due to the teamwork needed to help raise a baby. Had the communication between the families been strong from the beginning, an unwanted pregnancy may have been prevented. It is imperative that parents begin to bridge communication gaps sooner to make sure that teenagers know their parent's position on the issue of sexual activity, and they need to make sure that their children are taking appropriate precautions.

The amount of teen pregnancies in the U.S. and around the world could be reduced with proper parental support and supervision. Parents must stop feeling discouraged that they cannot effectively discuss the topic of sexual health with their teenagers. Parents fail to realize that teenagers will listen to their advice if they take the time to seriously discuss important issues, such as engaging in sexual activity. In a world where peer pressure is rampant and the temptation to do the wrong thing is even worse, parents need to be there for their teens and encourage them to do the right thing. The teen pregnancy crisis can, and should, be solved in order to make life easier for present and future families. No one should fall victim to the tragedy of an unwanted teenage pregnancy, and with the right help and family support, this crisis can be on its way to recovery.

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