

Parent Power: Tips for Engaging Parents

A Guide for Grantees of the Office of Adolescent Health and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families

Parents and other trusted adults can have an important role to play in helping teens prevent pregnancy. Teens consistently report that parents influence their decisions about sex the most – more than peers, music and the internet. However, despite parents’ best efforts to talk to their teens about sex, most parents admit that they don’t know when to start the conversation, what to say, or how to say it. Program providers have a unique opportunity to reach parents and encourage them to take steps at home to support the lessons their teens have learned through the program. This tip sheet will provide information about the parents’ essential role in preventing teen pregnancy along with strategies for engaging parents.

Why are Parents Important?

Parents are often the primary educators for their children on a variety of topics, and sexual health is no different. Parents are able to build on their unique and established relationships with their children and answer important questions as they come up, offer information early, and build upon information that has been shared in previous discussions about the topic. While evidence-based programs can provide critical information and skills, many programs are fairly short in duration and might only be offered one or two times over the course of several years. Parents, on the other hand can serve as an ongoing resource, and one that is always available.

Overall closeness between parents and their children, shared activities, parental presence in the home, and parental caring and concern are all associated with a reduced risk of early sex and pregnancy.ⁱ Research has also found that good parent-child communication is linked to teens avoiding sex, a later age of first sexual activity, increased communication between partners, and increased condom use among sexually active teens.ⁱⁱ

Teens consistently report that parents most influence their decisions about sex. In a 2010 survey:

- 46% of teens reported that parents are most influential when it comes to their decisions about sex. By comparison, just 20% of teens said that their friends are most influential and 4% of teens said that the media is most influential.

Teens and adults agree that conversations about sex and pregnancy would help young people avoid teen pregnancy.

- 80% of teens and 91% of adults agreed that it would be much easier for teens to postpone sexual activity and avoid pregnancy if teens were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.

Teens want to discuss relationships, not just body parts.

- When asked what they wished they could talk about more openly with their parents, 62% of teens reported that they wanted to talk more about relationships, 18% wanted to talk more about birth control, and 8% wanted to talk more about sex.

Teens and parents agree that parents need help starting these conversations.

- 85% of teens and 88% of adults agree that parents should be talking to their children about sex but often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

What can Program Providers Do?

- Consider offering a program for parents or partnering with another organization that could offer programming for parents.
 - There are many different types of parent-child communication programs, ranging from single-session interventions with only parents to multiple-session interventions with parents and their adolescents.
- Consider integrating a parental component into existing programming.
 - There are also ways that programs can integrate a parental component into their existing curriculum. This might include integrating homework sessions that encourage parental involvement, inviting parents to learn about the particulars of the program that their adolescents will be participating in or offering supplementary materials that adolescents can take home to their parents (brochures, flyers, etc). Remember to contact your project officer if you are considering making changes to your program.
- Consider offering an evidence-based program that has a parent-child component.
 - A review of the 28 evidence-based programs identified through the Office of Adolescent Health(<http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/prevention/research/programs/index.html>) determined that several evidence-based programs include a parent component in some capacity. These include:
 - Aban Aya Youth Project (parent workshop)
 - Children's AID Society – Carrera Program (home-based information for parents and children along with parent orientation session)
 - It's Your Game: Keep it Real (homework assignments)
 - Project TALC (sessions for parents only and for parents and their adolescents)
 - Promoting Health Among Teens (homework assignments)
 - Raising Healthy Children (training specifically for parents)
 - Reducing the Risk (homework assignments)
- Ensure parents are well-informed about your efforts.
 - Regardless of how involved parents are in your program efforts, providers should be sure that parents know about the program that will be delivered to their youth, which in some cases may require the organization to get the parents to opt their children into or out of the program (policies may vary). Giving parents notice will

allow them to prepare for questions that their children may ask at home about the information they have received.

Tips for Engaging Parents

A major challenge for most groups interested in engaging parents is actually reaching parents, given very busy schedules and other competing priorities. The following tips might be helpful to increasing the number of parents who are able to attend workshops and programs:

- Be flexible. If parents are being asked to attend a workshop or participate in a program, consider offering the workshop at multiple times and on multiple days.
- Offer child care. For any in-person workshops, or meetings, offering child care will increase the chances that a parent will be able to participate.
- Identify partners that can help recruit parents. Consider working through community partners such as churches, sports clubs, and community centers that have already successfully engaged parents and might be able to help recruit parents for events and workshops.

Messages to Share with Parents

If program providers aren't able to incorporate a parent-specific workshop or orientation session into their program, they might consider conveying the following messages to parents through supplementary material or any personal interactions that program staff have with parents. In addition, program providers could consider sharing the messages below with community partners who are working with parents on other issues.

- Encourage parents to approach conversations about sex, love and relationships as more than just “the big talk”. Parents should have multiple conversations with their adolescents about these topics.
- Encourage parents to start having age appropriate conversations about sex and related topics with their teens beginning at an early age. Research suggests that parents should try to start talking to their children about relationships and sex before they start having sex –this won't make it more likely that teens will have sex, and it won't make teens think that their parents are endorsing sexual activity. For many parents, this means that conversations should start in the “tween” ages, perhaps between 10 and 12.
- Parents should address more than just the health aspects of sex and contraception. Teens are looking for information about the emotional aspects of having sex and being in a relationship as well. Parents can play a very important role talking with their teens about some of the social reasons why teens might decide to have sex, (i.e. being accepted by peers, feeling loved by their partner, etc.) and helping their teens think more carefully about having sex.
- Encourage parents to use teachable moments to start conversations about sex and related topics. Parents can use something in the media or something else from daily life to start these challenging conversations.

- Reassure parents that they have access to resources if they need help answering their child’s questions. Practitioners are providing information to teens, but they can also serve as an important resource for parents.
- Remind parents that they do not need to have all the answers. If youth have questions for their parents that cannot be easily answered, provide them with the resources they need to find them. Encourage parents to look up the answers with their adolescents, or to reach out to healthcare professionals who might be able to help.

Additional Resources

- SIECUS: Innovative Approaches to Increase Parent-Child Communication about Sexuality (http://www.siecus.org/data/global/images/innovative_approaches.pdf)
- The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/parents/default.aspx>
- Advocates for Youth: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home>
- Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (ReCAPP): Activities for parents, youth and educators; research and parent-child communications and connectedness resources
<http://www.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.LearningActivitiesHome>
<http://www.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.currentresearchhome>

ⁱ Blum, R.W & Rinehard, PM (1998) Reducing the Risk: Connections that make a difference in the lives of youth. Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota. Minneapolis, MN

ⁱⁱ Dittus, P.J., Jaccard, J., and Gordon, V. V. (1999) Direct and non-direct communication of maternal beliefs to adolescents: Adolescent motivation for premarital sexual activity. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29, 1927–1963.; Dutra, R., Miller, K. S., and Forehand, R. (1999). The process and content of sexual communication with adolescents in two-parent families: Associations with sexual risk-taking behavior. *AIDS and Behavior*, 3(1), 59–66; Karofsky, P., Zeng, L., & Kosorok, M. R. (2001). Relationship between adolescent-parental communication and initiation of first intercourse by adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 28(1), 41–45; Kotchick, B. A., Dorsey, S., Miller, K. S., & Forehand, R. (1999). Adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior in single-parent ethnic minority families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13(1), 93–102; Leland, N. L., & Barth, R. P. (1993). Characteristics of adolescents who have attempted to avoid HIV and who have communicated with parents about sex. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 8, 58-76.; Miller, K. S., Levin, M. L., Whitaker, D. J., and Xu, X. (1998). Patterns of condom use among adolescents: The impact of mother-adolescent communication. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88(10), 1542–1544.