

What Can Parents Do To Reduce Risky Sexual Behavior and Substance Use Among Their Adolescent Children?

Risky sexual behavior, substance use and the combination of these two activities places adolescents at risk for unplanned pregnancy, teen childbearing, and contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including HIV. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide updated estimates of the occurrence of risky sexual behaviors, their co-occurrence with alcohol use (see figures on back), and parenting practices that have been found to reduce these behaviors.

Stats on Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Sexual activity is the primary mode of transmission of HIV among adolescents (Hutchinson, 2002), and risky sexual behavior is not uncommon among this population. Analysis of data from the Adolescent Health Study (AD-Health) finds that 38.3% of all adolescents have ever had sexual intercourse. Of these, nearly half have had 4 or more sexual partners, and two thirds report using condoms less than half the time.

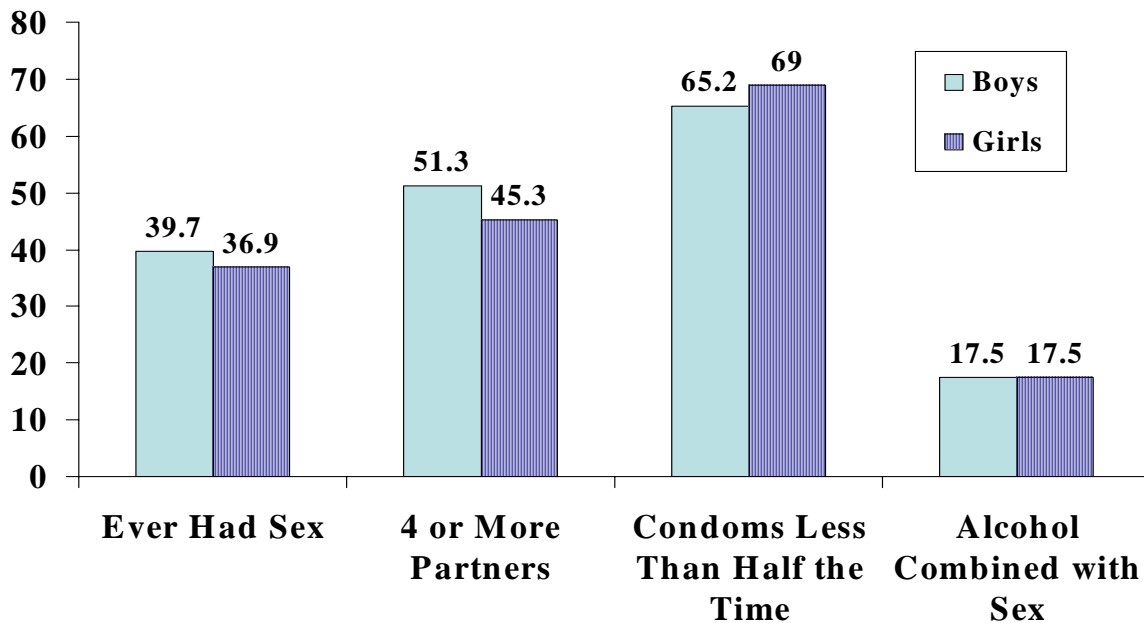
Combining substances, especially alcohol, with sexual behavior is common—25% of sexually active teens report being under the influence of a substance during their last sexual encounter (Grunbaum et al., 2002). This combination increases the occurrence of risky sexual behavior (no condoms, multiple partners, increased frequency) that in turn increases the odds of poor health outcomes (Graves & Leigh, 1995). Approximately 17% of the AD-Health respondents report that they have ever combined alcohol with sexual intercourse and regretted the experience later.

How Can Parents Help Protect Their Children?

Research finds that parents can influence their adolescent's sexual behavior. Involved and warm parenting both directly and indirectly (via less deviant peer affiliations) delays sexual intercourse (Scaramella et al., 1998). Parents who talk to their children about sex have teens who are less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior (Whitaker & Miller, 2000). However, this influence peaks during the 9th-10th grades and thereafter is replaced by stronger peer influences on sexual attitudes and behaviors (Treboux & Busch-Rossnagel, 1995).

BOTTOM LINE: Teens are engaging in sexual behavior, some of it quite risky, and it increases their chances of pregnancy, teen childbearing and STI's, including HIV. It is arguably a developmental task of adolescence for teens to learn how to engage in safe and healthy sexual practices and parents can play an important role in this process. Research has demonstrated a connection between parents who talk to their children about sex and children who engage in safer sexual practices.

Percent of Adolescents Engaging in Risky Sexual Behavior



Source: 1995 wave of the in-home sample of the AD-Health Survey. The AD-Health Survey is a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7 to 12 in the U.S. These interviews were conducted between April and December of 1995 (Bearman, Jones and Udry 1997).

References:

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