Preventing Teen Pregnancy Through Outreach and Engagement:
TIPS FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS

Introduction and Overview
Parents are a critical part of teen pregnancy prevention efforts. They can be helpful in voicing their support for programs that address this issue, and they often are a source of important prevention and education messages themselves. Teens consistently report that, when it comes to their decisions about sex, their parents are most influential. At the same time, teens often report that they wish they could talk more to their parents, particularly about topics such as relationships. Research suggests that parent-child communication in general is a protective factor that reduces engagement in different types of risk behavior, including risky sexual behavior. In particular, parent-child communication about sex can delay sexual initiation. As a result, many programs seek to engage parents in teen pregnancy prevention efforts, and in recent years programs developed specifically for parents have been proven to change teens’ behavior related to their risk of pregnancy.

This document will discuss ways to engage parents, with a focus on the importance of including parents in your plans from the start, the various strategies for engaging parents, and the challenges to working with parents.

Including Parents from the Beginning
Parents should not be an afterthought—if they are, you may not benefit from the full extent of their potential support. It is important to consider the role of parents from the beginning of your work on any particular project or in any particular community.

- Parents should be included as a key audience in any needs assessment activities. Information received from parents during the community needs assessment can help you: 1) document parental support for teen pregnancy prevention efforts; 2) identify gaps in parental understanding or knowledge of teen pregnancy related issues and prevention efforts; 3) highlight specific concerns or needs that parents have regarding teen pregnancy and prevention efforts; and 4) suggest concrete ways that parents can be engaged in teen pregnancy prevention efforts. To the extent you are conducting surveys or focus groups with parents, below are just a few examples of questions to consider asking them:
  - How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Reducing teen pregnancy is a very effective way to reduce the high school dropout rate and improve academic achievement.”
  - Do you think there should be more direct efforts in your community to prevent teen pregnancy?
  - How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Teen pregnancy almost never happens in my community.”
  - Suppose a parent or other adult tells a teen the following: “I strongly encourage you not to have sex. However, if you do, you should use birth control or protection.” Do you think this is a message that encourages teens to have sex?
  - What do you think is the main reason why so many teens have unprotected sex?
  - Do you wish teens were getting more information about abstinence, more information about birth control or protection, or more information about both?
  - When it comes to teens’ decisions about sex, who is most influential?
  - How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Parents believe they should talk to their kids about sex but often don’t know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.”
  - Which of the following statements most closely represents your views a) teen sexuality and contraception are private matters that should only be discussed within the family; b) I’m comfortable with the schools or other community groups teaching teens about sexuality and contraception; or c) I’m supportive of teen pregnancy prevention efforts by schools or community groups, but parents need to have a bigger voice in these efforts.
  - Additional examples of questions to ask parents can be found in various national polling documents, including the publication http://www.ThеNationalCampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV_2010.pdf.
• Overall, most parents are very supportive of teen pregnancy prevention efforts, however understanding how parents in your community perceive these issues will be critical in your work to engage them. Use data you collected during your community needs assessment to determine where parents fall along the continuum of understanding and supporting the mission of teen pregnancy prevention. Tailor your outreach accordingly, keeping in mind that multiple strategies may be needed to reach parents at different points along the continuum. For example, what proportion of parents:
  – Perceive teen pregnancy as a concern and/or prevention as a priority?
  – Perceive teen pregnancy as a concern but believe addressing it is strictly a family matter?
  – Support the general notion of teen pregnancy prevention efforts in the community and/or schools but are unsure of or concerned about what those efforts entail?
  – Want to be more proactive in teen pregnancy prevention efforts, either with their own children or in the community more broadly, but are unsure of how to get started?
  – Are already actively involved in teen pregnancy prevention efforts and seeking ways to do more?
• Once you have assessed parents’ understanding of and support for teen pregnancy prevention, consider what role they might play in your overall efforts. And realize that every parent can play a role, even those who have concerns about teen pregnancy prevention programs. As a useful framework, consider the roles parents play in the lives of teenagers more broadly—both with their own children and those of others. The examples that follow, while not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, can get you started.

Roles Adults Can Play in the Lives of Teens

**Parents as Parents**
Teens who are closely connected to their parents are far less likely to become pregnant than those whose relationship with their parents is not as strong. It is also important to recognize that parent involvement should not be limited to just mothers—when possible, both moms and dads have a role to play in helping model good behavior and helping their children make good decisions about sex.

**Parents as Trusted Adults**
Research suggests that strong, positive relationships between teens and other caring adults—not just parents—can influence whether young people become pregnant or cause a pregnancy. Children without good relationships with their parents often seek adult guidance from a relative, family friend, or coach. Even when children and parents do have a good relationship, sometimes teens may simply feel more comfortable confiding in someone other than a parent about sensitive topics such as sex.

**Parents as Advocates**
Adult influence can also expand from the “micro” to the “macro.” That is, once they understand their impact, adults have the opportunity to use their voice more broadly in the community to influence programs and policies that affect adolescents.

**Parents as Trainers**
Involved parents often beget other involved parents. Using positive peer pressure—encouraging parents who already support a particular program to draw in other parents—can be an effective strategy for broadening the base of parent involvement. By using a “train the trainer” model, programs can teach parents how to instruct others in skills such as talking with their own children or being advocates on key issues.

Engaging Parents—What Can Practitioners Do?
• First and foremost, make sure parents realize how important they are—that teens list their parents as being the most influential in their decisions about sex and relationships, and that while teens may not show it, they actually want to talk more with their parents on these topics, not less.
  • Help parents understand that they need not be experts on sexuality and contraception to start a conversation with their teen. While the information parents provide should be factual, it’s ok to not have all the answers and to search for information together with their teen. In fact, some of the most important messages parents can provide are straightforward and from the heart.
What Teens Want to Hear from Parents

Research clearly suggests, and most teens themselves will admit, that they really want to hear from their parents about topics related to teen pregnancy prevention. In particular, teens want to know:

**Why should I avoid a pregnancy?**

Often we spend time telling teens what they should and shouldn't be doing. It’s just as important to talk to them about why we want them to engage (or not) in certain behaviors. Remind parents to talk to their teens about their child’s hopes and goals for the future and how an unplanned pregnancy might interfere with those hopes and goals. You could also suggest that they talk about the importance of parenting and all it demands, as well as how wonderful parenting can be when someone is ready for it. Parents can help teens understand why it’s so important that they think about when they want to have a child, rather than letting it be something that just happens to them.

**What about love and relationships?**

As teens move through adolescence, they are experiencing a lot of new feelings and often developing new friendships and romantic relationships. Teens consistently say that they want to be able to talk about relationships and love with their parents, and parents can be a great support in helping them to navigate changing relationships and love. They might need advice from their parents about healthy or unhealthy relationships, both friendships and romantic relationships. Parents can start this conversation by talking about their own experience with friends and romantic partners when they were a teen. Parents don’t have to share too much, but they can remind their teens that they navigate relationships too.

**Why should I wait?**

Similar to talking about why it might be a good idea to delay parenthood for a few more years, parents who tell their teens not to have sex should be prepared to say more than “just say no.” Parents should talk to their teens about why they feel a certain way. Perhaps they are worried about the risks, particularly pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. If so, they should talk about those risks and ways to avoid those outcomes.

- Share helpful and concrete resources with parents. In particular, parents need help starting conversations with their teens about sex, love, and relationships. Consider sharing specific scripts that they might be able to use such as the ones in this document [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/RelationshipRedux.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/RelationshipRedux.pdf).

- Consider offering a program for parents. There are several programs that have been designed for parents to increase their knowledge and help build their skills so they can feel comfortable talking to their teens about sex. A few programs that target parents and have been found to subsequently change teens’ behavior related to sex and contraception include:

  - **Families Talking Together (FTT).** This program for mothers of adolescents has been developed for delivery in both a health care setting and a community-based setting. In both settings, the program is primarily designed to give parents the skills they need to effectively talk to their son or daughter about delaying sex in early adolescence. In addition, the FTT program includes content on talking with your adolescent child about birth control and contraception. The program was found to increase communication about sex between mothers and their teens and to delay sexual initiation among adolescents whose mothers participated in the program. In addition, adolescents in the program reported reduced frequency of sexual activity relative to youths in the control group. More information is available at: [http://www.clafh.org/resources-for-parents/parent-materials/](http://www.clafh.org/resources-for-parents/parent-materials/).

  - **Keepin’ it REAL and REAL Men.** These programs were developed for mothers with teens in general and fathers with teen boys specifically. Each program, which consists of seven sessions, works with the teens and parents separately until the final session, when they have an opportunity to talk together about sex and related issues. Both programs were found to increase condom use and the REAL Men program was found to decrease sexual initiation as well. More information is available at: [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/viewprogram.aspx?id=53](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/viewprogram.aspx?id=53) and [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/viewprogram.aspx?id=37](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/viewprogram.aspx?id=37).

  - **Focus on Kids plus ImPACT.** This program is largely for teens, but has a single session at the beginning of
Tips for Working with Parents

The particular strategy you choose for working with parents will depend on your community needs assessment—what it suggests they need from you in the way of information or education and what role they may be positioned to play in support of your mission—as well as how this information ties into your logical model which details your overall project goals and objectives. Are there parents who need basic education on the urgency of teen pregnancy prevention, or an explanation of evidence based programs? Would some parents benefit from participating in a program, while others might be willing to volunteer their time to facilitate group discussions?

Once you’ve determined the role of parents in your project, consider what you need to do in order to implement this particular piece of your overall project plan. These activities should be included in any work plan, similar to your strategies and activities for identifying and selecting a teen pregnancy prevention program that you are implementing with youth.

Also, similar to other activities, it’s important to evaluate the activities that you’ve planned for parents. The specific evaluation activities will depend on the objectives that you’ve established for this particular piece of your project, but will likely include a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection, and process measures such as attendance logs. Some goals for parental involvement activities include short term objectives such as increased parental attendance at events that your team has planned, high levels of parental consent for participation in your program, and increased vocal support for your program among parents in the community. Intermediate and longer term goals might include an increased proportion of parents who report talking to their teens about sex, an increased proportion of parents who report attending multiple events because of time, transportation, and childcare issues, to name a few.

TheNationalCampaign.org Bedsider.org StayTeen.org

Overcoming Challenges

Even with carefully planned activities based on a thorough community needs assessment, connecting with parents can be more challenging than expected. Parents have a number of competing demands on their time and attention. Parents also hold varying levels of awareness and concern about teen pregnancy.

Suggested Strategies:

- Go to where parents are.
- Spread the word through many channels.
- Ask parents to recruit other parents.

Motivating parents to fully participate can also be challenging. Similar to why it’s hard to connect to parents, it’s also hard to get them to attend multiple events because of time, transportation, and childcare issues, to name a few.

Suggested Strategies:

- Use incentives—both financial and otherwise. Offering childcare might be important.
- Ask teens to ask their parents to be involved.
- Determine when is the best time for parents to meet and consider offering your event multiple times so that people have different options.
- Make sure the site is accessible by public transportation (if that is available and well used in your community).

What It All Means

It is important to involve parents in teen pregnancy prevention efforts. They can provide important support for your work, and are the people that influence teens most when it comes
to teens’ decisions about sex. If appropriate, parents can be a huge ally in supporting and reinforcing the information and skills that you provide through your program. However, many parents feel as though they don’t have the knowledge and skills themselves to talk to their teens about these issues, and they could use your help.

Find out what kind of information parents in your community want and need, and find out the best way to deliver it to them. Depending on your community, parents might want to learn in person, or maybe they want to get the information they need online. Consider how you can deliver the information they need in the best format or multiple formats.

**Summary Tips for Working with Parents:**

- Parents are a huge influence in their teens’ lives, especially when it comes to decisions that teens make about sex, therefore increasing parent-child communication and parent-child connectedness can have an impact on behaviors related to teen pregnancy prevention. Make sure parents understand how important they are.
- Parents can support teen pregnancy prevention efforts not only within their own families, but in the community more broadly as well. While not all parents may be supportive of all roles, there is a role for every parent to play.
- It’s important to involve parents in your efforts from the beginning, and you should consider including them in your community needs assessment.
- Make sure you understand what parents need from you in order to be supportive of teen pregnancy prevention efforts. What would they like help with and what barriers might they face in accessing that help? What questions or concerns do they have, what information would be most helpful to them and how would they like to receive that information?
- Consider offering skills building activities that have been designed specifically to help parents communicate with their teens about sex and relationships.
- Don’t limit your focus to just the mothers, but rather include fathers as well. Also, consider broadening your focus to other trusted adults, for example teachers, coaches, and parents of friends.
- Take advantage of the many available resources that you can share with parents to help them communicate and connect with their teen and make sure they understand that teens want more than just “the talk” with their parents.
- Connecting with and motivating parents to stay engaged in teen pregnancy prevention activities can be challenging due to all the competing demands on their time, but with careful planning and strategizing you can overcome some of those challenges.

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**Endnotes**

2. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
17. Ibid.