

Why Birth Control Should Be a Men's Issue

My mother graduated from high school in 1969, and on January 3, 1971, she gave birth to me. She was married later that year, but by the time I was 10, she was a divorced single mother of two young boys. To make ends meet, we moved in with my grandparents, who were also housing two of my mother's siblings and their kids. My family and I moved at least six times before I graduated high school. I was fortunate to have a large family network that combined their resources to help me accomplish my goals—but not everyone may be as lucky.

With Father's Day upon us, I can't help but think of my childhood and the many challenges and struggles that single parents continue to face in America. As policy makers, Congress has the power to promote public policies that economically empower single parents and drastically reduce childhood poverty. But in order to do so, we have to have serious conversations about two things that are still taboo in too many parts of this country: contraception and sex.

For many Americans, including some of the Texans I represent, marriage is increasingly delayed or out of reach altogether. Research has found that two-thirds of American women have had their first child before they turn 30. Women have also reported that 45 percent of pregnancies are unplanned. Lower-income women had vastly higher rates—three to five times higher than the most well-off women. Most importantly, an identical disparity persists among groups in the same income and racial groups.

Children do best when their parents live together in stable relationships, when two incomes can be a catalyst for opportunity. The simple fact is that there is a huge window in which young adults are both unmarried and sexually active. The numbers are too compelling to ignore: We must talk to young women and men about family planning options and how to use them correctly. Future generations can't make smart decisions about when to start a family if we don't give them the information they need.

Americans know what this means for their families. A new survey from The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 83 percent of adults believe that when women have the power to decide if and when to get pregnant, they will have healthier babies and more stable families. 83 percent. Even in instances where two caregivers earn modest incomes, those pooled resources can add up to a better future for children.

So how can lawmakers like me help children to be born into stable families and help women to delay pregnancy until they themselves say they wish to be pregnant? The answer is to ensure that all women, regardless of race or economic background, have information and access to the full range of contraceptive methods to make the best-informed decision for themselves. That means birth control pills, condoms, IUDs, and accurate instructions on how to use them effectively.

We've made great progress in closing the gaps in affordable access to contraception thanks to programs like the Title X Family Planning Program, expanded coverage through Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive coverage provision. But even with those successes, not every American is fortunate enough to live in a state with family friendly policies.

Today, many states are working on ways to eliminate barriers to the most effective methods of contraception and to help providers counsel patients effectively. We must continue this work and expand it. I support legislative measures to protect and increase federal funding for comprehensive sex education such as the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative. Empowering young people to make their own educated family planning decisions is the best approach.

According to a Pew Research Center report from April, the U.S. teen birth rate is at an all-time low. The decline in teen pregnancy is largely credited to smart sex education programs that emphasize effective contraception practices, more information about pregnancy prevention, and the empowerment of young people to make the best decisions based on their beliefs and values. But in my home state of Texas, comprehensive sex education is still not the norm.

After votes in our nation's capital each week, I return back to the district I represent, where I personally witness the many single-parent homes that exist and the real-life implications of our policy decisions made in D.C. We can no longer use the antiquated 1960s stigma of single-parent homes; instead we should focus on the using many tools we have available to give women the power to plan their families. It is time to press the reset button and start having real conversations about sex and contraception.