



Survey Says Teens Skip Birth Control Because They Fear Parental Judgment

Parents, if the following finding doesn't make you sit up and take notice when it comes to talking to your kids about sex and birth control, I'm not sure what will get your attention.

In a recent survey, 68% of teens said they agreed with this statement: The primary reason why they don't use birth control or protection is because they're afraid their parents will find out.

That's nearly seven out of 10 teens who say fears about what their parents might think or say are pushing them not to protect themselves when and if they have sex, according to the research by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. It's a worrisome development even at a time when the U.S. teen pregnancy rate is lower than at any time in the 70 years it has been recorded.

May is National Teen Pregnancy Prevention month so, parents, let's talk about sex.

Bill Albert, chief program officer for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said teens consistently say, in the organization's surveys year after year, that their parents, not peers, partners or popular culture, most influence their decisions about sex, but birth control seems to be a "profound exception" to this rule.

Many parents say they want their kids to be using birth control or protection if they are having sex, but they just don't feel comfortable being the ones sharing that information, he said.

"Because somehow that implies to many parents we've talked to that it's almost like implicit tacit approval, like, 'You want to have sex. You go right ahead. Just be protected. You'll be fine.' That's not the view of most parents."

What's also at play, said Albert, is the feeling of many parents that they don't believe they can be influential when it comes to the topic of birth control.

"But that's simply not the case," said Albert.

Not a one-time conversation

Step number one in helping parents talk to their kids about birth control is convincing them that what they say matters to their kids -- and that it matters a lot.

"Parents need to be clear about what they think ... even if it's saying, 'Well, job number one, we'd really prefer you not at age 16 be having sex with your boyfriend,'" said Albert.

But if the teen is still planning to have sex with her boyfriend, are the parents going to help her get birth control? "They need to be kind of clear about that, which I think is important."

Parents also need to think about sex and birth control as not a one-time conversation. "It's an 18-year conversation and that should be encouraging news. No one wants the pressure of saying, 'I've got one crack at this and one crack only,'" he said.

Start early

It may be disappointing to hear this, but there is no magic answer on when is the right time to start talking to your kids about sex and birth control, Albert and other parents say. Every child is different, and parents know their kids and what they can handle better than anyone else.

"I think the important point is that you don't wait until they are 16 or 17 to start talking to them about sex because that is almost always too late," said Albert, who has a 21-year-old son.

“For kids on almost any topic if they feel they can go to their parents ... if their parents don’t sort of flip out on these conversations, that’s all for the good, for both parents and kids.”

Resources such as a new online teen pregnancy quiz are tools parents can use with their teens to keep the conversation going, he said.

When I asked parents around the country to weigh in on when and how to have conversations with kids about sex and birth control, I got a ton of responses, ranging from helpful to hilarious to both.

Ellen Williams, co-founder of the blog Sisterhood of the Sensible Moms, said when kids are young and they come to their parents with questions, it’s best to just answer specifically what they’re asking.

“No need to go through every aspect of the birds and the bees in one sitting,” she said.

As they get older, she said parents should use the media -- music, television, the Internet -- to get conversations going.

“If you see a teenage mother on TV (or in their school), ask them how they think this will affect her future and what she could have done differently to prevent it. Let the conversations develop naturally because this is not a one lecture and done kind of thing.”

Janeane Davis, a mother of four, said she and her husband told their children they would prefer they wait until marriage to have sex, but that if they choose not to follow that advice, they need to protect themselves.

“Our oldest daughter is now 19. When she was 16 and started going out with friends unsupervised, we told her if she was not going to wait, she should use condoms to protect herself from pregnancy and disease,” said Davis, founder of Janeane’s World.

“My husband told her that just as she kept her cell phone covered to protect it, she should cover and protect herself,” said Davis, who said her husband still tells their daughter to shake her cell phone as a reminder to use protection.

Time for the anatomy book!

So many parents may think avoiding the topic -- never bringing it up or encouraging their kids to bring it up either -- is the best and safest way to go. But your kids will find out what they want to know with or without your assistance, as Amanda Rodriguez noted, in a hilarious post for her blog Dude Mom:

“While having ‘The Talk’ is uncomfortable and hard and possibly embarrassing for both of you, it’s nowhere near as embarrassing as finding out your 12-year-old is knocked up or that your 14-year-old son is gonna be a baby’s daddy by spring break,” wrote Rodriguez, a mom of three boys.

And, as Buzz Bishop, a father of two boys, ages 5 and 7, and founder of the blog Dad Camp, found out, kids, even as young as his sons, pick up some “birds and bees” talk on the playground.

When his boys saw a pregnant woman and he asked them how she got pregnant, one of his sons replied, “Boys have wieners, girls have holes and the boys put the wieners in the holes,” he wrote in a blog post.

His son said he learned that information from another boy on the playground, a boy who was known to have disruptive behavior issues, according to Bishop.

He told his sons they should go to their mom and dad if they have any questions about these body issues. He and his wife then decided it was time to buy that anatomy book.

“Yup, time to get in front of the story, because now that my kids are out in the wild world, we don’t control the narrative anymore,” he wrote.