



## The New Sex Ed? How 'Teen Mom' Helped Lower Teen Birth Rate

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The teen birth rate in the United States has reached a new low, and that news has some psychologists wondering if they have been unfairly critical of television shows that spotlight pregnancy in adolescents.

Among them is Los Angeles psychologist Dr. Nancy Irwin, who thinks that perhaps she's been too harsh on television shows like "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom," which critics have said glorifies teen pregnancy and doesn't prevent it. That stance doesn't hold up in light of a new study released by the CDC on Tuesday, which shows the rate of births in girls, ages 15 to 17, has declined by 63 percent since 1991.

Although the research does not address specific factors contributing to the lower levels, Irwin agrees with CDC officials that education and awareness is key — whether it's in the form of a school program, Planned Parenthood or an MTV reality show.

"I have to eat my hat and kind of say, 'Yeah, I've been proven wrong,'" Irwin told NBC News. "I think it's fabulous. I guess when those shows started, I felt it was almost sensationalizing it and making it look like anyone could do it. And, fortunately, it looks like young girls are getting the message: 'It's not so easy, I'm missing a lot.'"

Certainly, MTV can't take all of the credit. The network's shows that chronicle the lives of teen mothers have been deemed "sex education for the 21st century" by researchers, but many other societal factors have contributed to the declines in teen births.

"I think there was an acknowledgement of what a problem teen pregnancy was," said Dr. Gail Saltz, an associate professor of psychiatry at The New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill Cornell School of Medicine and author of "Becoming Real: Defeating the Stories We Tell Ourselves That Hold Us Back."

"But I also think that technology has made educating on social issues much faster and much more vivid. It used to be that you were a pregnant teen and you were basically tucked away and nobody even talked about it. That just doesn't happen anymore. With the ability for everybody to tell everybody's story online and everybody being privy to it, the awareness of all kinds of socially difficult issues and the negative consequences has increased dramatically."

"16 and Pregnant" and its spin-off "Teen Mom," which follows the girls after they have become mothers, "give viewers an unvarnished look at the realities of teen pregnancy and parenthood," said Lauren Dolgen, MTV's executive vice president of series development.

"These series were created as cautionary tales, so we're incredibly happy to hear that the teen birth rates have declined," Dolgen said. "With a new season of '16 and Pregnant' beginning soon, we hope that this docu-series continues to make an impact by sparking meaningful dialogues around teen pregnancy and prevention."

MTV has worked with The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy since the shows premiered.

"Every season of 'Teen Mom' creates more public discourse about teen pregnancy, and keeps the issue in the national spotlight," the organization said in a statement earlier this year. "When young people identify with someone on TV, it helps them make a connection to their own lives and consider how they would handle similar situations. So the more candid, personal stories viewers get to see, the more opportunities there are for viewers to identify with them and think about their own lives."

A study released in January by the National Board of Economic Research echoed those feelings and determined that the teen pregnancy rate dropped 5.7 percent in the 18 months following the launch of “16 and Pregnant” in 2009. The economists at the University of Maryland and Wellesley College who helmed the research studied Nielsen ratings as well as search data from Google Trends and Twitter to determine the show’s potential impact. The results indicated that exposure to “16 and Pregnant” was high and that influenced how teens thought about birth control and abortion.

“Every bit of awareness helps,” Irwin said. “But if we’re looking at steady declines since 1991, then I think it’s probably more due to the fact that there are so many more forms of birth control, easier access and increased awareness than the impact of TV shows that have been around for five years.”

“16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom” show how difficult and life-altering teen parenting can be, “so I’m sure it has an impact,” Saltz added.

“The thing about reality shows is that it’s very hard to predict how glamorized it comes across,” Saltz said. “Sometimes it works out like this—teens are seeing it’s not all it’s cracked up to be, the baby daddy doesn’t stay around, it’s not the wonderful romance and instant family. There are terrible financial struggles. That’s great that it made an impact. But if you think about the popularization of ‘Jersey Shore,’ it didn’t make young people go, ‘Oh maybe I don’t want to get vomiting drunk.’ So it’s hard to sometimes to know in advance whether people will be deterred or not.”

As good as the news was, CDC officials cautioned against complacency during a press conference on Tuesday, noting that 86,000 girls, aged 15 to 17, had babies in 2012.

“Far too many teens are still having babies,” the study concluded.