

# Says: The Sexual Attitudes and Behavior of Male Teens

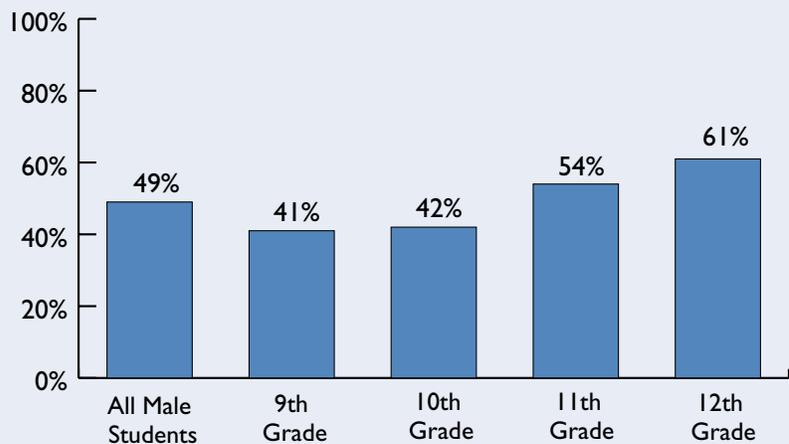
*The 850,000 teen girls who become pregnant each year don't do so alone. Still, teen pregnancy is usually seen as a "girls' problem." Happily, the past decade has brought increased attention to the importance of directly involving boys and men in efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. This Science Says brief provides information on teen boys' sexual activity and contraceptive use, their attitudes toward both, and advice for parents and program leaders.*

## Sexual Activity

### Sexual Experience

- Forty six percent of all high school students say they are sexually experienced (that is, they have had sexual intercourse). Male students (49 percent) are more likely than female students (43 percent) to have sex (2001 data).<sup>1</sup>
- Sexual experience also varies by race/ethnicity: 69 percent of African American, 53 percent of Hispanic, and 41 percent of non-Hispanic White male high school students are sexually experienced. For all three groups, boys are more likely to have sex than girls (2001 data).<sup>2</sup>
- Sexual activity increases with age: 41 percent of 9th grade boys are sexually experienced, compared to 61 percent of 12th grade boys (Figure 1). The gap between male and female students' sexual

**FIGURE 1: Percentage of Male High School Students Who Have Had Sex, by Grade, 2001**



experience is greatest in the ninth grade; by grade 12 the proportion of male and female students who have had sex is virtually the same (2001 data).<sup>3</sup>

- Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of high school boys who were sexually experienced decreased by 16 percent.<sup>4</sup>

### Frequency of Sexual Activity

- There is a lot of variation in how often teen boys have sex. For example, in 1995 (the most recent data available), among *all* sexually experienced 15- to 19-year-old males (not just those in high school), 10 percent had not

had sex at all in the previous year and 42 percent had had sex fewer than ten times in the previous year. Still, for a significant percentage of teen boys, sex is more frequent — nearly a quarter (23 percent) reported having sex 50 or more times in the previous 12 months.<sup>5</sup>

## Number of Partners

- High school boys are more likely than girls to have had four or more sexual partners (17 percent vs. 11 percent). This pattern holds true across grades and racial/ethnic groups (2001 data).<sup>6</sup>
- Having several sexual partners also varies by race/ethnicity: 13 percent of non-Hispanic White, 39 percent of African American, and 21 percent of Hispanic male high school students have had four or more sexual partners (Figure 2) (2001 data).<sup>7</sup>
- Not surprisingly, having multiple sexual partners increases with age: 14 percent of 9th grade boys

say they have had four or more sexual partners, compared to 24 percent of 12th grade boys (2001 data).<sup>8</sup>

- Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of high school boys reporting four or more sexual partners decreased 26 percent; among high school girls the decline was 17 percent (2001 data).<sup>9</sup>

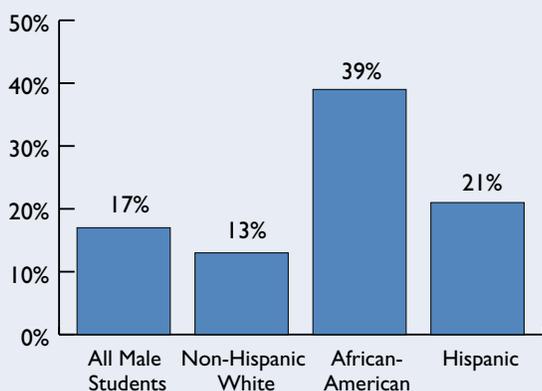
## Attitudes Toward Abstinence and Sexual Activity

- Ninety percent of boys aged 12–19 believe it is important for teens to be given a strong message from society that they should not have sex until they are at least out of high school. When examined by age, 94 percent of teen boys aged 12–14 and 87 percent of teen boys aged 15–19 believe it is important to send such a message (2002 data).<sup>10</sup>
- Nearly equal percentages of teen boys and girls aged 12–19 (81 percent vs. 84 percent) believe that sex should only occur in a long-term, committed relationship (2002 data).<sup>11</sup> When examined by age, 88 percent of boys aged 12–14 and 77 percent of boys aged 15–19 think sex should only occur in a long-term committed relationship (2002 data).<sup>12</sup>
- Boys aged 12–19 are more likely than girls the same age to think that it is embarrassing for teens to admit

that they are virgins (24 percent vs. 14 percent, 2001 data).<sup>13</sup> Young boys (aged 12–14) are slightly more likely than older boys (aged 15–19) to think it is embarrassing for teens to say they are virgins (2002 data).<sup>14</sup>

- Among sexually experienced youth aged 12–19, boys are less likely than girls to wish they had waited longer before having sex for the first time (55 percent vs. 70 percent).<sup>15</sup> However, young boys (aged 12–14) are *equally as likely* as girls the same age to wish they had waited longer to have sex (2002 data).<sup>16</sup>
- Nine out of ten (91 percent) teens aged 15–17 say that girls sometimes/often get bad reputations because of having sex while only 42 percent believe that boys sometimes/often get bad reputations by having sex (2002 data).<sup>17</sup>
- Boys aged 12–19 are slightly more likely than girls the same age to report feeling pressured to have sex (82 percent vs. 79 percent). Girls say romantic partners exert the most pressure while boys said pressure is most likely to come from friends (2000 data).
- Among youth aged 12–17, boys are less likely than girls to say their decisions about sex are influenced by what their parents might think and what their parents have said to them about sex; what they've learned in sex education; and what their religion says about sex (2002 data).<sup>18</sup>
- Boys aged 12–17 are more likely than girls to agree with the statement, “sex is something that just

**FIGURE 2: Percentage of Male High School Students Who Have Had Four or More Sexual Partners, by Race/Ethnicity, 2001**



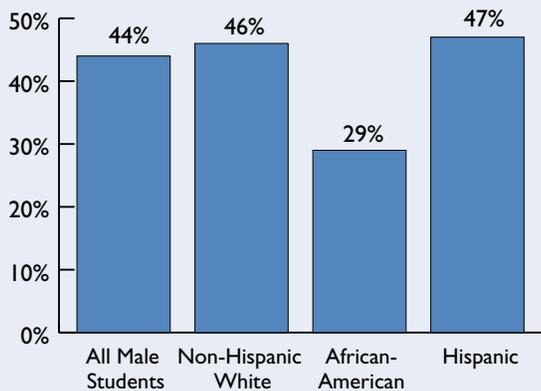
happens (33 percent vs. 17 percent, 2000 data).<sup>19</sup>

## Contraception

### Condom Use

- High school boys are more likely than girls to report using a condom the last time they had sex (65 percent vs. 51 percent). This pattern holds true across grades and racial/ethnic groups (2001 data).<sup>20</sup>
- Condom use varies by race/ethnicity: 64 percent of non-Hispanic White, 73 percent of African American, and 59 percent of Hispanic male high school students say they used a condom the last time they had sex (2001 data).<sup>21</sup>
- Only 44 percent of all 15- to 19-year-old males report using a condom *every* time they had sex in the previous year (Figure 3) (1995 data).<sup>22</sup> Consistent condom use also varied by

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of Males Aged 15-19 Who Used Condoms Every Time They Had Sex in the Previous 12 Months, 1995**



race/ethnicity: only 46 percent of non-Hispanic White, 29 percent of Hispanic, and 47 percent of African American 15- to 19-year-old males used condoms each time they had sex in the previous year (1995 data). Interestingly, condom use at last sex is highest among 10th grade boys (69 percent) and lowest among 12th grade boys (60 percent, 2001 data).<sup>23</sup>

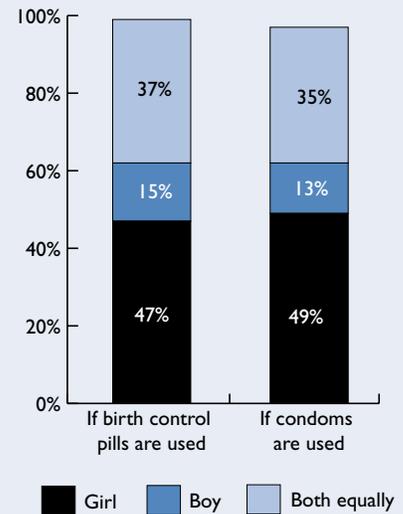
- Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of male high school students using a condom the last time they had sex increased 19 percent. During the same time period, the increase was 35 percent for female high school students.<sup>24</sup>

### Attitudes Toward Contraception

- In 1995, nearly one-third (31 percent) of boys aged 15–19 said they would be embarrassed buying condoms in a drugstore. About one in five (22 percent) thought that using a condom would reduce physical sensation or that putting on a condom in front of a partner would be embarrassing (19 percent).<sup>25</sup>

- When it comes to couples and contraception, adolescents aged 12–17 agree that girls influence the decision to use birth control pills or condoms more than boys (Figure 4) (2000 data).<sup>26</sup>

**FIGURE 4: Who Adolescents Aged 12-17 Think Has the Most Influence Over Decisions About Contraception Within a Couple**



## Pregnancy and Fatherhood

### Pregnancy

- Overall, 14 percent of sexually experienced males aged 15–19 reported that they have gotten a partner pregnant. Causing a pregnancy varies by racial/ethnic group: 22 percent of African American, 19 percent of Hispanic, and 10 percent of non-Hispanic White male teens reported getting a girl pregnant (1995 data).<sup>27</sup>

### Fatherhood

- The teen birth rate for boys aged 15–19 was 18.5 per 1,000 in 2001. Between 1991 and 2001 the teen birth rate for boys in this group decreased 25 percent.

Readers should note that the birth rate for male teens is much lower than the birth rate for female teens (45.3 per 1,000 in 2001) because many children born to teen mothers are fathered by men in their 20s or older.<sup>28</sup>

## Attitudes Toward Fatherhood

- Four out of ten boys aged 15–19 agree (at least a little) that “getting a girl pregnant will make you feel like a real man” (Figure 5) (1995 data).<sup>29</sup>
- Half (51 percent) of males aged 12–19 agree that teen boys often receive the message that sex and pregnancy are not a big deal (2002 data).
- About half (51%) of boys (compared to 41% of girls) agree with the statement “I have never really thought about what my life would be like if I got pregnant/got someone pregnant as a teen” (2002 data).<sup>30</sup>

## What it All Means

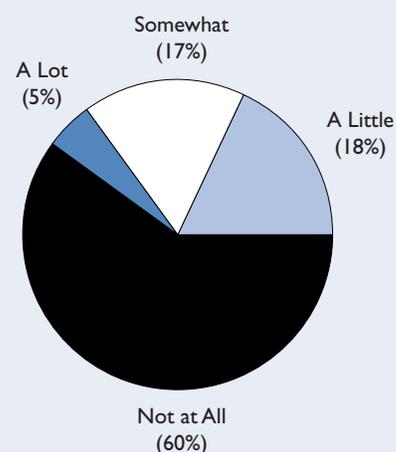
This research has several possible implications for parents and professionals who work with teens:

- **A Special Note About Pressure.** The notion that only teen girls feel pressure to have sex is an antiquated and inaccurate one. In fact, data cited above show, boys may even feel slightly *more* pressure to have sex than their female peers. Boys report they feel pressure to have sex for many reasons: sexually aggressive girls, the belief that “everyone is doing it,” and to prove their “manhood,” to name just a few. While

the sources of sexual pressure may differ for girls and boys, the pressure teen boys report is real and requires careful attention from the adults in their lives.

- **Parents.** Parents should be just as concerned about the sexual activity of their sons as they are about the sexual activity of their daughters. As the data presented here make clear, teen boys often receive a different message about sex and pregnancy than teen girls. Parents should be cautious about perpetuating a double-standard of expectations for sons and daughters — one that clearly discourages sexual activity among teen girls but too often offers a “wink and a nod” to a adolescent male sexual activity. Parents — perhaps fathers, in particular — are ideally suited to talk with their sons about responsible sexual behavior.
- **Program Leaders.** Rates of sexual activity are higher for teen boys than for teen girls. It is also true that teen boys have had more sexual partners than teen girls. Consequently, program leaders clearly need to focus their efforts carefully on boys as well as girls. As noted earlier in this research brief, there are large disparities in sexual behavior by race/ethnicity. To help address these disparities, programs should consider paying particular attention to specific changes in behavior, such as increasing condom use among Hispanic male teens or postponing sexual activity and decreasing the number of sexual partners among African-American male teens. Finally, some of the data in this brief provide clues for the

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of 15- to 19-Year-Old Males Believing “Getting a Girl Pregnant Will Make You Feel Like a Real Man, 1995**



*types* of messages teen pregnancy prevention programs should provide, such as discussion of the “double standard,” gender differences in the sources of pressure to have sex, and embarrassment about issues related to sexual activity, such as obtaining condoms.

## Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid.
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- 5 Sonenstein, F.L., Stewart, K., Lindberg, L.D., Pernas, M., & Williams, S. (1997). *Involving males in preventing teen pregnancy: A guide for program planners*. Washington: The Urban Institute.
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## About Putting What Works to Work

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the Campaign will translate research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the Science Says series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

**For more information, please visit [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)**

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**About the National Campaign**

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative supported largely by private donations.

The Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Our goal is to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

**About the author**

Christine Flanigan is the National Campaign's Research Program Manager.

**Source information**

Readers should note that much of the information provided in this research brief

comes from two different sources: (1) The Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a nationally representative sample of adolescents in high school, and (2) the National Survey of Adolescent Males, a nationally representative sample of never-married adolescent males aged 15-19 from 1995. Additional information is from several nationally representative surveys of adolescents, including several from the National Campaign and several from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.