

# Teen Sexual Behavior

## Summary

Teens in intact families are more likely to delay sexual activity than their peers in non-intact families. Delayed sexual activity, in turn, lowers the risk of teen depression and forming unstable marriages as adults.

- **Adolescents in intact families are less likely to become sexually active compared to their peers in non-intact families.** Adolescents living with both biological parents were 38 percent less likely to transition to sexual intercourse when compared to adolescents from all other family structures.<sup>1</sup>
- **Girls who experienced a parental separation during childhood are more likely to engage in early sexual activity.** Women who had experienced their parents' separation during childhood were more likely to engage in early sexual intercourse. Moreover, the effects of parental separation were dependent on the child's age at which the separation occurred. Relative to women who lived with both parents from birth to age 18, those whose parents separated when the girls were 0-5 years old were four times more likely to engage in sexual activity during adolescence; those whose parents separated when the girls were between six and 11 years old were 2.7 times more likely to engage in sexual activity during adolescence; and those whose parents separated when the girls were 12-17 years old were twice as likely to engage in sexual activity during adolescence.<sup>2</sup>
- **Among girls in intact families, those who report having a close relationship with their fathers are less likely to engage in sexual activity.** Among a sample of adolescent virgins from intact two-parent families, females who reported having a close relationship with their father during the initial interview were less likely to report having engaged in sexual intercourse during a follow-up interview one year later, when compared to similar females who did not report having a close relationship with their father.<sup>3</sup>
- **Adolescents whose mothers were teens when they first gave birth are more likely to initiate sexual activity at an early age.** In 1995, the percent of adolescents age 15-19 years who had intercourse before age 15 differed by mother's age at first birth. 28.4 percent of girls with mothers who first gave birth before age 20 were sexually active before age 15 compared to 13.5 percent of girls born to mothers who first gave birth age 20 or older. Among boys with mothers who first gave birth before age 20, 29.5 percent were sexually active before age 15 compared to 16.2 percent of boys born to mothers who first gave birth age 20 or older.<sup>4</sup>
- **Youths who pledge to protect their virginity until marriage are more likely to delay sexual activity.** The relative risk of sexual initiation among teenagers who formally pledged to protect their virginity until marriage is estimated to be 34 percent lower than nonpledgers.<sup>5</sup>
- **Youths who receive more adult supervision are less likely to engage in sexual activity.** There

was a strong relationship between unsupervised time and youths' sexual activity.<sup>6</sup>

- **Youths who engage in sexual activity are at an increased risk for depression.** Engaging in any level of drinking, smoking, sexual activity, or, especially, illegal drug use significantly increased the likelihood that a youth will experience depression, consider suicide, or attempt suicide.<sup>7</sup>
- **Among teenage boys, those from intact families with frequent religious attendance average the fewest sexual partners.** Teen boys from intact families with frequent religious attendance averaged the fewest sexual partners (1.04) when compared to (a) their peers from intact families with low to no religious attendance (2.03), (b) peers from non-intact families with low to no religious attendance (3.14), and (c) peers from non-intact families with frequent religious attendance (3.92).<sup>8</sup>
- **Teens in intact families are less likely to become pregnant compared to peers in other family structures.** The rate of nonmarital teen childbearing was 11.3 percentage points higher for those who lived with a stepfather throughout the high school years when compared to those who lived with two biological parents throughout the high school years. The rate of nonmarital teen childbearing was 14.3 percentage points higher for those that lived in a female-headed household throughout the high school years when compared to those who lived with two biological parents throughout the high-school years.<sup>9</sup>
- **Women who were sexually active in their teens are less likely to form and sustain stable**

**marriages.** Girls who began sexual activity in their teens have greater difficulty forming and sustaining stable marriages. Two-thirds of women surveyed who began sexual activity at age 21-22 were in stable marriages (i.e. had been in the same marriage for more than five years at the time of the survey). By contrast only 27.7 percent of girls who began sexual activity at age 13-14 were in stable marriages.<sup>10</sup>

### Endnotes

- 1 R. E. Sieving *et al.*, "Friends' Influence on Adolescents' First Sexual Intercourse," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 38, No. 1 (2006): 13-19.
- 2 R. J. Quinlan, "Father Absence, Parental Care, and Female Reproductive Development," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24 (2003): 376-390.
- 3 Mark D. Regnerus and Laura B. Luchies, "The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents' First Sex," *Journal of Family Issues* 27, No. 2 (2006): 159-183.
- 4 J. C. Abma *et al.*, "Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing," *Vital Health Statistics* 23, No. 24 (2004): 1-48.
- 5 Peters S. Bearman and Hannah Bruckner, "Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse," *American Journal of Sociology* 106 (2001): 859-912.
- 6 Deborah A. Cohen *et al.*, "When and Where Do Youths Have Sex? The Potential Role of Adult Supervision," *Pediatrics* 110, No. 6 (December 2002): 66.
- 7 Denise D. Hallfors, "Adolescent Depression and Suicide Risk: Association with Sex and Drug Behavior," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 27, No. 3 (2004): 224-231.
- 8 Patrick Fagan, "A Portrait of Family and Religion in America: Key Outcomes for the Common Good," *Heritage Foundation Book of Charts*, December 2006, 1-37, [http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf\\_media/2010/pdf/Map\\_of\\_Religion.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/2010/pdf/Map_of_Religion.pdf).
- 9 G. Painter and D. I. Levine, "Daddies, devotion, and dollars: How do they matter for youth?" *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 63, No. 4 (2004): 813-850.
- 10 Robert E. Rector *et al.*, "The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts," *Heritage Foundation WebMemo*, No. 303, (June 26, 2003), 1-29, [http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf\\_media/2003/pdf/wm303.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/2003/pdf/wm303.pdf).



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