

TRENDS Child FACT SHEET

Publication #2008-14

4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20008
Phone 202-572-6000 Fax 202-362-8420 www.childtrends.org

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT CONTRACEPTION OR STDs PRIOR TO SEX

By Emily Holcombe, B.A., Suzanne Ryan, Ph.D., and Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D.

April 2008

OVERVIEW

Since decisions about sexual behavior are made by couples, communication between sexual partners is essential for preventing risky sexual behavior. In particular, teens who discuss contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) with their partners before they engage in sex are more likely to use contraception when they do have sex, which can reduce their risk of unintended pregnancy and STDs. However, little research has looked at the characteristics of teens and their relationships that influence whether or not teens have such discussions. A greater understanding of the factors that influence teens' abilities to talk about contraception and STDs can aid prevention programs in their efforts to help teens improve their communication skills and learn how to negotiate sexual activity and contraceptive use.

Using data from high school students, this Fact Sheet finds that only half of teens report discussing contraception or STDs with a partner prior to having sexual intercourse for the first time. Males, whites, and Hispanics are less likely to have these discussions, whereas teens who report higher levels of communication with their parents and engage in more dating activities with their partners are more likely to discuss contraception or STDs.

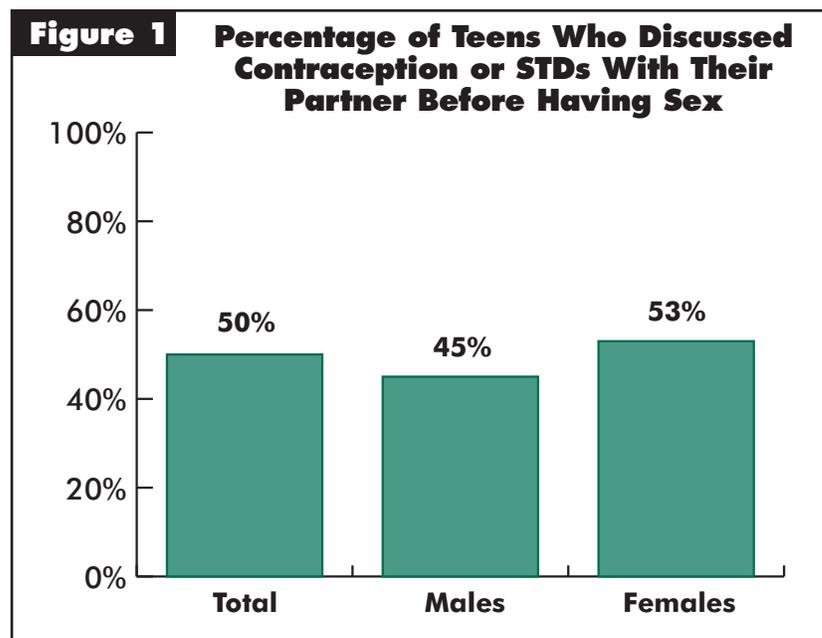
FINDINGS

Half of Teens Reported Discussing Contraception or STDs With Their Partners Before Having Sex For The First Time.

- Given the link between discussing contraception and actual contraceptive use, teens who did not have such conversations face a heightened risk of having an unintended pregnancy or contracting an STD.

Male Teens Were Somewhat Less Likely Than Were Female Teens To Report Discussing Contraception or STDs With Their First Sexual Partner.

- Forty-five percent of males and 53 percent of females reported that they discussed contraception or STDs with their first sexual partner (See Figure 1).
- This finding supports evidence from small-scale research studies suggesting that many males feel uncomfortable discussing contraception.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCE FOR THIS FACT SHEET

This *Fact Sheet* is based on an article titled “Discussions about Contraception or STDs with Partners Prior to First Sex”, published in the September 2007 issue of *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* and authored by Suzanne Ryan, Kerry Franzetta, Jennifer Manlove, and Emily Holcombe at Child Trends. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades seven through 12 in the United States in 1995. More than 14,000 teens participated in interviews in both 1995 and 1996, responding to detailed surveys that included questions on romantic and sexual relationships. Looking at multiple variables, Child Trends analyzed data from a sample of 1,426 unmarried teens who had sexual intercourse for the first time between the two waves of the survey.

- Consequently, male teens may be at a higher risk of having unprotected sex than are their female counterparts. Thus, male teens especially may benefit from participating in pregnancy and STD prevention programs that help them become comfortable communicating about contraceptive use and STDs with their partners.

Black Teens Were More Likely Than Were White and Hispanic Teens to Discuss Contraception or STDs With Their Partners.

- White and Hispanic teens, therefore, represent key target groups for pregnancy and STD prevention programs that emphasize helping teens improve communication around sex and contraception issues.
- While many interventions focus on minority teens, this research shows that white teens are in need of interventions, too, especially when it comes to increasing their level of comfort in discussing contraception before engaging in sex.

Teens Who Reported Higher Levels of Communication With Their Parents Were More Likely To Discuss Contraception or STDs With Their Partners.

- Thus, parents should be encouraged to talk to their children about a range of issues; conversations do not have to be explicitly about sex to help promote teens’ abilities to communicate with partners about contraception or STDs.

Teens Who Discussed Contraception or STDs With Their Partners Engaged in More Dating Activities Before Having Sex For The First Time (See Figure 2).

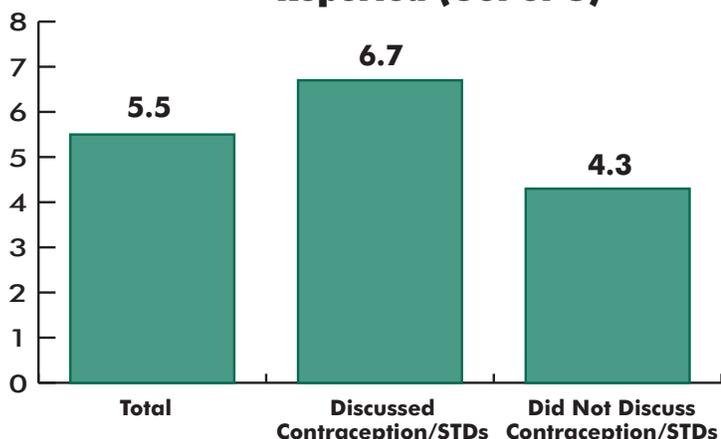
- More dating interactions between teens and their sexual partners (such as going out together alone or in a group, and meeting each other’s parents) likely improves their level of comfort with each other and, therefore, their willingness to talk about topics such as contraception and STDs.

Teens Who Think They Know More About Condoms Were More Likely to Discuss Contraception or STDs.

- The more knowledge teens think they have about condoms, the more likely they were to report discussing contraception or STDs with their partners before having sex for the first time.
- Thus, teaching teens more about contraceptive methods may help to improve their willingness to discuss contraception or STDs.

Figure 2

Number of Dating Activities Reported (Out of 8)*



* Activities include thinking of themselves as a couple, telling others they were a couple, going out together in a group, going out together alone, exchanging “I love you’s,” meeting each other’s parents, exchanging presents, and spending less time with friends in order to spend more time together.

Teens Who Perceived That They Were at High Risk For Contracting an STD Were Less Likely to Discuss Contraception or STDs.

- It is possible that teens who perceive their disease risk to be high do not engage in discussions about contraception and STDs with their partners because they may think that contracting an STD is inevitable.
- Thus, these teens may be an especially vulnerable group in need of interventions to improve their knowledge of reproductive health issues and risks, and to help them prevent risky sexual behaviors that may lead to STDs.

Teens Who Were Able to Make More Rational Decisions Were More Likely to Discuss Contraception or STDs.

- Rational decision making was measured by creating a scale that combined teens' reports of their decision-making habits (such as whether they get as many facts as possible about a problem and think of different ways to approach a problem when attempting to find a solution).
- This finding complements other research showing that teens with better problem-solving skills are more likely to postpone sex and to use contraception when they do become sexually active.

- Thus, programs that help provide teens with systematic approaches to negotiating decisions about sex and contraception in relationships may spur more discussions between partners about contraception and STDs.

Child Trends is indebted to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs (OPA) for their support of this *Fact Sheet*.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children from pregnancy to the transition to adulthood. Its mission is to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available *Research Briefs*, visit our Web site at www.childtrends.org. For the latest information on more than 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, visit the Child Trends DataBank at www.childtrends.databank.org.

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND PROGRAMS

Parents and programs can play instrumental roles in encouraging teens to engage in safer sexual behavior. Our findings suggest a number of ways that parents and programs can increase the likelihood that teens will discuss contraception or STDs with their partners before having sex for the first time and, consequently, help sexually experienced teens avoid pregnancy and STDs. These include:

- Discouraging sexual relationships at an early age, especially with someone teens do not know very well;
- Helping male and female teens become more comfortable communicating about pregnancy and STD prevention with their partners; one proven effective strategy for doing so is by engaging teens in role-playing exercises;
- Encouraging parent-teen communication, not only about sex but also about a range of everyday issues;
- Helping teens who do choose to have sex become more knowledgeable about condoms and more confident about using them;
- Targeting efforts to teens who perceive their risk of STDs to be high; and
- Assisting teens in the development of systematic, rational problem-solving skills and teaching teens to apply these skills to their sexual decision making.