

Parents Matter: The Role of Parents in Teens' Decisions About Sex

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November 2009

Overview. Adolescents are influenced by a variety of social factors and institutions. Prior research¹ confirms what many of us know instinctively: that parents can be one of the strongest influences in adolescents' lives. For example, higher levels of parental involvement in their adolescents' lives are linked with lower levels of delinquency, violent behavior, high-school dropout, and drug abuse, as well as with higher levels of educational attainment.²⁻⁴ In this Research Brief, we look specifically at whether parental involvement in adolescence reduces the chances of teens being sexually active at a young age.

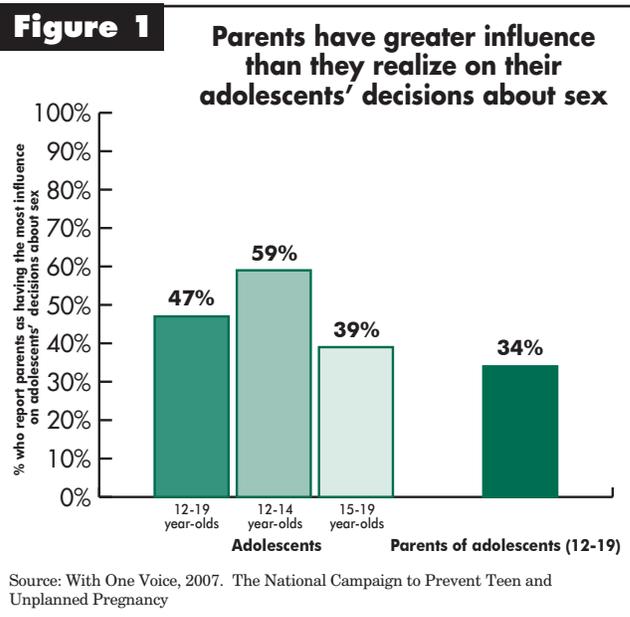
Compelling reasons exist for exploring this topic. Early adolescent sexual experience is linked with a variety of risky outcomes, including acquiring a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and having an unintended pregnancy.^{5,6} Because of the significant role that parents can potentially play in influencing their teens to delay having sex—thus reducing the risk of negative reproductive health outcomes—it is important to understand whether and how multiple dimensions of parental involvement are associated with the timing of teens' first sexual experience.

To further this understanding, Child Trends analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 cohort to explore how parenting practices that occur before adolescents become sexually experienced are associated with the probability of sexual experience by age 16. This Research Brief reports our key findings. We found that multiple measures of parental involvement and engagement are associated with delayed sex among teens. These measures include positive parent-adolescent relationship quality, high parental awareness and monitoring, and family dinner routines. Specifically, our analyses showed that adolescent girls who reported higher quality relationships with their mothers and fathers, and adolescent boys who reported that they ate dinner with their families every day were less likely to have sexual intercourse at an early age. The same held true for both adolescent girls and adolescent boys who reported that their parents kept close tabs on whom they were with when not at home.

PARENTS' INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENT SEXUAL ACTIVITY

In two recent nationally representative polls of 12- to 19-year-olds and of adults aged 20 and older (including parents of teens), respondents were asked about who they think is most influential when it comes to teens' decisions about sex.⁷ Response categories included: parents, friends, teachers and sex educators, religious leaders, the media, siblings, teens themselves, or someone else.

Parents have more influence than they think on their adolescents' decisions about sex. Nearly one-half of 12- to 19-year-olds (47 percent) reported that their parents had the most influence on their decisions about sex. However, only one-third of parents of adolescents (34 percent) reported that parents were the most influential.



ABOUT THE DATA SOURCES FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 cohort (NLSY97) is sponsored and directed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. The NLSY97 is a nationally representative survey of young people who were aged 12 to 16 in 1997. It provides valuable information on parent-youth relationships, youth sexual experiences, and family background and demographic factors. We used a sample of 4,581 adolescents (2,277 adolescent boys and 2,304 adolescent girls) who were aged 12-14 and had never engaged in sexual intercourse at the time of the first round of the survey. They were initially interviewed in 1997, and we include annual follow-up data through 2005.

Figure 1 is based on data from the 2007 *With One Voice* poll published by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unintended Pregnancy.⁷

For Figures 2-8, we used data from the NLSY97 sample of 4,581 adolescents. For Figures 2-4, parent-adolescent relationship quality was measured in 1997 as a three-item summative index ranging from 0-12 that captures the extent to which the adolescent agrees with the following three statements about his or her residential mother/father: “I think highly of him/her,” “I really enjoy spending time with him/her,” and “He/she is a person I want to be like.” Response categories for each question ranged from 0: strongly disagree to 4: strongly agree. We classified the index into three categories: low (0-7), medium (8-10), and high (11-12) relationship quality. Data in Figures 2, 5, and 7 are based on bivariate cross-tabular analyses, whereas the data in Figures 3-4, 6, and 8 are based on predicted probability estimates that sexually inexperienced adolescents in 1997 would have sexual intercourse before age 16. We incorporated predicted probabilities to estimate levels of sexual experience by varying levels of parent-adolescent relationship quality, parental awareness, and family dinner routines. For all estimates, we controlled for age, gender, race/ethnicity, family structure (two biological or adoptive parents versus other family structures), parental education (less than or equal to high school diploma versus greater than high school), and whether the respondent’s mother was a teenage mother. We weighted all analyses to present population-level estimates. All differences presented in this brief are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

(See Figure 1.) Parents most frequently cited adolescents’ friends as having the most influence on their adolescent children’s decisions about sex (41 percent).

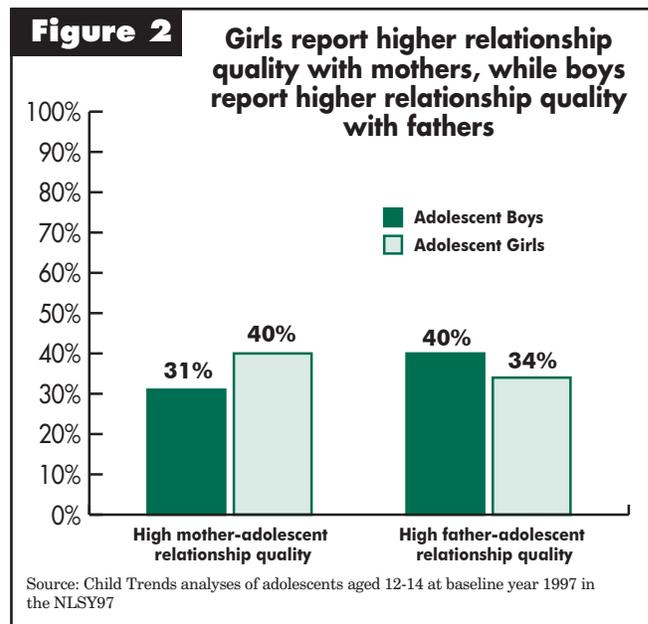
- Fifty-nine percent of 12-to 14-year-olds and 39 percent of 15-to 19-year-olds reported that parents had the most influence on their decisions about sex, compared with 34 percent of parents of adolescents of all ages (data for parents are not available by specific ages of their adolescent children). (See Figure 1.)

PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Although some previous studies have found an association between better parent-adolescent relationships and delayed sexual initiation among adolescents,⁸ limited research exists that specifically examines both mother-adolescent and father-adolescent relationships. In the NLSY97, adolescents reported on their relationship quality with each parent by level of agreement with the following statements: “I think highly of parent,” “I enjoy spending time with parent,” and “Parent is a person I want to be like.” In our analyses, we categorized responses to these statements as representing low, medium, and high levels of relationship quality^a (see “About the Data Sources for this brief” for more details).

Adolescent girls report better relationships with their mothers, on average, compared

with adolescent boys, while adolescent boys tend to report better relationships with their fathers than do adolescent girls. Forty percent of adolescent girls reported high relationship quality with their mothers, compared with 31 percent of adolescent boys. On the other hand, 40 percent of adolescent boys reported high relationship quality with their fathers, compared with 34 percent of adolescent girls. (See Figure 2.)

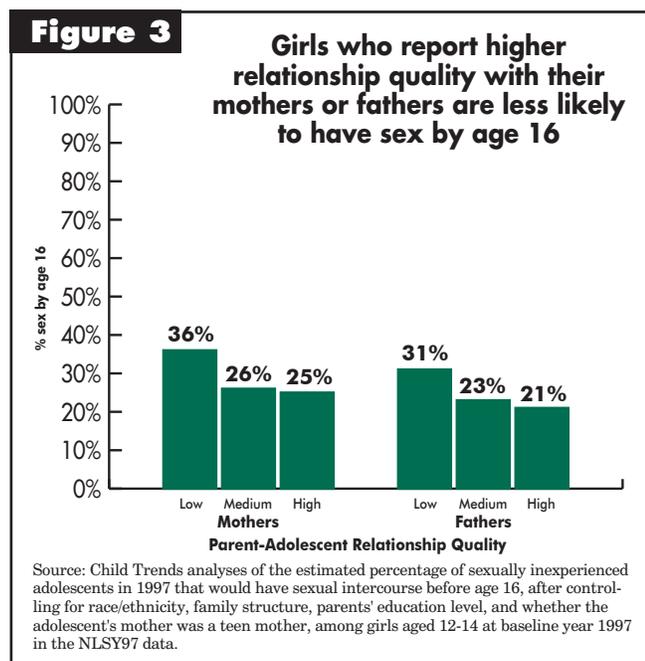


- Among adolescent girls living with two residential parents, about one in four (24 percent) reported high relationship quality with both parents, compared with about

^a We created “low,” “medium,” and “high” categories of parent-adolescent relationship quality using an index ranging from 0-12 to ensure that there would be an even distribution across the categories.

one in 10 (11 percent) who reported low relationship quality with both parents. Findings were similar for adolescent boys.

Higher levels of parent-adolescent relationship quality are associated with reduced risk of early sexual experience among teen girls, even after taking account of other background factors. Teen girls who reported higher levels of relationship quality with their mothers were less likely to have sex before age 16 (an estimated^b 25 percent and 26 percent for high and medium levels, respectively), compared with teen girls who reported poorer relationships with their mothers (an estimated 36 percent). (See Figure 3.)



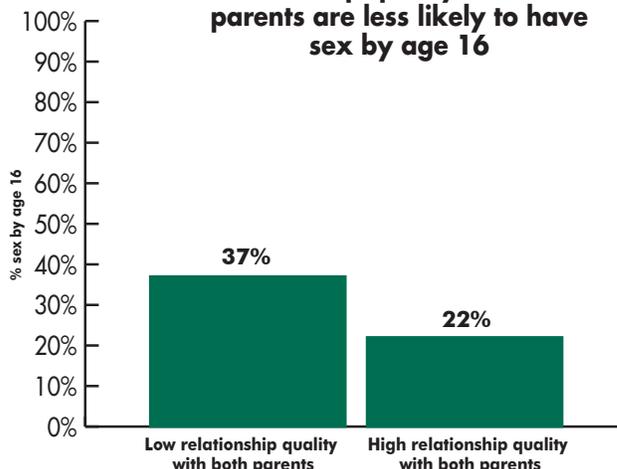
■ Additionally, teen girls who reported higher levels of relationship quality with their fathers were less likely to have sex before age 16 (21 percent and 23 percent for high and medium levels, respectively), compared with teen girls who reported lower levels of father-daughter relationship quality (31 percent). (See Figure 3.)

■ No significant association was found between parent-adolescent relationship quality and early sexual experience among teen boys.

Positive relationships with both parents in adolescence are associated with lower levels of early sexual activity among teen girls. Specifically, among teen girls who lived with two residential parents, those who reported high rela-

Figure 4

Girls who report higher relationship quality with both parents are less likely to have sex by age 16



Source: Child Trends analyses of the estimated percentage of sexually inexperienced adolescents in 1997 that would have sexual intercourse before age 16, after controlling for race/ethnicity, family structure, parents' education level, and whether the adolescent's mother was a teen mother, among girls aged 12-14 at baseline year 1997 in the NLSY97 data.

tionship quality with both parents were less likely to have sex at an early age (22 percent), compared with teen girls who reported low relationship quality with both parents (37 percent). (See Figure 4.)

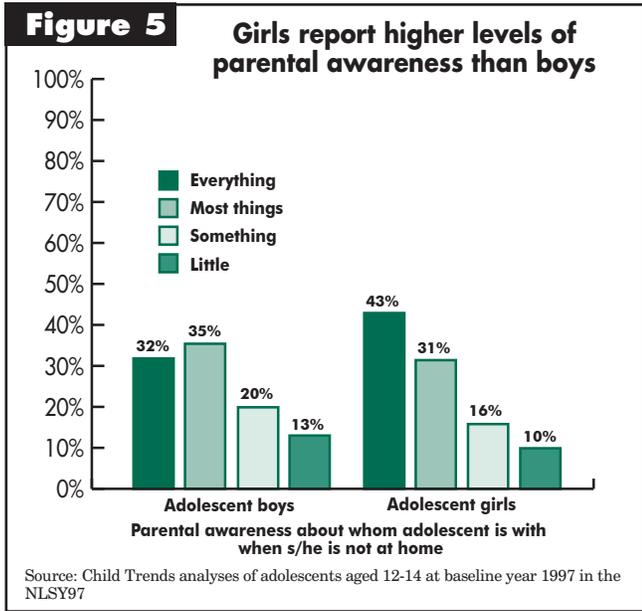
■ No significant association was found for teen boys on this measure.

PARENTAL AWARENESS AND MONITORING

Parents can help prevent risky teen behavior by monitoring their adolescents' activities and being aware of where and with whom their adolescents are when they are not at home or in school.⁹ We measured parental awareness and monitoring about their adolescents based on the following question asked of adolescents: "How much does he/she know about who you are with when you are not at home?" Adolescents could respond that their parent knows: everything, most things, some things, just a little, or nothing. Adolescents reported on both maternal and paternal awareness. We also created a measure of parental awareness and monitoring based on the average awareness and monitoring responses of the mother and father.

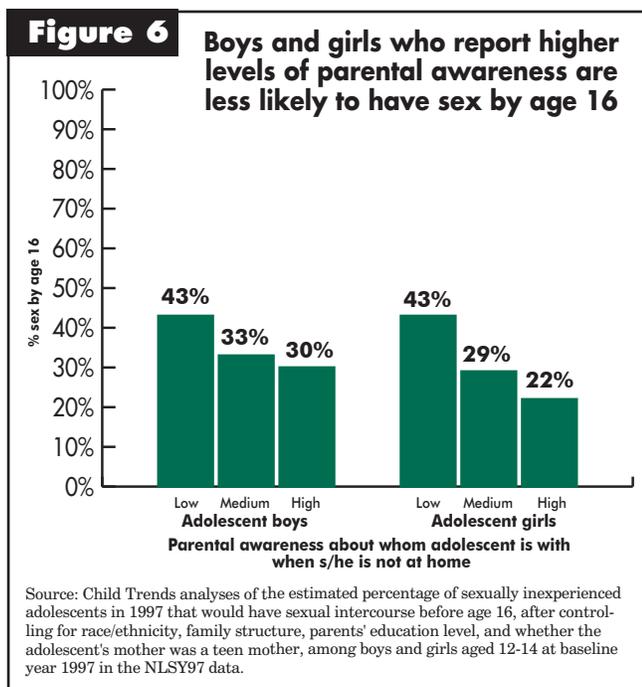
Adolescent girls report higher levels of parental awareness and monitoring than do adolescent boys. Forty-three percent of adolescent girls reported that their parent (or parents) knows everything about whom they are with when not at home, compared with 32 percent of adolescent boys. (See Figure 5.)

^bPredicted probability estimates that sexually inexperienced adolescents in 1997 would have sexual intercourse before age 16 by varying levels of parent-adolescent relationship quality, net of family background controls. Figures 4, 6, and 8 also show predicted probability estimates of sexual experience by age 16 for varying levels of parent-adolescent relationship quality, parental awareness and monitoring, and family dinner routines, net of family background controls.



Adolescent girls reported higher levels of both maternal and paternal awareness than did adolescent boys (47 percent versus 35 percent when it came to maternal awareness and 30 percent versus 24 percent when it came to paternal awareness).

Teens of both sexes who report higher levels of parental awareness were less likely to have had sexual intercourse before age 16, even when controlling for other background characteristics. Teen girls with higher levels of parental, maternal, and paternal awareness were less likely to have initiated sex before age 16. Less than one-quarter of teen girls (22 percent) who

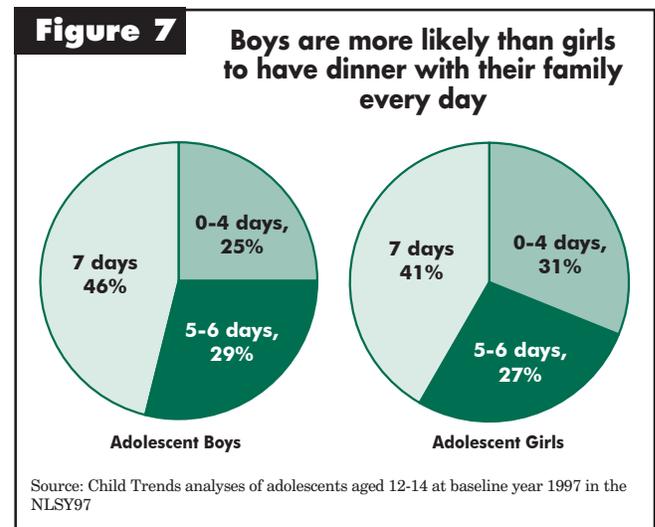


reported that their parent or parents knew everything about whom they were with when not at home had sex before age 16, compared with 29 percent who reported that their parent or parents knew most things about whom they were with when not at home and 43 percent who reported that their parent or parents knew just some things or less about whom they were with when not at home. (See Figure 6.)

- Teen boys who reported the lowest levels (knows some things or less) of parental awareness were more likely to have had sex before age 16, compared with those who reported medium (knows most things) and high levels (knows everything) of awareness (43 percent, compared with 33 percent and 30 percent, respectively). (See Figure 6).
- Separate analyses showed a similar pattern of association between maternal and paternal awareness and age at first sex for teen girls and teen boys.

FAMILY DINNER ROUTINES

Family routines—or time spent by parents and adolescents together—is another dimension of parental involvement that may influence adolescent behaviors.¹⁰ The following section highlights our findings on the association between the number of days a week that adolescents have dinner with their family and their probability of sexual experience before age 16.



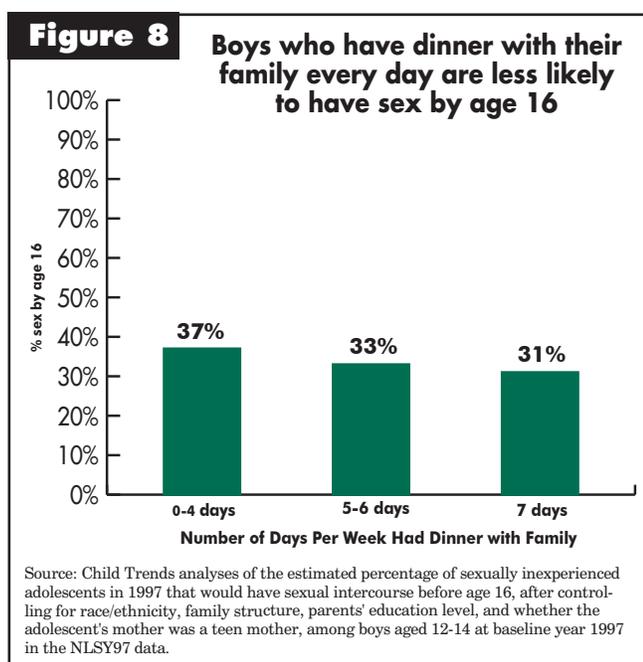
More than two-fifths of 12- to 14-year olds report having dinner with their family every day. Boys in this age group reported having dinner more often with their families than did girls in this age group. Specifically, 46 percent of the boys

reported having dinner with their family every day, compared with 41 percent of the girls.

- Nearly one-third of adolescent girls (31 percent) reported having dinner with their families from zero to four days a week, compared with just one-quarter of adolescent boys. (See Figure 7.)

Teen boys who report having dinner with their family every day were less likely to have had sex before age 16, compared with those who report they eat dinner with their family less than five nights a week, even after controlling for other background factors.

- Thirty-one percent of teen boys who reported having dinner with their family every day were estimated to have had sex before age 16, compared with 37 percent of teen boys who reported that they had dinner with their family fewer than five days a week. (See Figure 8.)



- No significant association was found between family dinner routines and early sexual experience among teen girls.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* has highlighted several dimensions of parental involvement in adolescents' lives, including parent-adolescent relationship quality, parental awareness and monitoring about whom their adolescents spend time with, and frequency of eating dinner together as a family. Our analyses

assessed the association between levels of parental involvement and the probability of sexual intercourse before age 16 and highlight the role of parental involvement in delaying the timing of when teens first have sex. These findings support previous research showing an association between parental involvement and adolescent sexual behaviors.¹¹ The following key findings and implications have emerged from our research:

- **Many adolescents themselves report that their parents have the most influence when it comes to their decisions about sex.** More than one-half of 12-to 14-year-olds reported that their parents have the most influence on their decisions about sex. In contrast, only about one-third of parents of adolescents reported that parents have the most influence on their adolescents' decisions about sex. These findings underscore the need for parents to recognize the level of influence that they have and, thus, to develop positive parenting practices and healthy parent-adolescent relationships that may help to delay sexual activity among their teens.
- **Better parent-adolescent relationships are associated with a lower probability of sexual intercourse before age 16, among teen girls.** This finding holds true for mother-adolescent, father-adolescent, and combined parent-adolescent relationship quality, showing that both mothers and fathers can have a positive influence on their teenage daughters' behaviors. Much research attention has been given to the role of mothers in this area. However, these findings, and those of other researchers, suggest that fathers may have just as important a role to play as mothers in helping their teenage daughters make responsible decisions about sex.¹²⁻¹⁴
- **Adolescents whose parents are more aware of whom they are with when not at home are less likely to have sex by age 16.** Again, this finding holds true for maternal, paternal, and overall parental awareness, signaling the importance of having at least one parent who is aware of the adolescent's friends and activities. Parents can help protect against risky sexual behaviors among their teenage children by getting to know their teens' friends and being aware of their teens' activities and whereabouts when they are not at home.

■ **Teen boys who eat dinner with their family every day have a lower probability of having sex before age 16, compared with those who eat dinner with their family four days a week or less.**

Eating dinner together as a family represents one type of routine family activity. Programs designed to delay sexual activity and/or other risky behaviors can help improve outcomes for adolescents by encouraging them and their parents to engage in routine family interactions and activities. In addition, more family routines offer more opportunities for conversations between parents and children, possibly improving parent-teen communication. Although the association between routine family dinners and sexual experience before age 16 was not significant for teen girls, it is possible that their decisions about sex may be influenced by other types of family activity.

- **Programs designed to delay teen sexual activity and to deter other risky behaviors may benefit from including or enhancing parental involvement in their offerings.** The analyses presented in this brief offer guidance to parents on ways that they can encourage their teens to delay sex and deter other risky behaviors. Our analyses also suggest steps that programs serving adolescents might take toward these ends. For example, our findings point to the value of adding a parental involvement component to sex education programs that do not currently engage parents. Currently, several sexual education programs do include parental involvement components.¹⁵⁻¹⁹ For such programs, the research suggests that such involvement should go beyond the typical discussions about the “sex talk” to a serious exploration of parenting practices associated with less sexual risk-taking by adolescents.

CONCLUSION

Parental involvement in their adolescents’ lives represents a critical factor associated with adolescent sexual behaviors. Our findings complement prior research, which has found that strong parent-adolescent relationship quality, communication, and monitoring and awareness of adolescents’ activities are associated with delayed sexual initiation and a reduced risk of teen pregnancy.^{11,20}

Adolescents who feel close to their parents may be more comfortable communicating with their parents about sex, may share or feel more influenced by their parents’ values, or may have a better understanding about their parents’ expectation regarding their teens’ sexual behaviors.^{10,11}

Recent data indicate a slight increase in sexual experience among teens,^{21,22} underscoring the importance of developing practices and programs that encourage teens to delay the initiation of sex or other risky sexual behaviors until they are older, thereby helping to reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and STIs among teens. The findings presented in this brief also suggest several simple and affordable parenting practices that can help strengthen families and improve adolescent outcomes.

Child Trends thanks the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Office of Population Affairs for their support of this *Research Brief*. The authors would also like to acknowledge Megan Barry for her valuable research assistance and Carol Emig for her careful review of this brief.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

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Teen Pregnancy Resources for Program Providers



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