



Teen Sexual Behavior Quick Facts

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Note: In this article, the term **sexually active** means vaginal intercourse. It does not mean other forms of sexual activity. Teens may be very involved in other forms of sexual activity without engaging in vaginal intercourse and thus without being labeled sexually active.

The term **committed relationships** carries a different meaning for teens than for adults. Adults tend to think of committed relationships within a definition of marriage (i.e. long-term), but for many high school teens, a romantic relationship lasts about six weeks (i.e. short-term). When we look at different age groups we need to be aware of differences in the meaning of the phrase.

A final note: Adults tend to have a more jaded view of teens' ability to resist sexual temptations than teens do. However, teens have historically had tremendous power to change themselves and revolutionize their culture. We need to encourage teens — who already make hundreds of good choices on a regular basis — that they also have the power to abstain from destructive sexual behaviors.

I. Younger teens (12 to 14 years old)

How many are sexually active?

Five percent of 12-year-olds, 10 percent of 13-year-olds and 20 percent of 14-year-olds are sexually active.¹

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When you consider that less than half of 12- to 14-year-olds have ever been on a date, these numbers are staggering.²

The numbers are increasing.

Though the proportion of sexually active girls ages 15 to 19 has decreased, the proportion of sexually active girls age 14 and younger has increased.³

They have multiple sex partners.

More than a quarter of sexually active 12- to 14-year-olds reported multiple sexual partners in the past 18 months.⁴

Those who date people older than themselves are more likely to be sexually active.

Thirteen percent of relationships between same-age partners include sex, compared to 26 percent of relationships with a partner who is two years older, 33 percent of relationships with a partner who is three years older and 47 percent of relationships with a partner who is four or more years older.⁵

Twelve percent of 12- to 14-year-olds involved in a romantic relationship are dating someone three or more years older.⁶

Why do they have sex?

About one-third of 14-year-old boys said they would have sex because of curiosity, and another third said they would do so to satisfy sexual desires.⁷

Ten percent of girls said they would have sex to satisfy curiosity, and another 10 percent said they would have sex to satisfy sexual desires.⁸

Why do they wait to have sex?

The top reasons among virgin teens for not having sex are:

- They feel they are too young.
- They are worried about pregnancy.
- They are worried about STDs.⁹

Teens with Christian parents are more likely to abstain from sex for fear of what their parents would think than teens with nonreligious parents.¹⁰

Girls are more hesitant about sex than boys.

Girls are more likely than boys to abstain from sex because of:

- a conscious decision to wait (81% vs. 67%)
- belief they are too young (82% vs. 67%)
- fear of pregnancy (77% vs. 71%)
- fear of STDs (75% vs. 68%)
- fear of parents' (71% vs. 59%) or friends' (28% vs. 13%) reaction¹¹

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Even the virgins...

Twelve percent of virgins have touched under clothes.¹²

Six percent of virgins have touched genitals.¹³

Thirty-six percent of 14-year-old boys and 18 percent of 14-year-old girls said they would consider having sex if they had a boyfriend or girlfriend they loved.¹⁴

Teen sex is related to drinking, smoking and drugs.

Sexually active teens are six times more likely to drink regularly than virgins.¹⁵

Sexually active teens are more than five times more likely to smoke regularly than virgins.¹⁶

Sexually active teens are more than four times more likely to try marijuana than virgins.¹⁷

II. Older teens (15 to 19 years old)

Almost half of high school students in the United States have had sex.¹⁸

Teen boys typically experience sex for the first time before their 17th birthday and teen girls before their 18th birthday.¹⁹

By their late teens, 75 percent of boys and girls have had sex and more than two-thirds of these have had two or more partners.²⁰

Since 1991, the percentage of sexually active teens has decreased from 54 percent to 47 percent.²¹

III. Casual Sex

Teens who engage in casual sex usually do so mainly to satisfy sexual desire, but they also do so to avoid the complications of a serious relationship.²²

IV. Parental awareness and involvement

Parents are more likely to talk about sex with daughters than with sons.²³

Parents tend to overestimate how open their children feel they can be with them.²⁴

Twice as many parents as teens claim they have talked about sex with their children.²⁵

Only 30 percent of the parents of sexually active 14-year-olds believe their children have ever had sex.²⁶

Though teens talk about sex more with their friends than their parents, they learn the most about sex from their parents.²⁷

V. Sex on TV

How much TV do teens watch?

The average teen watches approximately three hours of TV a day.²⁸ TV accounts for more of youths' time than any other medium.²⁹

How much sex is on TV?

Sexual content appears in two-thirds of all TV programs.³⁰

Programs with sexual content show more than four sex-related scenes an hour.³¹

Fourteen percent of programs portray sexual intercourse.³²

A mere one in seven programs with sexual content include a "safe-sex" message, and most of those are inconsequential.³³

What's the result?

TV encourages teens to become sexually active when it portrays sex as more central to daily life than it actually is, a process known as media cultivation.³⁴

Social learning theory predicts that teens who watch portrayals of sex without consequences will be more likely to become sexually active.³⁵

The probability of breast and genital touching is 50 percent higher among teens who watch large amounts of TV than among those who do not.³⁶

VI. Teens' thoughts on teenage sex and abstinence

Casual sex is not OK.

Eighty-five percent of teens think sex should take place only in committed relationships.³⁷

We shouldn't have sex in high school.

More than 70 percent of teens don't think it's OK to have sex in high school.³⁸

We wish we had waited longer.

Most sexually active teens wish they had waited longer to have sex.³⁹

Everyone's doing it.

More than one-third of 14-year-old boys and over half 14-year-old girls think most of their peers are having sex, though only a minority are.⁴⁰

Society should encourage us to wait.

More than 90 percent of teens think society should encourage them to wait for sex until after high school.⁴¹

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Tell us about the consequences.

More than eight in 10 teens wish the media talked more about the consequences of sex.⁴²

Contraception doesn't encourage sex.

Over two-thirds of teens don't think that being taught about contraception encourages them to have sex.⁴³

Morals are important in discouraging sex.

More than 60 percent of teens think that morals and values are as important as health information in preventing sexual activity, and almost 25 percent think it is more important.⁴⁴

Older teens are more likely than younger teens to say that morals and values are more important.⁴⁵

Girls are sexually aggressive.

More than half of teens think girls are as sexually aggressive as boys.⁴⁶ One in 10 teens think girls are more sexually aggressive than boys.⁴⁷

Girls are told to look sexy.

More than two-thirds of teen girls think they often receive the message that one of the most important things they can do is to attract boys and look sexy.⁴⁸

VII. Adults' thoughts on teenage sex and abstinence

Parents

Sex is best in marriage.

Seventy-nine percent of parents believe that sex should be linked to love, intimacy and commitment and that these qualities are most likely to occur within marriage.⁴⁹

Teen abstinence is best.

Eighty-five percent of parents believe abstinence from sexual activity is best for teens.⁵⁰

Teen sex is harmful.

Fifty-seven percent of parents believe that teen sexual activity is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.⁵¹

Teens don't wait to have sex.

Eighty-five percent of parents think waiting to have sex is a good idea but that teens won't actually wait.⁵²

Adults

Society should encourage teens to wait.

More than 90 percent of adults think society should encourage teens to wait for sex until after high school.⁵³

Tell teens about the consequences.

More than 80 percent of adults wish the media talked about the consequences of sex more.⁵⁴

Contraception doesn't encourage sex.

Half of adults don't believe that teaching teens about contraception encourages teens to have sex.⁵⁵

Girls are told to look sexy.

Nearly eight in 10 adults think teen girls often receive the message that one of the most important things they can do is to attract boys and look sexy.⁵⁶

¹ Albert, B., Brown, S., & Flanigan, C. (Eds.) (2003), *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents (Summary)*, Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, pp. 5-6.

² Albert, Brown, & Flanigan, 2003, p. 10.

³ Terry, E., & Manlove, J., *Trends in sexual activity and contraceptive use among teens*, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003, p. ?.

⁴ Albet, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 11.

⁵ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 11.

⁶ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 11.

⁷ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 17.

⁸ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 17.

⁹ "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active'" NBC News, PEOPLE Magazine commission national poll, 26 January 05.

¹⁰ "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active,'" 26 January 05.

¹¹ "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active,'" 26 January 05.

¹² Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 14.

¹³ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 14.

¹⁴ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 17.

¹⁵ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 13.

¹⁶ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 13.

¹⁷ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 13.

¹⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Trends in sexual risk behaviors among high school students: United States, 1991–2001," *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2002;51:856–859.

¹⁹ "Sexual and Reproductive Health: Women and Men," The Alan Guttmacher Institute, September 2002.

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²¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Surveillance Summaries*, May 21, 2004, MMWR 2004:53(No. SS-2), pg. 27, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/SS/SS5302.pdf>, (accessed 14 March 05).

²² "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active,'" 26 January 05.

²³ Albert, Brown & Flanigan, 2003, p. 15

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- ²⁷ "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active,'" 26 January 05.
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- ³⁹ National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, "With One Voice 2002: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy," *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy*, 2002.
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- ⁴¹ Bill Albert, p. 5.
- ⁴² Bill Albert, p. 7.
- ⁴³ Bill Albert, p. 6.
- ⁴⁴ Bill Albert, p. 6.
- ⁴⁵ Bill Albert, p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ Bill Albert, p. 6.
- ⁴⁷ Bill Albert, p. 6.
- ⁴⁸ Bill Albert, p. 6.

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⁴⁹ Zogby International, 2004 Survey on Parental Opinions of Character- or Relationship-Based Abstinence Education vs. Comprehensive (or "Abstinence-First," Then Condoms) Sex Education, January 28, 2004.

⁵⁰ Zogby International, 28 January 04.

⁵¹ Zogby International, 28 January 04.

⁵² "Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active,'" 26 January 05.

⁵³ Bill Albert, p. 5

⁵⁴ Bill Albert, p. 7

⁵⁵ Bill Albert, p. 6

⁵⁶ Bill Albert, p. 6