

Preventing Teen Pregnancy: A Faithful Response for Parents and the Church

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Kristy has missed her period and is scared. Several weeks ago she and Josh, her boyfriend, let things go too far. It was only one time. She is afraid she might be pregnant and has no idea what to do. She is afraid of telling her mother and knows this will break her father's heart. Her pregnancy changes everything. She had planned to go to college. Now how can she even finish high school? Whom can she talk to?

Good News and Work to Be Done

Despite situations like Kristy's, there is good news concerning teen pregnancy. In 2008, 68 pregnancies occurred per 1,000 women aged fifteen to nineteen,, which is a 42% decline from the peak rate of 117 per 1,000 in 1990.¹ Teens are also waiting longer to have sex than they did in the recent past. In the years 2006–2008, 11% of females aged fifteen to nineteen said they had sex before age fifteen compared to 19% in 1995. The numbers for males in the same age group also declined to 14% from a high of 21% in 1995.² In addition, the use of contraceptives by teens has been increasing, rising from 56% among women whose first premarital sex occurred before 1985, to 76% among those who first had sex in 2000–2004, to 84% among those whose first sex occurred in 2005–2008.³ These trends highlight the benefits of American culture's recent (though sometimes reluctant) willingness to face the issue of adolescent sexuality over the past four-plus decades. Sexuality education by parents, schools, and churches is making a difference.

Nevertheless, there is more work to be done. On average, young people first have sex at about age seventeen and do not marry until their mid-twenties, leaving young people at risk for unwanted pregnancy for a decade or more of their lives.⁴ Each year almost 750,000 women aged fifteen to nineteen become pregnant.⁵ Despite having declined, the teen pregnancy rate in the United States continues to be the highest in the developed world.⁶ Even one unwanted teen pregnancy is too many.

1. Kathryn Kost and Stanley Henshaw, *U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions, 2008: National Trends by Race and Ethnicity*, 2012, guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPTrends08.pdf.
2. Joyce C. Abma et al., "Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing, National Survey of Family Growth 2006–2008," *Vital and Health Statistics* 23, no. 30 (2010).
3. William D. Mosher and Jo Jones, "Use of Contraception in the United States: 1982–2008," *Vital and Health Statistics* 23, no. 29 (2010).
4. Anjani Chandra et al., "Fertility, Family Planning, and Reproductive Health of U.S. Women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth," *Vital and Health Statistics* 23, no. 25 (2005); Gladys M. Martinez et al., "Fertility, Contraception, and Fatherhood: Data on Men and Women from Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth," *Vital and Health Statistics* 23, no. 26 (2006).
5. Kost and Henshaw, "U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions, 2008."
6. Alexander McKay et al., "Trends in Teen Pregnancy Rates from 1996–2006: A Comparison of Canada, Sweden, USA and England/Wales," *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 19, nos. 1–2: 43–52.

Teen Pregnancy: Biblical and Reformed Tradition

In biblical times young people were allowed to marry with parental permission after reaching the age of accountability—twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. Permission was no longer required after the age of twenty-one. While there are no specific statistics available for ancient Israel, a wealth of evidence points to marriage occurring between twelve and fourteen for girls, and between fourteen and twenty for boys. Marriage at this age makes more sense when one considers that life expectancy is estimated to have been about forty years.

At the same time, the penalties for sex outside of marriage were quite severe. Penalties for unmarried consensual sex included the male paying the usual dowry required and marriage if the girl's father agreed. If the father did not agree to the marriage, the dowry still had to be paid (Exodus 22:16–17). Marriage would be a logical consequence, however, to save the girl's family from shame and public humiliation. If a man raped a virgin, they were forced to marry, he had to pay the dowry, and the couple could never divorce (Deuteronomy 22:28–29). If a groom found his new bride not to be a virgin, he could complain to the elders, and if they saw the complaint as true, the woman was stoned to death in front of the home of her family to “purge this evil from your midst” (Deuteronomy 22:20–21).

In the New Testament, Christ took a much different approach. A woman was made to stand in front of Christ, having been caught in the act of adultery. The men reminded Jesus of the law of Moses requiring she be stoned to death. Jesus said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.” Hearing this, the men left and Jesus told the woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.”

The Reformed tradition follows the way of Christ. It sees the law as a gift that makes life humane and possible. It is a gift of grace that provides an orderly way of living together. Unlike Martin Luther, who saw the law's purpose to convict us of our sinful nature, John Calvin and other reformers saw the purpose of the law for building up the body of Christ. Its purpose is to be redemptive and not punitive and not for the destruction of Christ's children or community.

Likewise, the Reformed tradition calls us to live in community. It is understood that humans are called to be in relationship with each other, and that as God's children, what happens to one of us affects all of us.

As followers of the Reformed tradition, we also understand that God calls us to service. The effect of God's grace, freely given, is out of gratitude to motivate us and move us into mission. Simply ignoring a struggle within culture cannot be an option if we are to be faithful to the God who has called us. While Presbyterians may at times disagree mightily about the type of mission to which we are called, we still understand clearly that we are called. The issue of teenage pregnancy is simply one call to mission among many others.

A Matter of Stewardship

Teen pregnancy is the result of fundamentally poor stewardship. It is treating God's gift of sexuality with indifference by not providing young people with appropriate guidance and information, thus creating consequences that are difficult for all. The resulting cost to individuals is dramatic. Lives are changed. Education is interrupted. Dreams are destroyed or delayed. Self-esteem may be injured and diminished. Young people, if a pregnancy is not prevented, are greatly challenged in becoming the men and women God intends and longs for them to be.

The cost to the community is equally dramatic. In 1986, a cost-benefit analysis was conducted in order to see the value of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s creating a sexuality education curriculum. The results concluded that if, over the life of the curriculum, just three teenage girls chose not to become pregnant who might have, the program would be justified in financial terms alone. With current first-year costs of having a baby, excluding labor and delivery, estimated at \$10,000 to \$12,000, the financial benefit of preventing teen pregnancy is still evident.

Aside from the human and financial cost, the moral cost is overwhelming. Families may fracture and peer group support may be lost. Churches and communities suffer with the individual, as they do not operate in a vacuum. Individual choices affect the health and life of the community. Also, every teenage girl who does not get pregnant is one less young person who would be thrown into the dilemma of considering an abortion.

So How do Parents, Christian Educators, and Pastors Respond?

Knowing that we are a part of God's community and that we are called to mission and service, we are compelled to do something. The place to begin is to build on strengths. In 2006–2010, the most common reason that sexually inexperienced teens gave for not having had sex was that it was "against religion or morals" (38 percent among females and 31 percent among males). The second and third most common reasons for females were "don't want to get pregnant" and "haven't found the right person yet."⁷

Use faith. If faith is already a significant reason for delaying sexual activity, then it makes little sense not to use it as a starting point. Church is an ideal place for appropriate sexuality education to occur. The development of educational opportunities by the church is simply good stewardship of the lives and gifts we've been given.

Parents can talk about how the church sees sexuality as a gift from God that is best reserved for marriage and is intended for the appropriate context of maturity, responsibility, and commitment. Parents can also talk about the desires that God holds for each person and how God longs for individuals to become the people God has in mind. The approach, in order to be heard, cannot be judgment based. God comes to persons not so much from a place of punishment, concerned about what they have done wrong, but from a place of grace. God encourages people to live the lives that God has created for them.

7. Mosher and Jones, "Use of Contraception in the United States."

Use the teachable moment. So often parents hesitate at having the big talk. It seems overwhelming and causes no little anxiety. Far more effective and far more important are the teachable moments that occur in everyday living. A year after the television show *Friends* showed an episode in which Rachel and Ross were dealing with the results of a broken condom, a survey was taken of 506 adolescents from age twelve to seventeen. Twenty-seven percent of the adolescents saw the episode and 40 percent of them reported watching it with an adult. Ten percent of the viewers talked to an adult about condom effectiveness because of the show. The youths who talked with an adult were much more likely to report learning about condoms from this particular episode than the others who watched alone, or watched with an adult but had no conversation.⁸ Teachable moments have great power, if utilized. Given today's hypersexualized culture, there are many teachable moments from television, movies, billboard advertisements, and popular music. Proactive use of them can turn undesirable examples into opportunities for learning.

Intentionally adopt a double standard. In parenthood, consistency is greatly overrated. Part of the maturation process for young people is learning to live in an asymmetric and sometimes irrational world. A helpful double standard related to pregnancy is this: Teach and tell the young person that they are too young to have sex. At the same time, teach them about birth control, including how it works and where to find it. Such teaching is a way of saying, "Don't have sex. Nevertheless, if you do, be responsible." Teach them that abstinence is the only method of birth control that is 100 percent effective. Giving information about sexuality is not the same as giving permission. If this logic were true, people could not teach others how to use a fire extinguisher for fear that the individuals being taught would then want to go out and start fires.

Talk about the cost of unplanned pregnancy. The only thing in the lives of some teenagers that may be more powerful than interest in sex is the desire for freedom. Unplanned pregnancy diminishes freedom, and the responsibility that comes with raising a child changes life forever. If this cost is made clear to young people, the effect is significant. It puts them in the position of setting their own healthy and responsible boundaries, proving their own power and individuality, rather than rebelling against boundaries set for them by their parents.

Christians are called to make wise and responsible use of the gifts God gives. Doing so requires a continual examination of priorities. Is this the way that time is to be spent? How are the gifts of physical, emotional, and intellectual energy being used? Christians also hold human life as sacred. Thus, caring for and shaping the lives of children during the time God "loans" them to parents is essential. This not only precludes children having children but also compels parents to take the time to educate their own children about the appropriate use of the God-given gift of sexuality. Most would agree that children are not ready to have children. Parents are also called to ensure that this does not happen. The prevention of teen pregnancy and the education of children about sexuality are fundamentally acts of stewardship.

8. R. Collins, M. Elliott, et al., "Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator: The Impact of Condom-Efficacy Information in an Episode of *Friends*," *Pediatrics* 112, no. 5 (November 1, 2003): 1115–1121.

Authenticity of faith comes when outside choices and responses align with internal promises, vows, and beliefs. If authentic, the vows taken during baptism by parents and church members will call for equipping young people to live faithfully and responsibly in a way that is pleasing to God. What has the average Presbyterian teen learned today about sexuality from the music to which he or she listens, or television, or movies, or the magazines at the checkout counter in the grocery? What has the average Presbyterian teen learned today from his or her church or parents? Youths cannot learn what parents and the church desire them to know if those who care for them the most do not speak.

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