

Relationship Education and Pregnancy Prevention: What's the Connection?

Strengthening families through teen pregnancy prevention and marriage and relationship education

Children who grow up in single-parent families are more likely to be poor, have trouble in school, and become teen parents themselves. Additionally, children who are born to a mother who is a teenager, who hasn't finished high school, and who isn't married are *nine times* more likely to be poor than a child whose mother is even a few years older, is married and has at least finished high school. Thus, strengthening families through both teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) and marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs is an effort to decrease out-of-wedlock childbearing and increase the percentage of children born to and raised by their married parents. This Tip Sheet highlights the connection between MRE and TPP programs and offers strategies for enhancing programs.

Recent research has found that:

- By age 18 more than 80 percent of teens have been in a romantic relationship
- Most teens believe it is better to get married than to go through life single
- More than half of teens (62 percent) have had sex by the time they graduate from high school
- One in three girls becomes pregnant by age twenty
- Half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers in the United States today
- One in five teen births is to a teen mother who already has another child(ren)



These statistics illustrate the importance teens place on relationships and the life changing decisions young people are making within the context of romantic relationships. Although very few of these teen pregnancies occur outside of a romantic relationship, teen pregnancy and parenting can derail a young person's life trajectory as the opportunity for marriage is dramatically reduced by too-early parenting. While practitioners (and teachers and parents) may not be comfortable talking about the love lives of teens, these young romantic relationships are powerful in the lives of teens and when the relationship results in an unintended teen pregnancy, there is a broad social impact. High levels of teen pregnancy disrupt the lives of teens, and contribute to the persistence of maternal and child poverty.

Background

TPP programs are typically designed to: 1) help teens delay sex and/or 2) to use contraception carefully and consistently if they are sexually active. A growing number of programs have been shown, through rigorous evaluation, to achieve these goals. Mainly, TPP programs give teens the tools they need to avoid too-early pregnancy and parenting, but give less attention to the bigger picture and how to build skills to have healthy relationships. Although these programs address relationships, very few make relationships the focal point. Talking in-depth about relationships can help engage students and provide a context for discussions including issues related to pregnancy prevention.

TPP curricula teaches teens to:

- Abstain from sex
- Use protection if they plan to have sex to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV)

MRE is based on more than twenty years of research into patterns of behavior that protect and preserve relationships as well as patterns that damage relationships. Traditionally, such programs targeted single adults and couples who are dating, engaged, or married, but have evolved to serve young people including teens and tweens just entering relationships. This programming generally seeks to prepare young people for the relationships they will have over the course of their life, including marriage. Teen relationship education aims to enable young people with the knowledge, language and skills to manage their early attractions. MRE for teens also serves to educate young adults about dating violence and to recognize other forms of abuse (like psychological). MRE programs give students the tools they need to have more successful relationships, but often don't provide information about preventing pregnancy, which can affect relationships now and marriage prospects later.

Some teens in MRE programs may already be parents, and it is important not to leave them out of the conversation. The decisions they make about relationships are more important than ever for the well-being of their child(ren), and entering an unstable relationship puts them at a high risk of an additional pregnancy.

MRE curricula teaches teens to:

- Recognize the characteristics of a healthy relationship
- Become aware of what emotionally and physically abusive relationships look like
- Discover the qualities they desire in a romantic partner
- Set goals for themselves related to partner selection and family formation
- Understand the economic, health and social benefits of having children after marriage
- Learn essential conflict resolution skills
- Gain knowledge of effective communication strategies

TPP and MRE are designed to help teens avoid pregnancy and improve their odds of having successful relationships, respectively. Despite the common linkage of managing intimate partner relationships, too often they do not focus on both.

Countless teens have not seen a healthy relationship modeled. Numerous TPP programs are aware of this and address the topics of dating violence and how to identify the warning signs of an unhealthy or abusive relationship as a way to help teens avoid unhealthy relationships. Accordingly, it is helpful for TPP programs to teach what healthy relationships look like in addition

to recognizing violent and unhealthy behaviors. Communication skills, a main focus of MRE programs, can also enhance the content of TPP programs.

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Generally, skills taught in MRE are within the context of improving teens' communication in various types of relationships—including with their parent(s) and later when they start a career. These same skills can be utilized to help teens communicate with their romantic partner about: their goals for the future, conflicts that may arise in their relationship, their feelings about whether or not to have sex, and the use of contraception should they choose to be sexually active. These skills can also aid in learning how to handle sexual pressures. Similarly, TPP programs provide teens with practical information to help them avoid sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. Teens can use practical examples of abstinence, discussing birth control, protection and other issues related to sex in class to practice and use their new communication skills.

Conclusion

MRE and TPP programs have a shared goal: to improve the lives of the current generation of young people as well as the next. This goal is more likely to be realized by focusing programming within the context of teens' relationships and creating opportunities for teens to discover what they aspire to in a relationship. At the same time, participants can learn about risks and receive practical information and concrete skills to help them navigate romantic relationships.

One way to engage teens is to facilitate a group discussion about a movie or television show that deals with both relationships and teen pregnancy. For example, the MTV series *16 and Pregnant* documents the lives of teen girls and how their lives change when faced with a teen pregnancy. As a result, these girls' relationships—with their family, friends, and the father of their baby—also go through remarkable changes. Teens not only like the show and can relate to it, but they can also learn from it. Consider having a screening of *16 and Pregnant*, or a show with similar themes, and ask teens questions about the impact of the pregnancy on the teen moms' relationships. To watch the show and download discussion guides, go to <http://www.stayteen.org/tuned/16-and-pregnant>.

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Additional Resources

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Why It Matters: Teen Pregnancy, Out-of-Wedlock Births, Healthy Relationships, and Marriage. Washington, DC: Author. <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters/pdf/marriage.pdf>

Whitehead, B. & Pearson, M. (2006). Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy, and Marriage. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/MALC_FINAL.pdf