



## Nurturing Resilience

Raising children to be competent and caring.

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### How to Prevent Your Daughter Getting Pregnant

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Warm summer evenings and there are lots of temptations for our teenagers to explore sex before they are fully able to handle the consequences. I'm no prude. I know that by the time teens finish high school, almost 60% will have experienced sexual intercourse at least once. If we are going to protect our daughters (and our sons) from an unwanted pregnancy, we need to think carefully about how we explain the seriousness of being sexually active.

On her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday I gave my daughter a big basket of condoms. Not because I thought she would use them (I hoped she wouldn't be sexually active for a while at least) but because I wanted her to feel that she could make a responsible decision if she had to. In other words, I wanted her to know she had a choice, and in my family, choice is very important. I live in a low risk community and the parenting style that suits my children best is to provide them with lots of information and choices. It's been shown that in higher risk environments the parent who keeps their child the safest is the one with more rules and expectations that kids do as they are told. In my world, however, kids have choice, including what they do with their bodies.

My point is that every family finds a way of preventing teenage pregnancy by doing things that reflect their culture. Here's a great example from doctoral research by Alejandra Diaz at the University of Texas at El Paso. Diaz interviewed teenage Latina girls who had not gotten pregnant despite all the risk factors that said they would. An older boyfriend, a mother who had a child early, low family income. And yet, these girls had remained in school and were doing well.

The study reflects positive deviance, which Diaz's mentor Arvind Singhal describes as out of the ordinary solutions ordinary people use to solve problems. Without any extra resources (like sex education classes), and against all odds, positive deviants find solutions.

In the case of preventing pregnancy, Diaz expected that the girls who had succeeded and not become pregnant had better sex education, or at the very least, were speaking about sex with their mothers. That was not often the case, and when it was, neither factor provided much of an explanation for the girls' success. In fact, Diaz found that when a parent, usually a mother, said

goodbye to their daughters as they were off on a date with their boyfriends, the mothers told their daughters that they fully expected them to finish school. College if possible. Not a word about sex. Instead, they expressed their hope that their children would make great futures for themselves.

The daughters understood this was a coded, culturally appropriate message that meant “Don’t have a child” until you can support it yourself.

There were other things that helped these young Latina women.

- The setting of clear expectations about activities they do at home, at work, and when they are at school.
- An emphasis on extracurricular activities.
- Reinforcement and support of the message “Finish your schooling” from extended family members.
- The role of a trusted older male mentor who provides the girls with affirmation, guidance, and direction.
- When talking about teenage pregnancy, mothers emphasized the gains achieved without a pregnancy instead of talking about what girls lose through failure.

These are great rules for Latina adolescents whose culture values the extended family and an older male who can affirm a young woman’s potential in a non-sexual way. What will work for your family will have to be just as good a match between your family’s culture and the risks your daughters and sons experience.

Let’s face it, having sex when you are teenager is not a deviant act since a majority of our children (just like us adults) do have sex at least once before our 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Getting pregnant, or causing a pregnancy, is, however, a problem for most children and their families.

To prevent your child from becoming pregnant, ask yourself:

1) Why is my child having (or likely to have) sex? Is she (or he) looking for a new experience, is she enjoying her evolving sexuality? Is she seeking a way to jump from child to adult, a rite of passage? The answer will tell you what your child needs from you. More responsibility? A lesson in masturbation (not something any parent is going to relish discussing)? Or some other way than through pregnancy to feel self-esteem and adventure?

2) Think about your family’s values. Children should be explained what it is that you value (like getting a university education). It may be that a child’s pregnancy would bring disgrace to an entire family. Or it may be that a teenage pregnancy would burden the entire family financially. Whatever the reason, you have a explain to your child why a pregnancy is a problem for you and other members of your family.

3) Think about your culture at home and in your community. What is accepted as normal behaviour? How risky is it really for a teenager to have sex if they have access to the information and protection they need to avoid both disease and pregnancy? We need to think carefully if we are the only ones in our extended family upset with our child's sexual expression, or if there are many others in our community who would think sex among teens is normal. A child is not going to listen to her parents unless her parents' values are supported by the wider community.

4) Finally, think back to when you were the same age as your adolescent. What were you doing sexually? Be honest. If you had sex, or sexual thoughts (didn't we all?) then you need to recognize that a message of abstinence isn't going to be meaningful unless you can offer your child a proud and powerful identity as a virgin. How is your family celebrating your child's good decision-making? How much is each accomplishment in school acknowledged? If you didn't get pregnant as a teen, then consider what you were told, how you were supported, and how you made good decisions. If you did have a child young, then it is even more important you think back to how you were feeling as an adolescent and what your own child may want to experience too.

We can't control our teenager's sexuality. Nor should we. We can, though, help them to reflect on their choices and make decisions that are good for them. Sex education is important, but it is not the most important factor that prevents an early pregnancy. A child's hopes and dreams for the future are what ultimately can help children avoid an early pregnancy.