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Whose kids? Our kids!

Teens, sex and alcohol

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Teens who use alcohol or other drugs are at greater risk for unplanned sexual intercourse, sexual violence and exposure to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. There is no denying the fact that many teens are sexually active. In addition, the majority are still in junior high or high school when they first have sexual intercourse.

What is the connection between teen alcohol use and sexual activity? Alcohol and other drug use is linked to risky sexual behavior and poses significant threats to the health of adolescents. Sexual activity among adolescents is often unplanned and frequently occurs after drinking or drug use. As youth begin to use alcohol and have sex at a younger age, the risk of unplanned pregnancies, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and sexual violence increases.

The risks associated with alcohol use and teen sexual activity increase even more when youth abuse alcohol. Excessive drinking (that is, five or more drinks in a row) places them at greater risk of engaging in sex. Teens who don't drink are much less likely to become sexually active compared to teens who drink excessively. This is true for both boys and girls. And, people who use alcohol excessively are more likely to use other drugs, which can have even more dire consequences when combined with sexual activity. The difference between your teen drinking and not drinking alcohol can have long-term impacts on his or her future.

Parents make a difference!

You may be wondering: What can I do to make a difference and help my child make healthy decisions? While it may seem the influence

you have with your teen is declining, you can still have a powerful and positive effect in helping protect your teen from the dangers of alcohol use and sexual activity.

Teens who experience high levels of support from their parents are less likely to have had sex than teens who don't feel much parental support. Parental support refers to the care, love, fairness, praise and affection teens receive from their parents. Teens who believe their mothers care about them are less likely to have had sex than those who feel their mothers do not care about them.

The caring of fathers is also important. Youth who believe their fathers care about them are also less likely to have had sex than those who feel their fathers don't care about them. A teen who feels a void in the love and support of parents may seek to fill that void with a sexual relationship.

As children grow into teenagers, parents tend to hug them less often, and show less affection. Have you noticed this in the relationship with your teen? Yet research shows that warm and loving expressions from parents are just as important to 17-year-olds as to

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7-year-olds. However, you may want to limit your expressions of affection to those times when your child's peers aren't around! While it's important for teens to establish their independence, teens should never have reason to doubt a parent's love and support.

Parental support involves more than caring; it's about offering love, encouragement and appreciation, as well as respect for your child. You can strengthen the bond between you and your teen by enjoying free time together, serving as a positive role model for your teen and recognizing your teen's value as a unique person and family member.

Teens also feel supported when they perceive their parents as fair and reasonable in setting and enforcing rules and limits. While you may never hear a "thank you," teens appreciate consistency in rules and limits affecting them. This provides at least one area of certainty in their otherwise unpredictable adolescent years.

Does your child know how you feel about teen sexual behavior?

Another factor associated with teen sexual behavior is parental values about sex. Does your teen believe you think it's wrong for teens to have sex? Studies show that a significant number of youth are "not sure" how their parents feel about this. And, some students believe their parents do approve of teen sexual activity. Do parental values affect teen's sexual activity? They sure do! Teens who believe their parents approve of adolescent sexual intercourse are more likely to be sexually active than teens who believe their parents disapprove. Even teens who are unsure of their parents' values are more likely to be sexually active than teens who have a clear sense of their parents' disapproval of teen sexual activity.

Is it possible your teen thinks you approve of teenage sex? "Of course not," you may think. But it's well worth your time to talk with your son or daughter about your feelings. It's easy to believe that your teen just knows you don't approve of young people having sex. Yet, teenagers often read messages into what they see and hear. For example, you and your teen may watch a TV show with teenage sex in the storyline. If you don't express your concerns, your teen may assume you don't see anything wrong with it.

Talking about teenage sex is usually easier when someone or something else has already introduced the topic. Rather than beginning a conversation out of the blue, look for teachable moments. For example, you may want to bring up the topic of teen sex when watching a television show that portrays sexual activity. Or you can use a magazine advertisement or song that contains sexual messages or lyrics. Be very clear about stating your concerns about teenage sex and your reasons for these concerns. Focus on the dangers involved without making blanket statements such as teen sex is bad "because I say so." The more clearly you express your disapproval, the better the chances of your teen not engaging in sexual activity.

Because teens are more likely to have unplanned or unwanted sex if they or their partners have been drinking, preventing teen alcohol and other drug use is important to preventing teen sexual activity. *You* can make a positive difference by providing your teen with love, support, encouragement, affection and recognition.

Be very clear about stating your concerns about teenage sex and your reasons for these concerns.

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