

It doesn't matter what the program does as long as it promotes talking about teen pregnancy in an open manner.

LISTEN UP...

Youth Voices On Teen Pregnancy

During the later half of 1999, the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition (NMTPC) hosted six teen focus groups throughout our State. The purpose of these sessions was to provide a forum for the views of young people on teen pregnancy related issues. NMTPC believes that it is essential to include the voices of youth in the conversation about this topic. Appropriate interventions can not be designed unless we are accurately informed about the real world of young people today.

The 70 young people who shared their thoughts and opinions with us represented a diverse cross section of New Mexico Youth. They were almost evenly divided between male and female and ranged in age from 15 to 21 years. The majority self identified as Hispanic (46), 15 Anglo, 4 Native American, 2 African American, 1 Asian American, and two did not specify. The following communities were chosen to allow for diversity in culture, region, and life experience.

Farmington - 13 male teens

Taos - 5 young mothers

Santa Fe - 16 coed teens

Bernalillo County Juvenile Detention Center - 12 coed teens, one pregnant

Deming - 12 female teens

Roswell Job Corps (ENMU) - 12 coed youth

While we realize that a group of 70 teens can not represent the views of all New Mexico teens, we believe these focus groups added to our knowledge and increased our understanding. NMTPC hopes to provide more focus groups in the future.

May 1, 2000

Besides being informed, being involved in activities is the best way to prevent pregnancy.

Comments from the Focus Group Facilitator

As facilitator, I observed that regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, or location, young people are hungry to participate in meaningful dialogue about sexuality and other issues that affect them. Each group expressed its appreciation for the safe, structured, non-judgmental forum. Although many youth noted that sex seems to be everywhere, few, if any, have an opportunity for genuine discussion. If we hope to raise young people who will make healthy decisions about their bodies and their relationships, then we must provide the kinds of settings where they can ask questions, express opinions, and learn from adults and one another.

Michelle Otero

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I don't regret having a baby, but I wish I'd waited until I was older.

It's like a trend here in school. The other day I saw this girl...at lunch. She went up to her friends and they were touching her and everything, "oh! He kicked." And another girl said, "Oh, I want one. How cute!" And the other one goes, "Well, go ahead, it's very easy."

Some simply think, it can't happen to me.

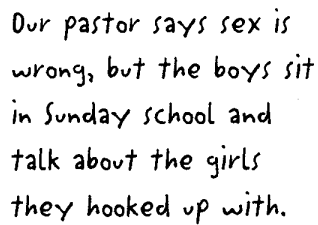
Teen Concerns

Those who are already parents are primarily concerned with raising their children; finances are a major concern. This represents a shift in priorities for them; previously they were concerned with the more common teen issues of boys, partying, etc. Non-parenting teens were concerned with school, relationships, enjoying themselves, money, and their personal activities. Incarcerated teens had many concerns about the violence that has been in their lives since early childhood. Many teens have not had a father in their lives.

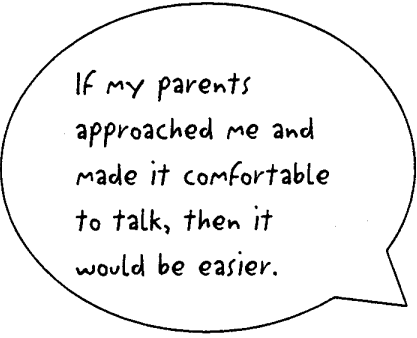
Attitudes About Teen Pregnancy

Focus group participants agreed that teen pregnancy is prevalent. Non-parenting teens viewed teen pregnancy as generally negative. Teen parents did not express regret about having a child but most said they wish they'd waited until they were older and better equipped to give their children the emotional and financial support they need.

It all comes down to morals, what you believe. There are some people who apply biblical standards. Your parents can tell you a lot and apply those things to you, but it's up to you to make the decision.



Our pastor says sex is wrong, but the boys sit in Sunday school and talk about the girls they hooked up with.



If my parents approached me and made it comfortable to talk, then it would be easier.

Attitudes About Sex

Attitudes varied with participants' sexual experience. Sexually active teens feel sex is acceptable, at least under some circumstances. Abstinent teens believe that sex should be delayed until marriage. Both groups believe that protection against disease and pregnancy is essential.

All participants agreed that the double standard is alive and well. Young women are encouraged to delay sex until they are older or married and young men are encouraged to gain sexual experience.

Males feel a great deal of pressure to be sexually active from peers, adults, society, and even family members.

Talking About Sex

Only a minority of these young people say they can talk with their parents about sex. They say they can't bring up the subject without incurring their parents suspicion, judgement, or anger. But they also expressed a desire to talk with their parents and other caring adults about sexuality related topics.

Identified as Major Causes of Teen Pregnancy:

Alcohol: Alcohol was identified by all groups as an important factor in teen pregnancy.

Boredom: Regardless of the size of their community, most groups responded with "there's nothing else to do in this town."

Communities not investing in youth: Without exception, these young people feel that their community does not respect them or take an interest in nurturing or providing for them.

Misconceptions about the realities of pregnancy and parenting: The desire to fulfill unmet emotional needs or to keep a boyfriend can cloud a young persons' thinking about what will really come with having a child.

Lack of parent/significant adult involvement: Many participants said that young people do not have trustworthy, honest and well-informed adults in their lives to turn to when they need to talk about sexuality. Some sexually active teens are seeking the love and attention they don't get at home.

Feeling invincible: Participants acknowledged that many of their peers believe that a pregnancy just could not happen to them and poor decisions are made based on this belief.

Embarrassment: Although not always overtly mentioned, all groups alluded to this on some level. Teens express some embarrassment about having questions about sex or about being sexually active. While they disparage society's discomfort with talking openly and honestly about sex, they also seem to have absorbed some of this attitude. In part, they don't ask questions because they don't want adults or peers to perceive them negatively. This often results in misinformation.

Youth Recommendations on Preventing Teen Pregnancy

- The most common theme running through all focus groups was that young people want to talk openly and honestly about sexual issues. They feel that settings like these focus groups (or rap sessions, talking circles, etc.) are often preferable to lectures because they can express themselves and learn from other young people and adults. They value the opportunity to talk with and listen to the opposite sex.
- Parents should take an active role in encouraging meaningful communication with their children about sexuality and other issues facing teens today.
- Schools should be smaller and more personal with counselors who are there to listen to teens - not just schedule classes. Information is important, but teachers and school personnel need to know how to talk about sexuality in a manner in which youth can relate. This information needs to be presented many times throughout the school years. Abstinence needs to be supported but condoms should also be available in schools.
- There need to be more activities and places where youth can gather. More activities that provide positive outlets for time and energy would help prevent teen pregnancy. Young people want and need more caring adults in their lives.
- Participants also want more public forums to discuss issues that affect them. They need their opinions to be respected and valued and want recognition for the positive contributions of youth.

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