

# What You Need to Know About Today's Teenage Girls

By Kendra Lee

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So what's it like to be a teenage girl these days? It's not much different than a half generation ago. "Boys, parents not understanding them, race issues, sex, drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, boys—in that order," said Stacie Wright, a sociologist in Roanoke, VA. There is, however, one notable exception: "They just start so much earlier," Wright said. "Issues we dealt with as older teens, 17 and 18, they're dealing with at 11, 12, and 13."

Recent studies bear this out. One survey, by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *YM* magazine for teens, found that teen girls as young as 13 struggle with complex sexual situations involving pressure, drinking and drug use, or with relationships that are moving too fast for them to handle. Teens in the study also reported worrying a lot about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as unwanted pregnancy.

A large-scale study—*The Girls Report: What We Need to Know About Growing Up Female*—by the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW), found that although adolescent girls are doing better in school and having fewer babies than several years ago, they are smoking more, suffer depression twice as frequently as boys, and often are the victims of rape and other forms of violence.

"Despite some progress, in many areas girls remain victimized, harassed, and diminished and face very real risks that threaten their healthy development," wrote NCRW Executive Director Linda Basch in the report's introduction. The report concluded that a growing number of programs directed at girls' needs and an increased effort by girls themselves to overcome challenges notwithstanding, recent research reveals little or no progress on many indicators, and even a turn for the worse in some areas:

- ♦ Smoking among teenage girls is on the rise. In 1991, one in eight girls in eighth grade reported smoking (13 percent); by 1996 the number had jumped to more than one in five (21 percent).
- ♦ Girls ages 12–18 are now as likely as boys to drink alcohol and use illegal drugs.
- ♦ Girls are twice as likely as boys to experience depression during adolescence, and are more likely to consider and attempt suicide.
- ♦ A disproportionate percentage of reported rape victims are adolescent girls. In 1992, 62 percent of all reported forcible rape cases involved victims who were younger than 17.
- ♦ Girls frequently are denied access to reproductive information, products and services.
- ♦ Recent changes in welfare laws threaten the well-being of teen mothers and their children, children living in single-parent households, and children from immigrant families.
- ♦ Participation in sports is linked with numerous health and social benefits. Yet despite Title IX and the

increasing popularity of women's collegiate and professional sports, the percentage of high school sophomore girls who participated on athletic teams continues to fall.

- ♦ High school girls who say they have experienced sexual or physical abuse are more likely to smoke, drink and use illegal drugs.
- ♦ Teen mothers under age 20 comprised 7 percent of all adult female recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1995.

In addition, peer pressure—especially among the younger set of adolescents—is strong. "There's a lot of pressure to do drugs. There's pressure about that all the time," said Meredith Howard, an 11 year-old African American.

Signs of the results of that pressure show up in the latest results from the Monitoring the Future study, conducted at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. The most recent study showed that drug use among American adolescents held steady in 1999. "We are down some from the recent peak levels in overall illicit drug use by American teen-agers, which were reached in 1996 and 1997," said Lloyd D. Johnston, one of the study's researchers. "I am hopeful that this is just a pause in a longer-term decline. In fact, we saw such a pause in the '80s, in the middle of what turned out to be a continuing decline in drug use." The one exception to the illegal drug standstill is ecstasy; use of that by teens increased in 1999.

## Girl Power! Campaign

In 1998, HHS Secretary Donna Shalala launched *Girl Power!*, a national public education campaign to help encourage and empower 9 to 14-year-old girls to make the most of their lives. "Too many girls are taking dangerous chances with the only lives they will ever have," Shalala said during the program's kickoff. "We hope to reach girls at this key transitional age when they are forming their values and attitudes. Our job as caring adults is to help girls build confidence and pursue opportunity."

Phase one of the project focused on preventing alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use among girls. Subsequent phases have addressed premature sexual activity, physical activity, nutrition and mental health. Three aspects of this public education campaign set it apart from other government efforts:

- ♦ It recognizes that while some health messages work equally well for boys and girls, girls require health messages targeted to their unique needs, interests and challenges.
- ♦ It takes a comprehensive approach, addressing not only a range of health issues but also the erosion of self confidence, motivation and opportunity that is all too typical for

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- many girls during the transitional period of 9-14 years of age.
- It is based on research indicating that girls at the age of 8 or 9 typically have very strong attitudes about their health. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America's 1995 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study found the majority of girls and boys in grades 4-6 believe that "using drugs is dangerous."

Girl Power! also enlists the aid of parents schools, communities, religious organizations, health providers and others to give girls the support and encouragement they need. "We are challenging caring adults to reach out to young girls in their lives," Shalala said. "Despite

the aura of independence they project so well, adolescent girls look to their parents and other adults for everyday love, attention, involvement and discipline."

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention developed *The Girl Power! Community Education Kit* designed to help coaches, teachers, business leaders and others help girls make the most of their lives.

*The kit can be previewed and downloaded from the Girl Power! Web site at <http://www.health.org/gpower>. The kit can also be ordered by calling SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) at (800) 729-6686. ❖*

## Teen Pregnancy Rates

Despite a decline in teen pregnancy and abortion rates during the 1990s, unwanted pregnancy and abortion still pose a major problem for adolescent females, according to CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, 1999.

- More than 800,000 teens become pregnant each year.
- Four in 10 young women become pregnant at least once before age 20.
- From 1995 to 1997, among females aged 15-19 years, the national pregnancy rate declined by 7.8 percent.
- The largest decline in teen births since 1991 has been in black teens age 15-19. The rate dropped 38 percent.
- From 1994-1998, Hispanic teen birth rates fell 13 percent, but this group still has the highest teen birth rates.
- Adolescent pregnancy rates were higher for blacks than for whites in every state except one.
- An estimated 65-86 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended and nearly two-thirds of children born to teenage girls are fathered by men at least four years older than their teen mothers.
- 70 percent of African-American teenagers reported that lack of communication between a girl and her parents is often a reason teenage girls have babies.
- From 1995 to 1997, the abortion rate for adolescents aged 15 to 19 fell by 7.5 percent nationally.

- Still, the U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate among developed countries.

## Teen Sexuality

According to CDC's 1998 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Summary:

- In 1995, of girls age 15-19, 53 percent of Hispanic girls, 49 percent of non-Hispanic white girls, and 67 percent of African American girls had sexual intercourse.
- Most sexually experienced teens are also sexually active, having had sex in the last 12 months. The majority of sexually experienced teens have had one or two partners, but many have had three or more.
- The primary reason teenage girls who have never had intercourse give for abstaining from sex is that having sex would be against their religious or moral values.
- Three of four girls report that girls who have sex do so because their boyfriends want them to.
- At age 16, 22 percent of girls from intact families and 44 percent of other girls have had sex at least once.
- One of every 3 girls has had sex by age 16, 2 out of 3 by age 18.
- More than six percent (6.5 percent) of ninth-grade girls first had sexual intercourse before age 13.

## Sexuality Transmitted Diseases

Although STDs affect people of all ages, the epidemic disproportionately impacts young people:

- Roughly four million teens get an STD every year.
- Experts estimate that as many as one in three sexually-experienced young people will have an STD by age 24.

- American teens 15-17 underestimate the incidence of non-HIV STDs in the U.S. AIDS tops the list when teens are asked to name sexually transmitted diseases. Even the more commonplace non-HIV STDs, like gonorrhea and herpes, trail behind AIDS in mentions.
- A quarter of new STD cases in the U.S. occur among 15-19 year olds.
- Few 15 to 17 year olds say they worry about getting an STD.
- Many teens assume because they have no symptoms or that their health care provider has never mentioned a problem or that they do not know about any of their partners having been infected they do not need to be concerned.
- Teens underestimate the national incidence of STDs, and many are misinformed or uninformed about treatment options and health consequences.
- Most teens know STDs can be spread despite the absence of symptoms and that some STDs may be symptom-free for an extended period. Many, however, are unaware about other transmission facts and most know little about the prognosis of specific non-HIV STDs.
- Teenage girls are more likely than teenage boys to have been tested for both HIV and other STDs.
- Many teens think only of AIDS when they talk about STDs. ❖

—Kendra Lee

