

Nobody Ever Talks About It

FINDINGS ON TEEN SEXUAL ACTIVITY

From the March 2010 Youth Risk Behavior Survey
Arlington, Virginia

The choices that young people make today have a big impact on their health and well-being, now and in the future.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) asks young people about the behaviors and habits with the strongest links to their health.

This brochure takes a quick look at the findings on use of illegal drugs from Arlington's March 2007 survey of middle and high school students.

WHY WORRY?

For good reasons, most adults want teenagers to delay sexual activity. Public health officials want young people to wait until they are responsible enough to avoid unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Many parents want young people to wait until they can understand and be responsible for all of the consequences of sexual activity – physical, emotional, ethical and social.

Young people engaged in sexual activity – particularly those who have intercourse before age 13 or who have four or more partners – face increased risk of both contracting sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. Both risks can have serious and long-lasting effects including health problems, not finishing high school and living in poverty.

Despite these serious consequences, many teens report that “nobody ever talks about it” – about values, expectations, sexuality, relationships and contraception. These issues can be awkward to discuss. But the survey data clearly indicates the need for parents and other caring adults to do so.

SEXUALLY ACTIVE TOO SOON?

Both national and local data suggest that many teens are engaging in sexual activity before they are prepared to handle it.

- Nationwide, most teens who've had intercourse wish that they had waited longer. Seven out of ten feel that young people in high school should not be engaging in intercourse.
- In Arlington, about one third of sexually-experienced youth did not use a condom the last time that they had intercourse, indicating a lack of responsibility for their own and their partner's health and well-being.

Sexuality is an essential part of life, and sexual knowledge is essential to a responsible life.

Deborah M. Roffman

(Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex)

HOW WE DID THE SURVEY

These findings are based on a survey of about 2850 students enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington's public secondary schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Parents had an opportunity to opt out their child. Only one percent did. Eighty-six percent of students in the classes chosen for the survey filled out a questionnaire. Most of those who did not were absent from school.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

- 27 percent of youth in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade reported ever having intercourse while about one-fifth reported being sexually active (i.e. had intercourse in the past three months).
- Four percent of Arlington youth report having intercourse before age 13.
- Most sexually active youth report using a reliable method of birth control the last time they had sex; specifically 70 percent of sexually active 10th graders and 76 percent of 12th graders. However, only 61 percent of seniors used a condom – the only form of reliable birth control that protects against some sexually transmitted diseases.
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines “responsible sexual behavior” as either abstaining from sexual intercourse or, if sexually active, using a condom. By this definition, 94 percent of 10th grade students but only 87 percent of 12th grade Arlington students are sexually responsible. The CDC goal is 95 percent.

WHO’S AT RISK?

Engaging in sexual intercourse clearly increases with age. Less than one in ten 8th grade students report sexual experience compared to one half of 12th graders. Males are more likely than females to report having intercourse and having more than one partner.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Recent studies suggest that parents can have a great deal of influence over the sexual attitudes and behaviors of young people. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, relationships matter most. Young people are most likely to delay early sexual activity if their parents:

- Clearly communicate their values about love, sex and relationships;
- Show caring and concern for their children;
- Monitor their children’s activities, peers and role models;
- Pay attention to what their children are reading, watching and listening to.
- Stay heavily involved in the lives of their children;
- Discourage early dating – that is before age 16;
- Take a strong stand against a daughter dating a boy who is significantly older than she is.

Young people (including young teens who are not sexually active) want and need to hear what their parents think about sex, values, and relationships. In national surveys, many teens report considerable pressure to have sex. Young people with close connections and strong communication with their parents are best able to resist that pressure and other risk behaviors as well.

TO LEARN MORE

Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy) at www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/parents.aspx

10 Tips for Talking About the Facts of Life (Advocates for Youth) at http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=108&Itemid=206
This site has a guide to child development at various ages, expert advice on helping kids develop responsible sexuality, and a reading list.

Sexual Health (The Nemours Foundation) at www.kidshealth.org/teen/sexual_health
This site offers guidance to teens on a variety of health-related topics, including sexual health. The answers have been reviewed by physicians. Parents may want to browse the site to see the kinds of things that teens worry about but may be too embarrassed to bring up.



Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families
2100 Washington Blvd, 3rd floor
Arlington, VA 22204
Phone (703) 228-1667
www.arlingtonpartnershipforyouth.org