

Teen Pregnancy

An American Dilemma

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Throughout the history of the world, until the modern era, teen pregnancies were the norm. When a young girl became sexually mature she was married off and soon accomplished that for which she is biologically designed, giving birth to the next generation. Teen pregnancies are still the norm in much of the developing world. Each child born to a young girl normally is considered a blessing.

But in the developed nations the situation is different. The networks to help the teen mothers, composed of grandmothers, large, extended families, intimate neighborhoods, and working fathers, are seldom in existence. More importantly, women are expected to become educated and, for many, have secure employment before they bear children. Education is considered to be a necessity for living in a complex, information-rich society, and young women today are involved in the work force at about the same rate as young men.

Under modern conditions, teen pregnancies are considered not a blessing but a curse. This is so because most of the children of these pregnancies will grow up fatherless and at high risk themselves for various social and behavioral problems, the education and work lives of their mothers will be seriously impaired, and the welfare and social costs to the nation will be great.

With its very high teen pregnancy rate the United States is seriously out of line with other developed nations. Each year in this country almost one million teenagers become pregnant, and approximately four in ten girls become pregnant at least once before reaching the age of twenty. This is twice the rate found in the next highest nation, Great Britain, and nearly ten times the rates found in Japan and the Netherlands. Although the teen pregnancy rate in the United States has dropped some in the past few years, it is still substantially higher than in the early 1970s and the drop should not deflect us from grappling with this urgent national problem. Indeed, with many so-called baby boom echo children now entering their teenage years, the total number of teen pregnancies is expected to increase significantly over the next decade.

Perhaps the most alarming trend associated with teen pregnancy concerns the decline of marriage. In 1960, a time of marriage at younger ages and more restricted sexuality, the percentage of unmarried teen births was only 15%. Since then, the increase in out-of-wedlock births has been staggering. Today, some 80% of teen pregnancies and 75% of teen births are to unmarried girls. These girls typically lack the maturity, the skills, and the assistance that are necessary for good parenting.

There is a straightforward reason why the unmarried teen pregnancy rate has increased so dramatically—teens are having more sex, at earlier ages, and without the use of contraceptives. In 1970, 35% of girls and 55% of boys reported having had sex by age eighteen. By 1988, the figures were 56% for girls and 73% for boys. Today, if the data were available, the amount of teen sexual activity undoubtedly would be still higher. This is

despite a slight decline over the past few years, reported by some studies, in the stated acceptance of casual sex by young people.

One reason for the increase in teen sexual activity is that the age of puberty slowly has been dropping. But the principal reason, in my opinion, is a dramatic increase in sexually permissive attitudes among the young. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll, for example, 47% of respondents ages 18-29 said that 'premarital sex is not wrong at all,' compared to only 12% of people in the 65 and over age category. Contraceptive use has increased, but the use is often inconsistent and in any event is not enough to offset the increase in sexual activity.

Data about the social consequences of teen pregnancies portray an alarming picture. Less than one third of teens who begin families before age eighteen ever complete high school; the great majority remain single mothers without fathers to help; and half of all teen mothers and three quarters of *unmarried* teen mothers end up on welfare within five years of the birth of their first child. As a pathway to a successful life for teenage girls, this is certainly far from desirable.

Even more troubling are the negative effects of teen pregnancies on the children involved. These children are far more likely to grow up in poverty, to have more health problems, to suffer from higher rates of abuse and neglect, to fail in school, to become teen mothers, to commit delinquent acts and adult crimes, and to incur failed adult marriages and other relationships. All of this comes at considerable extra cost to the nation's taxpayers. According to one recent study, which controlled for other differences between teen mothers and mothers aged 20 or 21, teen childbearing costs the taxpayers \$6.9 billion each year, or \$2,831 a year per teen mother.

The great majority of Americans believe that teen pregnancies are a serious national problem, indeed a problem that is the major component of what is thought to be national moral decline. There is less agreement, however, on what we as a nation should do about it. The options range from reestablishing cultural norms, such as a strict moral ban on sexual intercourse before marriage, to comprehensive sex education in our schools, to improving the life options of disadvantaged young people, to the practice of "safe sex" through the placing of contraceptives in the purses and wallets of every teenager.

There is growing agreement within the research community that one of the most important factors in retarding teen sexuality and pregnancies is the disapprobation of society, especially of one's family and peers. A recent large-scale study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, for example, found not surprisingly that parents' attitudes and relationships with their teen children could be highly influential. The study concluded: "parents who give clear messages about delaying sex have children who are less likely to have early intercourse."

Fundamentally, in my opinion, we need to reestablish across America the simple moral code that young people should wait until adulthood, if not marriage, before beginning a sexually active life. This normally means through adolescence and high school, at least until age eighteen. We must come to the realization that the teenage years in modern times should be for learning and maturing and becoming fully civilized, not for sexuality, pregnancy and parenthood.

In the sense that this norm stands against the powerful thrust of the sexual revolution, and that teenage sexuality seems impossible to curtail, this proposition may appear naïve to some. Actually, it has strong support not only among religious bodies but also among parents and teachers and even among teenagers themselves. In one survey, commissioned by *USA Weekend*, seven in ten adults and teens nationwide agreed with "the teen abstinence

message." And respondents to a telephone survey of 503 teenagers in grades 9 through 12, when asked their opinion about the right age to start having sexual intercourse, on average said 18 years.

More than 2000 years ago Plato understood that, in the end, there is only one fundamental political issue—how we raise our children. Today, this observation is surely no less true.