



OPEN DIALOGUE ESSENTIAL TO PREVENTING TEEN PREGNANCY!

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The consequences of teen pregnancy are numerous and far-reaching. Nearly 60% of school-age teens who become pregnant drop out of school at some point between eighth and twelfth grades, and one half of teen moms go on welfare within five years of becoming parents. Simply put, teen pregnancy robs young mothers of their future and is often a fast track to a life of poverty and dependence.

What's worse, the children of teen mothers are born with the odds of future opportunity and success largely stacked against them. Compared to children of older parents, children born to teens are twice as likely to suffer abuse or neglect, more likely to be born prematurely and at lower birth weights, and more likely to perform poorly in school. And, teen pregnancy tends to establish an ongoing cycle of dependence, as the daughters of teen moms are 22% more likely to become teen mothers themselves. The sons of teenage moms face an uphill climb, too. In fact, they are 13% more likely to end up in prison.

In terms of dollars and cents, teen pregnancy costs US taxpayers at least \$7 billion each year in direct costs associated with health care, foster care, criminal justice, public assistance, as well as lost revenues due to decreased earnings and spending. In Lucas County alone, which has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any county in Ohio, the annual cost to taxpayers associated with teen pregnancy is \$6 million.

That's the bad news. The good news is that efforts to reduce the teen pregnancy rate are beginning to bear fruit. "In Ohio between 1991 and 2004, we saw a decline of 36% in the teen pregnancy rate. The drop was even more substantial in Lucas County, which experienced a decline of 42.5% over that same period," notes Marilyn Parker, chair of the teen

pregnancy prevention collaborative Partners for Successful Youth (PSY), a committee of the Lucas County Family Council.

This welcome decline in the teen pregnancy rate is due in no small part to the ongoing work of community organizations such as PSY, which employs a four-pronged approach in its effort to reduce the teen and preteen pregnancy rate in Lucas County to below the state average. PSY's strategy to promote a better future for our youth includes:

- Identifying mechanisms for the community to work in partnership in addressing the issues of teen pregnancy
- Advocating responsible sexual decision-making
- Advising and making recommendations to the Family Council on community priorities relating to healthy youth development and teen pregnancy prevention
- Collaborating with community partners in program development and in securing funding.

Through a series of grants, PSY funds numerous community organizations with the shared goal of preventing teen pregnancy. These include Connecting Point TOP (Teen Outreach Program), North River Development Plain Talk, YWCA Incentives for Excellence Program (IFE), Friendship New Vision Rites of Passage Program, Adelante GANAS Program, YMCA Chance for Change, Planned Parenthood of Northwest Ohio, St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center Positive Choices Program, UMADAOP Carry Books Not Babies Program, and Polly Fox Academy.

"Our programming currently reaches 1,871 youths at an average cost of \$467.23 per youth served," says Parker. "That's money well spent considering that the rate of pregnancy or birth

among teens reached by these programs is 13.4 per 1,000, which is significantly lower than the county birthrate of 24 per 1,000."

Parker sees open dialogue between teens and their parents as critical to preventing teen pregnancy. However, the message often comes too late because parents are either too embarrassed to discuss issues of sexuality with their kids or they think their preteen or early teen kids are still too young to hear about them. This stands in stark contrast to teen perceptions. In fact, seven out of ten teens say they are ready to listen to things that their parents think they are not ready to hear. As Parker explains, "You can't start too young. We need to reach kids beginning no later than middle school. By the time parents get their courage up to have 'the talk,' their kids may already be sexually active and at risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases."

The statistics certainly support this position. The percentage of high school students reporting that they have had intercourse is 47.8%. Of even greater concern is the fact that the percentage of kids who report having sexual intercourse before the age of 13 is 5.3%.

Just getting the parent-teen dialogue started is often the biggest challenge to overcome—especially when the subject is sex. To help open the channels of communication on this delicate topic, PSY has brought the national exhibition Children of Children: Portraits and Stories of Teenage Parents to the Toledo Museum of Art Community Gallery. This groundbreaking, multi-media exhibit by Michael Nye, which continues through March 11, 2007, personalizes the issue of teen pregnancy with 50 compelling black-and-white images accompanied by moving audio narratives. The subjects include men and women ranging in age

from 12 to 100 and include teen mothers and fathers as well as their children and families.

"The intention of the project is not to condemn, condone, or romanticize teen pregnancy in any way, but to learn and to explore the reality of young pregnancy and parenting in our society. We hope it will help get the conversation started between parents and kids so we can make a positive difference," Parker says.

For more information about Children of Children: Portraits of Teenage Parents, call 419-213-4615 or log onto www.lucascountyfamilycouncil.org. Parents seeking information to use when talking to their children about teen pregnancy can visit www.HealthyTeenNetwork.org and www.teenpregnancy.org.