



September 2000

influence

relationships

Teens

HIV

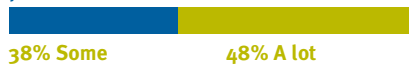
Decision Making About Sex

Whether to have sex? What kind of contraception to use? How to protect against sexually transmitted diseases? Teens are making decisions about sex everyday, and often young people say they feel pressure from many sources in trying to decide what is right for them. (See Figure 1) There are many factors — from peers, to parents, to the media, to what they have learned in sex education — that influence the choices they ultimately make.

This national survey examines the influences that teens say affect their decisions about sex and relationships. It was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine as part of an ongoing public information partnership to provide teens with information and resources on sexual health.



FIGURE 1. Peers and Pressure...
 Eighty-six percent of teens say young people today face pressure when it comes to sex and relationships.



Decision Making

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex



sexsmarts
 a public information partnership

SexSmarts is an ongoing public information partnership between the **Kaiser Family Foundation** and *seventeen* magazine to provide young people with information and resources on sexual health issues. The campaign will address a range of topics from decision making about sex, including how to say no, to the real facts on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Under the partnership, the Foundation and *seventeen* will periodically survey teens about their knowledge and attitudes about sex and sexual health. These nationally-representative survey snapshots will help shed light on the issues that teens need more information about. The campaign also includes special articles in the magazine, an online monthly column on seventeen.com, and other consumer education materials.

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Teens are weighing the physical and emotional when it comes to decisions about sex and relationships.

Teens are balancing concerns about pregnancy and disease with feelings about personal readiness and maturity, relationships with parents, and communication with partners in their decisions about whether and when to have sex. Those who are having sex, and those who wait, consider both the health and interpersonal issues related to relationships and sexual activity (Figure 2). Teens who have not had sex say their decision is influenced by a range of factors, including worry about pregnancy and STDs, feeling they are “too young”, or having “made a conscious decision to wait.” The most common reason given by sexually-active teens for why they decided to have sex when they did is a sense of readiness, that they “had met the right person.” Although many of these teens admit to also being subject to external pressures from their partner and their friends.

Many say they need more information.

As teens make decisions about sex and relationships, many express a need for more information (Figure 3). While most teens say they are comfortable talking about sexual decision making with friends and trusted adults, they want to know more about the specifics: how HIV and STDs are spread, their consequences and testing, which types of contraception are best, and how to get them. They also want to learn more about how to communicate with their partners about tough issues. Almost half of teens say learning more about how to talk about STDs and birth control

FIGURE 2. To Have Sex...Or Not?
Among 15–17 year olds who have *not* had sex, the percent who say each was a “major reason” for their decision to wait to have sex...

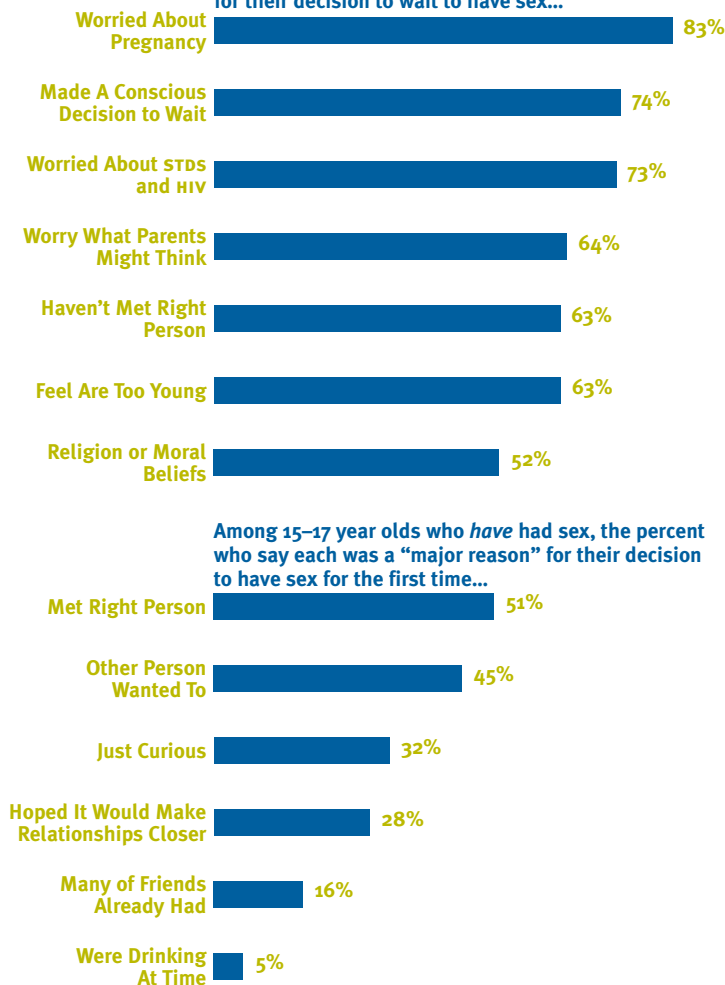


FIGURE 3. **In The Know?**
Percent of teens who want to know *more* about...

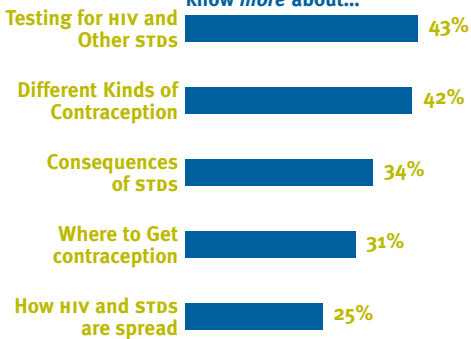
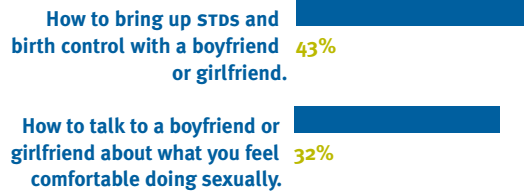


FIGURE 4. **Relationships and Communication**

Seventy-eight percent of teens say they are comfortable talking about sex and relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend.



But, many would like to know more about...



is a high priority. About one third of all teens also want to know how to talk with their partners about what they feel comfortable doing sexually (Figure 4).

Who do teens want to talk with about these subjects? Parents, peers and health care providers seem to be teens' choice. Teens say that they would be most comfortable talking about sex and relationships with friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, mom, and a doctor or other health care provider.

Teen boys feel as much if not more pressure than girls when it comes to sex and relationships.

Boys and girls report different types of concerns when it comes to talking about pressures and factors that influence decisions about becoming sexually active. Girls feel more pressure from family, religion and friends regarding sexual activity and relationships. Boys,

on the other hand, feel more pressure to "have sex" by a certain age, and they are twice as likely as girls to say that sex "is expected in a relationship." Relatedly, a boy's partner's prior sexual experience influences his decisions about sex.

FIGURE 5. Influences in Decision Making About Sex and Relationships

Percent of teens who say their decisions about sex and relationships are influenced by...

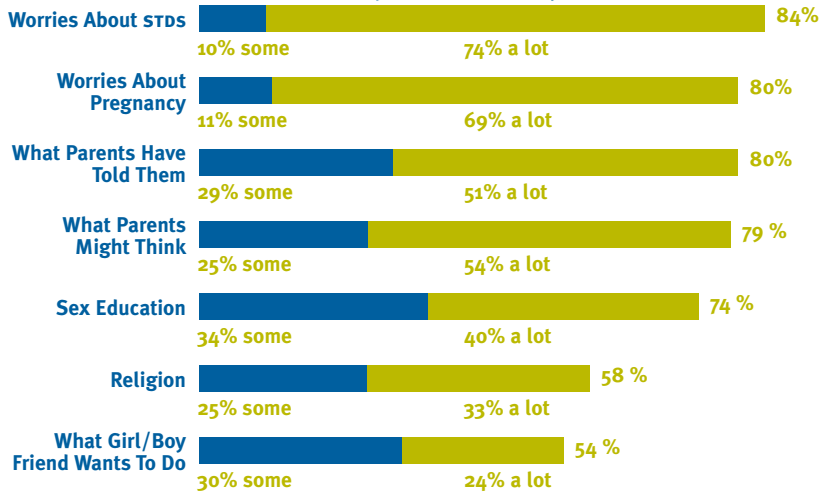


FIGURE 6. Virginity and Waiting... The Ideal vs. The Real

Nine in ten teens agree young people *should* wait to have sexual intercourse until they are older.



Yet, 57 percent believe few will actually wait.



While boys and girls may experience different pressures, both genders reveal similar opinions about the risks and reality of sex. Concerns about STDs and pregnancy are equally important to boys and girls, both of which rated the possibility of pregnancy and disease as important influences on their decision making more than 80 percent of the time (Figure 5). Boys and girls agree that “people should wait “ to have sex, but that “nobody really” does, and that after you have had sex once, it is harder to say “no” the second time (Figure 6).

Older teens say risk of pregnancy and STDs influence their decisions, while younger teens focus on information from parents and school.

STDs and pregnancy grow in importance as teens age, rated as the top two concerns among teens aged 15-17. Older teens also report more comfort talking to health care providers about sex, another sign that older teens are interested in discussing the health risks associated with sexual activity. As teens grow older, friends, partners and personal sexual experience become more important in shaping decisions about their relationships. About one third of

15-17 year olds are sexually active, making issues like pregnancy and contraception a familiar topic among older teens. Younger teens (12-14) indicate parents, teachers and religious advisors are influential. This suggests that adults at church, school, and home may have the best opportunity to influence sexual decision making when teens are younger.