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sexsmarts
a public information partnership



Many teens wait until after they've had sex to talk to their parents about it – that is, if they ever do. According to a national survey of 15- to 17-year-olds, one in four teen girls, and nearly one in two teen boys, who have had sexual intercourse say their parents don't know about it.

Even among parents in the know, many are finding out about their teen's sex life later than they might like to, or at least too late to have an influence on the choices their children make, or to encourage them to protect themselves.

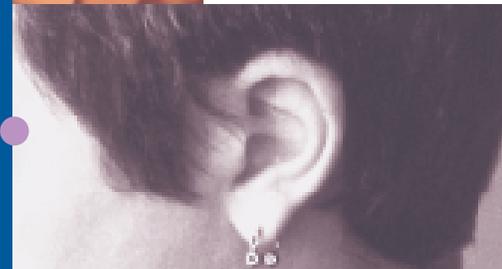
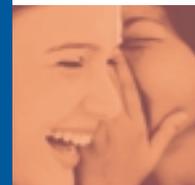
Of all the teens surveyed – including both those who have had sex as well as those who have not – half have never had a conversation with a parent about how to know when you are ready to have sex. And even fewer have talked with a parent about how to bring up topics like birth control, condoms or sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing with someone they are dating.

Most teens aren't talking about their sexual health with a doctor either. Less than a third report having talked with a health care provider about HIV/AIDS, other STDs, or condoms.

This survey snapshot of 503 teens aged 15 to 17 examines experiences and attitudes related to sexual health communication. Additional information is included from focus group discussions conducted with teen girls in Atlanta, GA April 15, 2002. This is the fifth in a series of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

Communication

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex



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 addresses 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* periodically survey teens about their knowledge and attitudes about sex and sexual health. These nationally-representative survey snapshots shed light on the issues facing teens today and their information needs. 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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Talking About Sex ... Too Late?

Just one in 10 teens who have had sexual intercourse say they discussed their plans with their parents ahead of time; a quarter told them after the fact, and another one fifth say their parents found out “some other way.” The remainder – close to forty percent of sexually-active teens – say their parents still don’t know. (Figure 1)

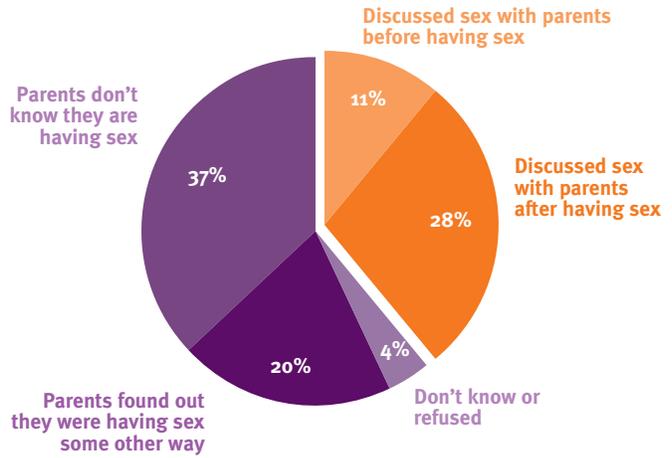
What’s behind this silence? Part of the problem is a lack of communication between parents and their teens. Close to half of 15-to 17-year-olds surveyed – including 56 percent of those who are already sexually active – say they have never talked with their parents about sexual decision making. Nor have many discussed other sexual health issues, like HIV/AIDS, other STDs, condoms or other forms of birth control. (Figure 2)

Without these talks, teens may be missing an opportunity to get the guidance they need to protect themselves. Experts say that kids whose parents talk with them about sex are more likely to wait longer before they have sex, and to use birth control or protection when they do.

“I asked my mom to go on birth control – but she said ‘No. It would give you free rein to have sex with anybody you want.’ I don’t understand why they feel that way.”

— Shannon, 17

FIGURE 1. **Talking About Sex**
Percent of sexually active teens



When it comes to telling their parents they are thinking about – or already are – having sex, many say it doesn’t happen because teens think their parents will disapprove. Indeed, eight in 10 say parents will assume it means they are

having sex. They also say it’s just too embarrassing to bring up. Others suspect parents’ would just as well prefer to stay in the dark when it comes to teens’ sex lives. (Figure 3)

FIGURE 2. **Tough Talks**
Percent who have *never* talked with a parent about:

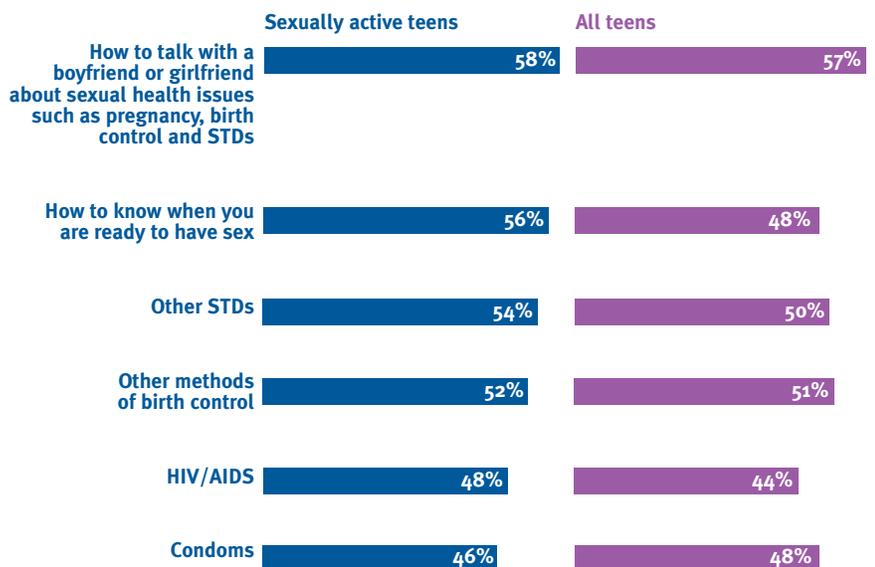


FIGURE 3. Conversation Concerns
 Percent who say the following are big reasons why people their age don't talk with their parents about sexual health:



“When I went to get birth control, that was the first time I’d been to a gynecologist. Before that, my pediatrician never really asked me about sex.”

—Leslie, 17

Teens and doctors aren’t talking about decision-making or communication either. Less than one in five – and only slightly more sexually active teens – say they have talked with a provider about how to discuss their sexual health with someone they might be dating, or how to know when they are ready to become sexually active.

Doctor’s Orders

It’s not just parents who are in the dark. Teens and health care providers aren’t talking about their sexual histories even though it could affect their care. More than half of teens who are sexually active say they have never discussed HIV/AIDS, other STDs, or contraception

with a doctor or other health care provider. (Figure 4)

Among all teens, only a third report hearing from a health care provider about HIV/AIDS or other STDs, and closer to one in four report having a conversation about condoms or other forms of birth control.

Teens report some of the same concerns keeping them from talking with their parents about sexual health issues are also preventing them from talking with a provider: namely, embarrassment and feeling ill-equipped to raise the topic. Others worry that their health care provider will tell their parents about their visit.

FIGURE 4. What’s Up Doc?
 Percent who have *never* talked about the following with a health care provider:

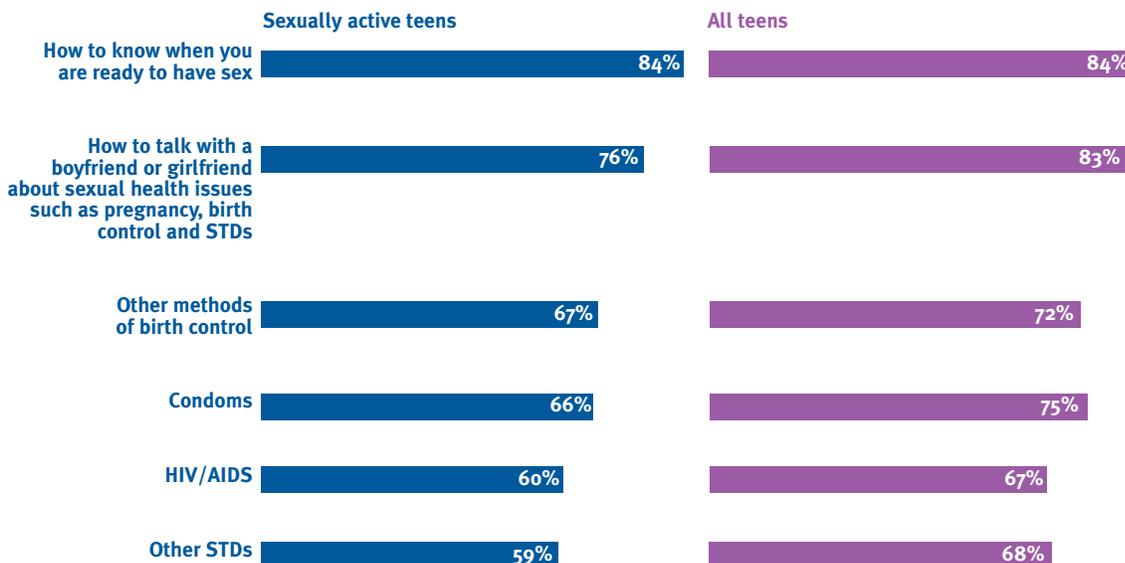
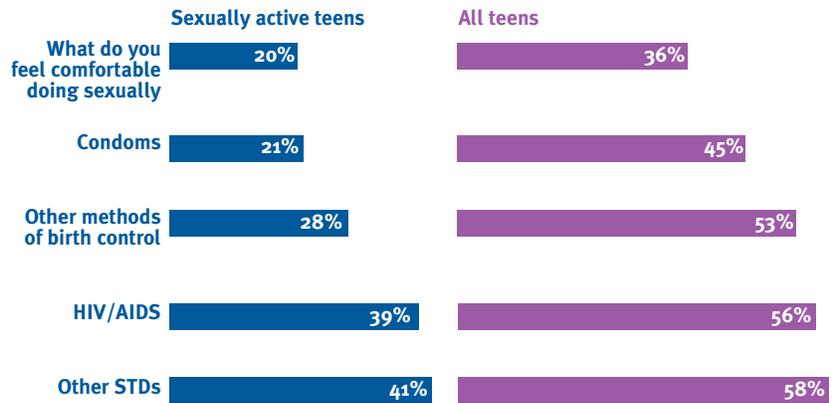




FIGURE 5. Speaking Up
Percent who have *never* talked about the following with a partner:



Tongue Tied

Given the general lack of dialogue about sex going on at home and in the doctor’s office, perhaps it’s not surprising that some young people are having a hard time talking with their boyfriends and girlfriends about these issues as well.

While about two-thirds of teens say they have talked about what they feel comfortable doing sexually with a boyfriend or girlfriend, including 80 percent of sexually active teens, far fewer have talked about specifics – like contraception, protection or STDs. (Figure 5)

Among teens who have had sex, more than one in five has never talked about condoms or any other form of birth control with a partner. And, just because they have talked, doesn’t mean they did *before* they became sexually active.

Nearly two-thirds of teens surveyed agree that their peers often wait until after they have had sex to talk about things like condoms or STDs with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Many teens say when these conversations have come up it’s been a shared responsibility. Still, some old gender

stereotypes still hold true, such as thinking condoms are a topic to be raised by boys, while pregnancy and other forms of birth control are in the girls’ domain. One reason for the silence between partners is stigma: Four in five teens say people their age worry about what the other person will think about them if they raise a topic like testing or condoms. But, many also say lack of knowledge about what or how to say it is also a barrier, as is embarrassment. (Figure 6)

Speaking Up

In addition to hearing more from their parents about sex – and hearing it earlier – sex education could also do more. More than half of teens agree that Sex Ed hasn’t prepared them to communicate on these hard-to-talk-about topics. Three in four say seeing characters on TV shows who model this kind of behavior can help break down some of these communication barriers.

FIGURE 6. Perceptions
Percent who say that the following are big reasons why teens don’t talk to a boyfriend or girlfriend about sexual health issues

