

KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION AND *YM* MAGAZINE

National Survey of Teens: Teens Talk About Dating, Intimacy, and Their Sexual Experiences

INTRODUCTION

Teens are growing up in an extraordinarily complex and difficult world, facing a range of pressures to smoke cigarettes, drink, experiment with drugs, get involved in gangs... and have sex. Most teens today will have sexual intercourse by their eighteenth birthday. Even though teens are doing a better job of using contraception, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) remain major concerns: three million teens—about one in four sexually experienced teens—get an STD every year. One in four Americans newly infected with HIV is under 22 years old. And, almost one million teen girls become pregnant every year, and about half a million give birth.

The Kaiser Family Foundation paired up with a leading teen magazine, *YM*, to hear from teens themselves what kinds of sexual situations they face today, how they “negotiate” dating, sex, and intimacy, and what kind of information teens need. The result, an in-depth national survey of teens (650 boys and girls ages 13-18), will appear in a special guide for teens on sex in *YM*'s May 1998 issue.

The joint Kaiser Family Foundation/*YM* survey found that teens today, even those as young as 13 and 14 years old, struggle with complex sexual situations, involving pressure, drinking and drug use, or relationships that are moving too fast, which they are often not prepared to handle. Close to half of *all* teens—47 percent—say they have done something sexual, or felt pressure to do something sexual, that they did not feel they were ready to do. Teenage girls are more likely to have these experiences than boys.

By the time a teen has sex for the first time, the survey finds that many are still not adequately prepared: a majority (58%) of those who are sexually experienced report not using contraception *every time* they have sex, and more than a third have *never* talked with a sexual partner about birth control (34%) or STDs (40%). About one in five of those who talked about either contraception or STDs did so only *after* having sex. Many teens who have not talked about contraception or STDs with a partner say they haven't because they know their partner so well. In general, a significant proportion of teens say they have had or would expect to have difficulty discussing topics like birth control, AIDS/HIV, other STDs, or what they feel comfortable doing sexually.

While intimacy appears to play a significant role in teens' relationships, deciding to wait to become sexually involved is viewed positively by most teens. The majority of the

teens we interviewed say they are virgins. What's more, being a virgin is acceptable, and even admired, among teens. Three-quarters of teens in the survey say it is considered a "good thing to make a conscious decision not to have sex until some later time," and just as many teens say they know someone who has made such a decision. Almost half of all teens age 13 to 18 have made a conscious decision to delay intercourse. In addition, one in two teens say they have been in a situation when they *could* have had sexual intercourse with someone they liked but decided not to at the time.

Teens also report worrying a lot about pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs. Whether or not they are sexually experienced, most teens say their peers are extremely worried about pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs; very few say these are issues that do not concern them. At least four in ten teens say the teens they know are *very concerned* about pregnancy or about getting an STD. HIV/AIDS is one of the biggest sexual health concerns facing teens: over half of teens say the teens they know are *very concerned* about the disease.

Other interesting findings include:

- Dating is a part of most teens' social lives as early as age 13. The level of physical intimacy couples are involved in and the incidence of "serious" relationships, however, increase as teens age. By age 17, intercourse is an accepted, if not an expected, part of dating relationships.
- As widespread as dating is among teens, it is acceptable to be unattached. Very few teens say most of their friends currently have a boy- or girlfriend and most say that, among their social circle, dating is not very important.
- Teen boys and girls share roughly the same perceptions about how teen girls think about sex—how important it is to them, and how much they worry about the negative consequences of having sex. But teen girls and boys do not agree about what's going on in teen boys' minds. Teen girls, especially older girls, think teen boys attach much greater importance to sex in a relationship than teen boys think their male peers do. Teen girls also think teen boys aren't as concerned about pregnancy, STDs, and HIV as teen boys say their male peers are.
- Teens age 13 to 18, particularly teen girls, believe their experience with sex is not typical. A significant percentage think they are less experienced than their friends, and less experienced than their sexual partners. However, few teens say their lack of experience actually *worries* them when they are in an intimate situation with a member of the opposite sex.
- Teen girls are motivated to engage in sexual intercourse mainly because they are in love or plan to get married. Teen boys who haven't had intercourse also think love and marriage are top reasons why their peers decide to have intercourse for the first time. But, these reasons shrink in significance for teen boys who actually have had intercourse. These teens point to *opportunity* as the main reason a teen boy has sex the first time.

A summary of the key findings follows, prepared by Princeton Survey Research Associates and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The findings from this survey are reported on in the May issue of *YM* in a special section of the magazine that provides teens with a guide to sexual decision-making, including whether it is the right choice, contraceptive information, and the risks and consequences of sexually transmitted diseases. Over 2 million girls 12-19 years old read *YM* each month. Magazines such as *YM* are an important resource for teens on sexual health issues. In a Kaiser Family Foundation survey, out of seven in ten teen girls who report reading magazines regularly, half say they use magazines for information on sex, contraception, and ways to prevent STDs. Most of these girls say this is information they *don't get* from other sources.

FINDINGS

DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS

Romantic attachments are a part of life for teens age 13 to 18, but not a *necessary* part, according to teens themselves. Serious relationships are not all that common, and what's more, it's OK to be unattached.

Nine in ten teens age 13 to 18 (89%) say they have had some romantic involvement with a member of the opposite sex. Dating starts early—those aged 13 to 14 are almost as likely to have had a boy or girlfriend (82%) as older teens (93%). But, only 4% of all teens say it's very important among the group of friends they hang out with to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, and two-thirds (68%) say that fewer than half of their friends are going out with someone right now. Only 31% say most of their friends are attached now, and even fewer (19%) say most of them have ever had a “serious” relationship.

Though the amount of dating might not differ much between younger and older teens, expectations about what dating entails change considerably during the teen years. Most teens age 13 to 14 say it's typical for couples their age to kiss (72% say this usually happens), but that other forms of physical intimacy are not the norm. Only 45% say French kissing is expected, and far fewer say petting (15%) or intercourse (4%) is typical. More than half of teens age 13 to 14 say couples their age go out on dates, such as to the movies (58%), but at this age couples don't necessarily spend a lot of their free time together (43% say this is typical), or say they are in love with each other (47%).

Among 15 and 16 year old teens, the physical intimacy of dating couples becomes more intense, and at the same time, the emotional aspects of the relationship become more important. Most teens age 15 and 16 say dating couples their age typically kiss (93%) and French kiss (71%), and just under half (48%) say they also engage in petting. Only 28% say sexual intercourse is typical for dating couples their age. Most teens age 15 and 16 say couples their age go out on dates (79%) and spend a lot of their free time together (56%). Couples this age also say they are in love with each other (63%).

The most distinctive difference between younger teens and those age 17 and 18 is that for this older group petting and even intercourse appear to be the norm. More than half of teens this age say it's typical for couples they know to engage in petting (57%) and about half (52%) say couples typically have intercourse. Still, it's just a bare majority of teens age 17 and 18 who say this type of intense physical intimacy is common. Unfortunately, teens also tell us that couples this age who are having intercourse are not necessarily using birth control; though most (67%) teens age 17 and 18 say sexually experienced couples typically use birth control, almost a quarter (22%) say using birth control is not typical.

So-called “serious” relationships do not look all that different from other dating relationships, at least with respect to two aspects of relationships we investigated. According to teens themselves, the likelihood of having sexual intercourse is about the same for

serious couples as it is for couples in general.¹ And, “serious” couples are about as likely to be characterized as “being in love” as couples in general are characterized as saying “I love you” to each other. Altogether, about half of teens say that love is part of serious or regular dating relationships.

Serious relationships are characteristically exclusive. Most teens (87%) say serious relationships among couples their age are exclusive relationships. However, teen boys age 13 to 16 are somewhat less likely than teen girls the same age to say a serious relationship entails exclusivity (78% of teen boys, and 92% of teen girls age 13 to 16).

EXTENT OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Physical intimacy

During the early teen years, the boyfriend/girlfriend relationships that are so common do not always include physical intimacy. About three-quarters of teens say they have had an intimate encounter (77%), an encounter where they were alone with someone of the opposite sex and there was at least the *possibility* of kissing or other intimate physical activity. These teens who have had an intimate encounter include:

- 63% of the 13 and 14 year old girls who have had a boyfriend,
- 73% of the 13 and 14 year old boys who have had a girlfriend, and
- 92% of 15, 16, 17 and 18 year old boys and girls who have had a romantic relationship.

Many teens, especially teen boys, are starting to become physically intimate by age 13, but many still are not. Only about half of 13 year old boys (52%) and a third of 13 year old girls (30%) have been kissed. Only 42% of 13 year old boys and about half as many 13 year old girls (23%) have tried French kissing. By age 13, almost every teen who has had the *opportunity* to be physically intimate has actually been intimate in some way. Ninety-seven percent of teens who have been in an intimate situation, regardless of age, have been kissed.

Most teens have been kissed by age 14 (71%) and over half (59%) have been French kissed. By age 15, French kissing is common (69%), but petting is starting to be common only for teen boys (59% of boys age 15 and 45% of girls age 15 have engaged in petting). At 16, three quarters of teen boys (75%) and a slightly smaller majority of teen girls (61%) have tried petting. By age 17 teen girls catch up; 76% of both teen boys and girls have engaged in petting.

Sexual intercourse

Only three in ten (31%) of the teens we interviewed said they were sexually experienced. Sexual intercourse starts to become common for teen boys once they hit age 16 (55%

¹ The only significant difference between what’s typical in serious relationships and what’s typical in dating relationships generally occurs for younger teens age 13 and 14. While sexual intercourse is rare for both types of relationships, more teens age 13 and 14 say this happens in serious relationships (14%) than say it happens in relationships generally (4%).

have had intercourse) and for teen girls at age 17 (51%, and only 40% of those age 16). The likelihood of having intercourse does not increase significantly for teens at age 18 (59% for boys and 51% for girls). Intercourse is rare among young teens (13% of boys and 3% of girls 13 to 14 have had intercourse).

- Of the teens who have already become sexually experienced, the average age of first intercourse for both teen boys and girls was 15.
- Of the teens who aren't sexually experienced yet, only 27% expect to have intercourse for the first time while still a teenager. Half (52%) think they'll be older, or married, and the rest (21%) have no idea how old they will be.
- Teen boys say boys start thinking about having sex on average at age 14, and then first have sex two years later, at age 16. Teen girls make the same estimates about the timing of the process for teen girls. Teen boys' views about what's typical seem to conform to reality, since just over half of the teen boys in the survey did have sex by age 16. But only 40% of the teen girls in the survey had sex by age 16, indicating the process works a little slower for teen girls than most girls think it does.
- A quarter (23%) of teen boys report their same-sex peers start thinking about sex at 12 or younger. Only a third as many teen girls (7%) think this about their same-sex peers.
- Among sexually-active teens, about half (46%) have had only one sexual partner, 18% have had two partners, 13% have had three, and the remaining 18% have had four or more. Over half (54%) of sexually experienced teens age 17-18 have had more than one partner, compared with just over four in ten (43%) of those 16 and under. Teen boys are more likely than teen girls to have had multiple partners (54% vs. 43%). Among sexually experienced teens age 17-18, one in ten (11%) say they have had seven or more partners.

How teens think they stack up against their friends

Almost half (44%) of teens say they know *a lot* about what's happening in their peers' love lives—that is, who they're interested in, what's going on in their relationships, and how much happens sexually. Another 38% say they have “some” knowledge of what's going on, while only 17% say they know little or nothing of this. Teen girls (50%) and older teens (50% of those 17-18) are especially likely to know a lot about what is going on in their friends' love lives.

Teens' characterizations of the amount of physical intimacy between teen boys and girls their age matches fairly well with what they say they are actually doing in their own relationships. Most teens who date at age 13 to 14 kiss, and most teens this age say their friends who date kiss. Most teens who date at age 15 and 16 French kiss, and most teens this age say their friends who date French kiss. Most teens who date at age 17 and 18 pet and have sexual intercourse, and most teens this age say their friends who date pet and have intercourse.

But, teens age 13 to 16 seem to *underestimate* some of their peers' sexual behavior. Specifically, those age 13 to 14 seem to underestimate their peers involvement in French-kissing, and those age 15 to 16 seem to underestimate their peers involvement in

petting.² Of course, it is impossible to know the actual behavior of each respondent's group of friends, so we cannot really conclude that any respondent is right or wrong in his or her assessment of what's going on in friends' relationships. But, these data suggest it's unlikely that teens have an exaggerated view of the sexual experience of their friends. By and large, they think their friends are doing what they themselves are doing.

How They Stack Up: Perception vs. Reality

Extent of actual experience	Perception of own experience compared with friends'				
	Less (%)	Same (%)	More (%)	Don't Know/Refused (%)	
Nothing yet	63	34	1	2	100
Only kissing	43	52	2	3	100
Up to petting	24	57	17	2	100
Intercourse					
Boys	10	55	32	3	100
Girl	22	56	21	1	100
Multiple Partners					
Total	13	58	25	4	100
Boys	14	54	28	4	100
Girls	12	64	21	3	100
Total	35	49	13	3	100

Paradoxically, when teens were asked whether they think *in general* they have more sexual experience, about the same, or less than their friends, only about half of teens (49%) think their own behavior is typical, regardless of whether they date or not. Even more perplexing is the fact that 35% say they *don't have as much* sexual experience as the friends they hang out with have (only 13% say they have more experience). The data show they have more experience, on average, than what they think is typical for their group of friends. Yet, they feel they're "behind."³

Until they actually have sexual intercourse, many teens feel less experienced than their friends. Teen girls, even after they've had intercourse, are as apt to feel less experienced as they are to feel more experienced than their friends.

Sexually experienced teen girls also feel inexperienced compared to the teen boys with whom they are involved. Six in ten (59%) sexually experienced teen girls say they felt less experienced than their first sexual partner, compared with half as many teen boys (28%). Conversely, the majority (58%) of teen boys felt they were as experienced as their partner the first time, while only 38% of teen girls felt this way.

² More than half (54%) of 13 and 14 year olds who date French kiss, yet fewer than half (45%) of 13 and 14 year olds say most couples this age French kiss. Similarly, more than half (65%) of 15 and 16 year olds who date engage in petting, yet only about half (48%) say most couples this age pet.

³ These self-assessments are even more remarkable when considered in light of the fact that in other areas of life, most teens see themselves as just like their friends. Almost two-thirds say they do as well in school as their friends (64%) and have about the same amount of self-confidence (64%). About eight in ten (79%) say they know as much about sex as their peers.

HOW AND WHY DOES THE DECISION TO HAVE SEX OCCUR?

When asked what leads their same-sex peers to have sex that very first time, teen boys' and girls' answers differ. Teen girls who have had intercourse feel love is the predominant factor. Those teen girls who have not yet lost their virginity are as likely to think of marriage as the deciding factor as love. Teen boys, especially sexually experienced boys, most often say it is simply a matter of opportunity, although a quarter (25%) of all teen boys, virgins and non-virgins, do say love is the main consideration.

Relatively few teens say peer pressure or pressure from partners is the primary reason teens have sex for the first time. More teen boys (13%) than teen girls (7%) cite pressure from friends as a factor, whereas teen girls (8%) are more likely than teen boys (1%) to cite pressure from partners.

The Big Decision

	Total (%)	Boys		Girls	
		Sexually Active (%)	Not (%)	Sexually Active (%)	Not (%)
He or she has met someone he or she really loves	31	23	27	54	31
He or she is engaged or married	19	2	21	8	31
He or she has the opportunity to do it with someone he or she likes	19	43	21	11	7
He or she has reached a certain age or maturity level	14	15	16	11	14
He or she feels pressure to do it because everyone else is	10	15	12	6	8
His or her girlfriend or boyfriend is pressuring him or her	5	1	1	6	9
Don't know	2	1	2	4	0
	100	100	100	100	100

IT'S OKAY TO BE A VIRGIN

Just as being unattached is acceptable for teens, being a virgin is okay too. Almost half (44%) of all teens age 13 to 18 say they have made a conscious decision to delay intercourse, three-quarters (76%) hang out with someone who has made this decision, and the same proportion (74%) say within their group it is considered a good thing to decide to remain a virgin.

Teen girls age 13 to 16 are much more likely than teen boys age 13 to 16 to say they have made a conscious decision to remain a virgin and are also more likely to have friends who have made this decision. At every age, teen girls are more likely than teen boys to say the decision to remain a virgin is viewed in a positive light by their friends (87% vs. 62%). However, a majority of teen boys do share this view.

The Decision to Remain a Virgin

Percent who say . . .	13-14		15-16		17-18	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
They have made a decision to stay a virgin	53	68	36	47	30	26
Someone in their group has made this decision	62	89	60	88	76	75
Among their group, it's a good thing to make the decision to remain a virgin	67	85	57	89	62	88

A quarter (27%) of teens under 15 have been in a situation when they could have had sex with someone they liked but decided not to. By way of contrast, more than half (56%) of teen boys and two-thirds of teen girls (68%) age 15 and older have been in such a situation. Teen girls who have turned down such opportunities most often say they did so because they felt they just weren't ready (44%) or had made a conscious decision not to have sex with anyone (29%). Although teen boys also often cite not feeling ready (27%) and having made a decision not to have sex (23%), they mention other reasons as well.

SEXUALITY AND RELIGION

According to teens themselves, religion plays a significant role in their lives. Three-quarters (78%) say religion is at least somewhat important to them, including almost half (43%) who say it is *very* important. Teen girls, especially, say religion is important to them (84%). Overall, almost half of teens say they have “made a conscious decision to wait to have sex.” The more importance a teen boy or girl places on religion, the more likely he or she is to name this as their reason for delaying intercourse instead of reasons such as “worried about pregnancy or STDs” or “haven't met the right person yet.”

Not only does religion underlie why teens say they have not had sex yet (of those who have not), it is also correlated for teen boys with actual postponement of sexual activity. That is, the more importance a teen boy places on religion, the less likely he is to have had sex. Religion is *not* correlated to the same degree with whether or not a teen girl has had sex. Teen boys who say religion is important to them are also less likely to have had multiple partners, but again, the same does not appear to be true for girls.

Religion and Sex

	Total (%)	Importance of Religion			
		Very (%)	Somewhat (%)	Not too (%)	Not at all (%)
Made a conscious decision to wait	44	55	40	36	18
Boys	39	51	38	31	17
Girls	49	59	41	45	21
Have had sexual intercourse	31	24	36	35	41

Boys	36	26	39	43	51
Girls	26	21	33	23	18
Have had multiple partners	15	14	16	15	20
Boys	19	17	20	19	26
Girls	11	10	13	9	6

Religion is also correlated with whether a teen has engaged in sexual or intimate activities *other* than sex, for both teen girls and boys. The more importance a teen places on religion, the less likely he or she is to have had engaged in activities like French kissing and petting. Specifically, six in ten (61%) of those teens who say religion is very important to them have tried French kissing, compared with almost nine in ten (86%) teens who say religion is not at all important. Likewise, less than half (42%) of very religious teens have engaged in petting, compared with three-quarters (76%) of those who are not religious.

DO BOYS AND GIRLS ATTACH THE SAME IMPORTANCE TO SEX IN A RELATIONSHIP?

Teen boys and girls agree that sex in a relationship is more important to teen boys than it is to teen girls, and that the importance of sex in a relationship increases for both teen boys and girls around age 15 or 16. However, few teens say sex in a relationship is *very* important for either teen boys (19%) or girls (5%) at any age. Teen boys and girls have roughly the same ideas about how important sex is to the teen girls their age. But, they differ about the importance of sex to the teen boys. Teen girls, especially girls aged 17 to 18, believe teen boys are more focused on sex than the boys themselves say they are.

How Important Is Sexual Intimacy in a Relationship . . .

	13-14		15-16		17-18	
	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
From the girl's point of view						
Very/Somewhat Important	32	31	49	43	50	48
Not too/Not at all Important	61	68	43	56	45	52
From the boy's point of view						
Very/Somewhat Important	44	49	65	63	63	81
Not too/Not at all Important	55	48	30	33	37	17

HOW DO TEENS FEEL ABOUT BEING TOGETHER?

Many fears, feelings, and thoughts arise during teens' intimate encounters. The most common feelings are concerns about body image, anxiety about a partner's trustworthiness, and, for teen boys, hope that intimacy will enhance the relationship. Among teens who have had intimate encounters, teen girls are twice as likely as teen boys to say they often worry about their body image during intimacy. To a lesser extent teen girls are also more likely than teen boys to have concerns about how trustworthy their partner is and how their friends will judge their behavior. One might expect older teens to be less subject to these insecurities, but that isn't the case—these sorts of feelings are as prevalent among older teens as among younger ones.

Sexual Feelings

When you've been alone with a (girl/boy), how often have you felt . . . *	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)
Worried about how your body looks	24	28
Girls	33	34
Boys	15	23
Worried about whether you can trust the (girl/boy)	20	32
Girls	25	32
Boys	16	33
Hopeful that intimacy will improve your relationship	11	27
Girls	6	22
Boys	15	31
Worried about what your friends will think	9	20
Girls	13	22
Boys	6	18
That the (girl/boy) does not respect you	8	19
Girls	8	23
Boys	7	16
Worried you are leading the (girl/boy) on	8	23
Girls	5	24
Boys	9	23
Worried the (girl/boy) will think you aren't experienced enough	7	19
Girls	9	18
Boys	5	20
Not in control of the situation	6	20
Girls	8	20
Boys	5	20
Worried about seeming too experienced	4	10
Girls	2	7
Boys	5	13

* Based on those who have been in an intimate situation

UNCOMFORTABLE SEXUAL SITUATIONS

A quarter of teens (26%) feel that, at least some of the time, they are not in control of their intimate encounters, including six percent who *often* feel this way. Surprisingly, the frequency of these feelings does *not* increase with age or sexual experience and teen girls are no more likely than teen boys to say they sometimes feel they are not in control.

When we asked teens about specific sexual situations they might have faced, however, a more complicated, troubling picture emerges. Among those teens who have been in an intimate situation, almost half (47%) have done something, or felt pressure to do something, they didn't feel they were ready to do. Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to have had these experiences (55% vs. 40%). Specifically, teen girls are twice as likely as teen boys to have been in a situation when someone was pressuring them to do more sexually than they felt comfortable doing (28% vs. 13%), to admit having actually done something sexual they did not feel comfortable doing (31% vs. 16%), and to have been in a relationship that was moving too fast sexually (33% vs. 15%).

Even 13 and 14 year olds find themselves in these situations. Among those teens under 15 who have had an intimate encounter, almost two in ten have been in a situation where

they felt sexually pressured (18%) or in a relationship that was moving too fast (17%), and just over one in ten (13%) have done something sexual for which they felt unprepared.

Younger teens and older teens are equally likely to have been in situations where they felt pressured sexually, but older teens are more likely to have *given in* to the pressure. In other words, “going too far” becomes more common as teens age. Among those 13 to 14 years old only 13% have done something they were not really ready for, compared with two in ten (22%) teen boys age 17 and 18 and twice as many teen girls this age (42%). Likewise, sexually experienced teens are more likely than those who have not yet had intercourse to say they have done something sexual before they felt ready (36% vs. 16%).

Research has shown alcohol and drugs often act as a catalyst in teens’ sexual encounters, and this survey reinforces that point. Almost two in ten (17%) teens 13 to 18 who have had an intimate encounter admit having done something sexual while under the influence of drugs or alcohol that they otherwise might not have done. One in three (32%) girls 17 to 18 have had this experience.

WHAT DO TEENS TALK ABOUT. . . AND HOW COMFORTABLE DO THEY FEEL?

Two-thirds of sexually experienced teens (66%) say they have had a conversation with a sexual partner about whether to use birth control. One-third (34%) say they have *never* had such a conversation. Likewise, though the majority (60%) of sexually experienced teens surveyed say they have discussed the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS or other STDs with a partner, a troubling minority (40%) *never* have.

- Teen girls are much more likely than teen boys to say they have had conversations about birth control (78% vs. 57%) and STDs (74% vs. 49%).
- Most conversations about birth control (80%) and STDs (82%) take place *before* the first time teens have sex with a new partner. But some of these conversations don’t happen until the heat of the moment (8% for birth control, 5% for STDs) and one in five teens says conversations about birth control (20%) and STDs (18%) usually do not happen until *after* they have already had intercourse with a new partner.

Teens who have *not* discussed the risks of STDs with their partners most often cite knowing their partner pretty well as the reason they have not discussed this topic (63%). Far fewer say they did not think there was much of a risk (14%) or did not want their partner to think they did not trust them (9%).

Communicating about sexual issues can be awkward and embarrassing. Among teens who have had an intimate encounter, between a quarter and a third say they have, or would expect to have, at least some difficulty discussing such sexual topics as birth control (22%), AIDS/HIV (23%), other STDs (23%), what they feel comfortable doing sexually (32%), and their feelings toward each other (30%). The difficulty in talking about these subjects decreases in the later teen years, in part because teens who have had more experience feel more comfortable being open with their partners. However, talking

about their feelings toward one another is as hard to discuss in the later teen years as it is in the early years.

Teen boys have a harder time discussing these subjects than teen girls. Teen boys are more likely than teen girls to have difficulty with topics like birth control (28% vs. 16% have at least some difficulty), AIDS (26% vs. 19%), and other STDs (27% vs. 18%). However, teen boys are just as comfortable, or uncomfortable, discussing their feelings for their partner as teen girls are (29% vs. 31% have at least some difficulty).

WHERE AND HOW TEENS GET ADVICE ON TALKING ABOUT SEX

Most teens (85%) have gotten advice about discussing sexual topics from at least one of a list of nine possible sources, but about one in seven (15%) say they have never gotten advice from *any* source about how to talk to members of the opposite sex about sex. Younger teens, and those with less sexual experience, are especially unlikely to have gotten any advice or information. A third (32%) of those who have never been involved in an intimate situation have never gotten this type of guidance. One in five (21%) teens under age 15 have also never gotten any advice or information on this topic.

Advice on How to Talk About Sexual Issues

Have you ever gotten any good ideas about talking about sexual issues from . .	Total	Boys	Girls
A friend or sibling	61	60	63
A sex education or health class	44	39	48
A TV show or movie	40	42	38
A magazine	35	12	59
One of your parents	32	25	38
A book or brochure	24	18	30
A religious leader	15	15	15
MTV	14	13	16
A counselor or therapist	11	9	13
Any other source	5	4	6
Never turned to any source	15	17	12

Both teen boys and girls rely most often on friends and siblings for advice of this sort; about six in ten have gotten advice from friends or siblings. Teen girls tend to turn to a wider array of sources. The majority of teen girls have turned to magazines for advice, but very few teen boys name magazines as a source. Teen girls are also more likely than teen boys to say they acquired advice in a health or sex education class or from a book or brochure. Similarly, almost four in ten teen girls, but only a quarter of teen boys say they have gotten advice on talking about sex from a parent.

DO MOM AND DAD KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Though only a third of teens have turned to their parents for advice on talking about sexual issues, suggesting they might not discuss such subjects with their parents, teens feel their parents know what goes on sexually. Two-thirds (66%) say their parents have a pretty good idea what goes on sexually among teens their age. Only two in ten (22%) say their parents are in the dark about what goes on, and half that number (10%) say their parents think *more* happens than really does. Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to turn to their parents for advice about sexual negotiations, but they are *not* more likely than teen boys to feel their parents are well-informed about what happens sexually among teens their age.

ARE TEENS CONCERNED ABOUT PREGNANCY AND STDs?

Teens say their friends, especially their female friends, are concerned about the risks associated with sexual intercourse. The majority say the girls they know are *very* concerned about AIDS/HIV and unplanned pregnancy, and half say girls are very concerned about other STDs. Boys and girls have similar assessments of how concerned girls are about these dangers.

Teen boys and girls also agree that teen boys are somewhat less concerned about these dangers than teen girls. Half say the teen boys they know are very concerned about AIDS, and less than half report that teen boys are very concerned about other STDs and unplanned pregnancy. While teen boys seem as attuned to teen girls' concerns as teen girls are themselves, teen girls are much more skeptical about teen boys' level of concern. The teen boys surveyed said their male peers are just as concerned as their female friends about AIDS and almost as concerned about other STDs and pregnancy. As the table illustrates, teen girls view their male friends as significantly less concerned about these dangers.

Concerns about STDs and pregnancy

	Percent Very Concerned		
	Total	Boys	Girls
How concerned are the girls you know about . . .			
HIV/AIDS	61	61	61
Other STDs	53	54	52
Getting pregnant	58	58	57
How concerned are the boys you know about . . .			
HIV/AIDS	51	60	42
Other STDs	43	51	35
Getting a girl pregnant	39	48	31

Concerns about HIV, other STDs and pregnancy do not increase with age, nor do they grow much as the level of sexual activity that a teen and his or her friends engage in increases.

ARE THEY PROTECTING THEMSELVES?

Many teens are concerned about sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. Unfortunately, this concern does not necessarily mean sexually experienced teens are always protecting themselves. In fact, many are taking risks. Less than half of sexually experienced teen boys interviewed (45%) and even fewer of the teen girls (38%) say they have used birth control every time they have had intercourse.⁴ One in five sexually experienced teens (19%) say they have never used birth control. Sexually experienced teens who have had more than one partner are even less likely to say they have used birth control consistently (36%) than those who have had only one partner (51%). Surprisingly, teens who have had conversations about birth control, HIV and other STDs with their sexual partners are not significantly more likely than those who have not had such conversations to report using birth control consistently.

There is some evidence that the level of concern among a teen's social group affects that teen's sexual behavior. For example, although peer concern is not related to whether or not a teen has had intercourse, it does appear to be related to individual teens' reasons for abstaining. Those virgins whose friends, both male and female, are *very* concerned about pregnancy, AIDS, and STDs are twice as likely as teens whose friends are less concerned to cite these fears as a reason they personally have not had sex (19% vs. 10% on average). Similarly, the collective fear of contracting HIV/AIDS affects teens' decision about birth control use. Over half (53%) of those sexually experienced teens who say the teens in their social circle are very concerned about HIV/AIDS use birth control, often condoms, consistently, compared with only a third (30%) of those whose friends exhibit less concern. Peer concerns about other STDs and about pregnancy do not appear to impact individual teens' behavior.

⁴ The survey asked about birth control generally and did not specifically ask about the use of condoms—the only contraceptive method that helps prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs.

METHODOLOGY

The Kaiser Family Foundation/YM 1998 National Survey of Teens: Teens Talk about Dating, Intimacy, and Their Sexual Experiences is a random-sample national survey of 650 teens, ages 13-18 years old. The survey was designed by staff at the Foundation, YM, and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA). It was conducted by telephone by PSRA between October 9 and November 3, 1997.

For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus four percentage points. The sampling error for the sub-sample of teen girls is plus or minus six percentage points and the sampling error for the sub-sample of teen boys is also plus or minus six percentage points. The sampling error for the sub-sample of sexually experienced teens is plus or minus eight percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. Parental permission was granted prior to interviewing the teens.