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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study explores how parental involvement in childhood influences later sexual activity in the teen years. IMFC Research Fellow Dr. Frank Jones examined childhood environments including parent-child interaction, and inter-parent relationships, determining correlations between childhood experience and teen sexual choices. The findings are grouped by influencing factors starting with parental substance use, family structure, parent-child interaction and parental community involvement. The data was taken from Statistics Canada's *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, comparing responses from parents and their children age six to eleven, and then again eight years later as teens. The data shows that 39.9 per cent of teens age 14 to 19 have had consensual sexual intercourse, which is 41.6 per cent of girls and 38.1 percent of boys. Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces have the highest percentage of sexually active teens.

Among the more interesting findings:

- Childhood home environments do have an important effect on teen decisions about sexual activity
- There is a relationship between parent behaviours (drinking, smoking) and future teen sexual activity
- Church-going children are less likely to have sex as teens; still 30 per cent of children in the pews are sexually active in their teen years
- Family structure has a bearing on teenage sexual activity

Adolescent sexual behaviour places teens at risk of ill health, unintended pregnancy and emotional concerns. The earlier teens initiate sex, the greater the risk. Conversely, delaying sexual activity in the teen years significantly reduces these risks. Our results confirm that parents are influential (sometimes unintentionally) in teen sexual decision making.

Our top recommendations:

- Parents should be the prime sex educator. Parents are the most influential force in a teens life
- Parents should work to create a healthy, stable home characterized by warmth, open communication and clear expectations
- Parents should model a healthy lifestyle and positive choices. Your children are watching
- Sex education should engage parents and recognize their role as the primary sex educators
- Sex education should acknowledge that girls face unique risks compared to boys when it comes to early sexual engagement

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The study found that a number of childhood factors reduced the likelihood of teens having sex. These include close family relationships and living with two biological parents. The study also found that childhood homes with low levels of tobacco and alcohol use were correlated with a reduced likelihood of teen sexual behaviour. Childhood homes where parents often felt depressed, or smoked, drank and/or drank to excess, were more likely to produce sexually active teens. Boys who grew up with cohabiting parents and girls with divorced or separated parents were more likely to be sexual active as teens.

METHODOLOGY

DATA SOURCE:

The study data was extracted from Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The survey examines child development from the first year of life to age 19. This study uses data from cycle 1 (1994-95) and cycle 5 (2002-03).

The study is based on data from two cycles of the *National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*, conducted by Statistics Canada. The study compares sexually active and inactive teens.¹ It examines children age six to eleven in 1995 and eight years later as teens in 2003, age fourteen to nineteen. Home environments, including parent-child interaction and inter-parent relationships, were examined in light of sexual choices as teens.

Children were grouped by shared variable in 1995 and then the sexual behaviour as teens in 2003 was observed and compared with the national average teen sex rate. An over representation or under representation of ten per cent or more was considered significant.² Results for boys and girls were examined separately.

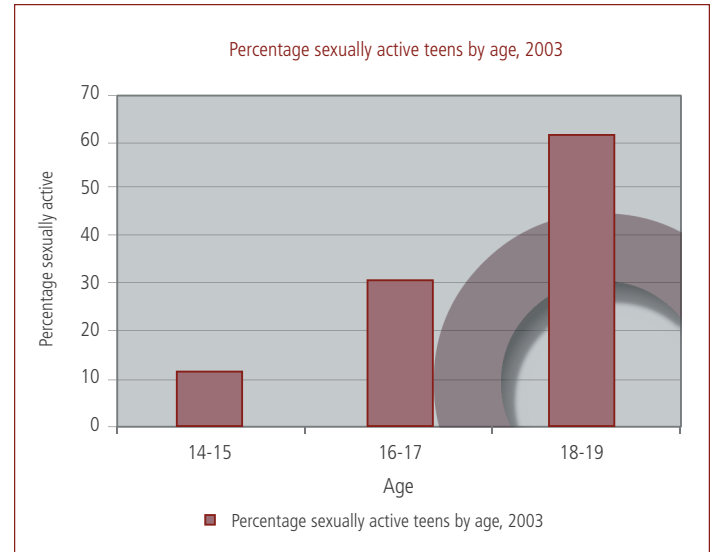
These observations do not explain causation, but reveal common childhood experiences shared by teens that make similar sexual decisions. And observing which groups of teens with shared characteristics are more or less likely to be sexually active is important, but how do we know that these behaviours are related to teen sexual choices? In order to answer this, the study used three regression models to measure the significance of the correlations between sexual activity and a number of variables. In this modelling system we hold a number of variables constant while we examine the relationship between sexual activity and the particular variables we are interested in.³ This method allows for the suggestion of causation, but cannot be said to prove causation. The results are applicable to the Canadian adolescent population, though many individual exceptions exist.

THE TEEN SEX RATE

Amongst 14 to 19-year-olds, 39.9 per cent were sexually active, which is 41.6 per cent of girls and 38.1 per cent of boys.⁴

STUDY RESULTS

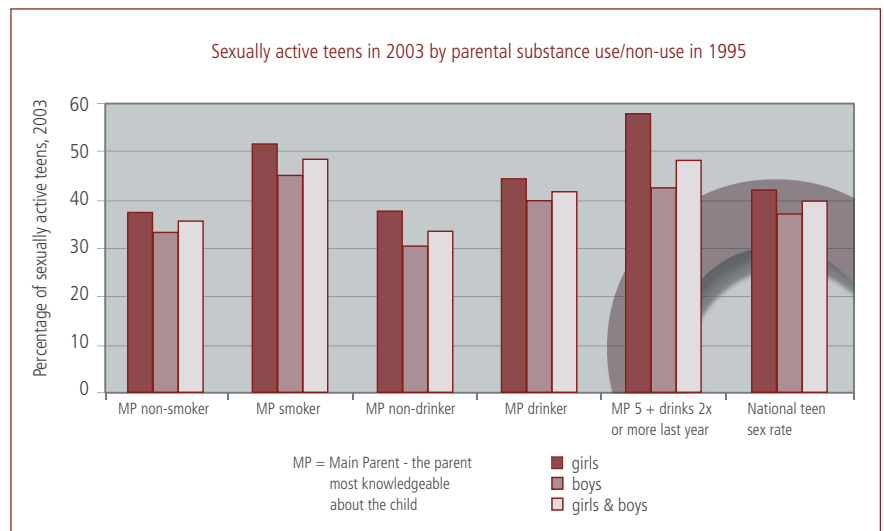
Comparing characteristics and early home environments with teen sexual choices provided interesting results. The findings are grouped by influencing factors starting with parental substance use, family structure, parent-child interaction and parental community involvement.



PARENTAL SUBSTANCE USE

Parental substance use is correlated with future sexual activity

Several parental behaviours in the childhood home were more prominent among sexually inactive teens. The data suggests that parents who refrained from drinking and getting drunk had children who were less likely to be sexually active as teens by 18 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. Children of non-smokers were 15 per cent less likely to be sexually active as adults compared to the national average. Conversely, children of parents who drank to excess twice or more in 1995 were 24 per cent more likely to be sexually active as teens, overwhelmingly so for girls who were 38 per cent more likely to be sexually active. Children of smokers were 22 per cent more likely than the national average to choose to be sexually active as teens with the effect stronger among girls.



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How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity

A number of questions in the survey probe parental emotional health including inquiries about feeling depressed, hopeful, joyful, restfulness of sleep, and use of social services. Overall, teens were more likely to report being sexually active in 2003 if their parents reported feeling emotionally down or anxious in 1995.

There are numerous studies that correlate sexual behaviour with other high risk behaviours. Studies show that parents influence teen attitudes toward risk behaviours in several ways. Columbia University's *National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XIV: Teens and Parents*, suggests that teens who have seen their parents drunk are twice as likely to get drunk monthly themselves, compared with teens who have never seen their parents intoxicated. These teens are also three times more likely to use marijuana and smoke tobacco.⁵

FAMILY STRUCTURE

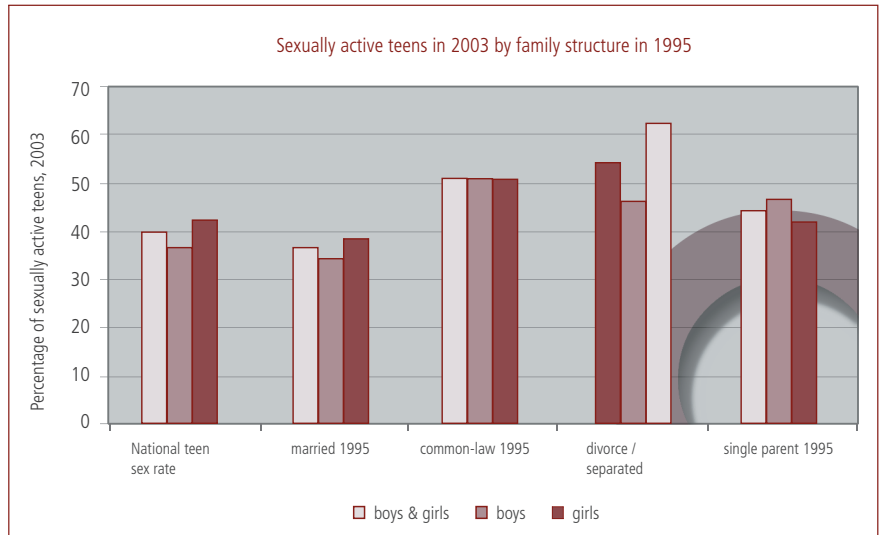
Parent relationships make a difference

The influence of family structure on child outcomes has been an increasingly studied subject over the past two decades. In the IMFC study, childhood family structure was strongly correlated with sexual choices in the teenage years. Children with married parents in 1995, including biological or non-biological married parents, were 8 per cent less likely to be sexually active as teens. While this does not meet our 10 per cent criteria for a significant reduction in teen sexual activity, it is interesting considering other family forms. Children who lived with both biological parents in the home in 1995 irrespective of marital status were 11 per cent less likely to be sexually active in 2003. Conversely, children with only one biological parent in the home irrespective of marital status were 37 per cent more likely to be sexually active as teens. Girls whose parents rarely or never got upset with each other in 1995 were 15 per cent less likely to be sexually active as teens.

Regression models were used to measure the significance of family structure on sexual activity while holding other influences constant. The findings suggest some family structures may influence teen sexual choices in different ways. Living with two biological parents rather than one influenced a decreased likelihood of sexual activity. Strong correlations between teen sexual behaviour and growing up with common-law parents were observed among boys, while correlations between sexual activity and growing up in divorced or separated homes were observed among girls. Boys and girls who grew up in single parent homes were no more likely to be sexually active as teens than those who grew up in married parent homes.

A wealth of literature has explored the relationship between family structure and teen sexuality.⁶ Most studies have focused on age of sexual initiation or on teen pregnancy.

Many studies have suggested that two biological parent families correlate with postponed sexual activity while divorce, separation or cohabitation correlate with earlier sexual initiation. Interestingly, one study found that women who as teens lived with two non-biological parents were more likely to have been involved sexually at an early age.⁷ Previous studies have noted that family transitions are stressful for children, resulting in greater involvement in risk behaviours.⁸ Some researchers have identified family transition as the key variable, pointing to findings that suggest prolonged single parenthood seems to have little impact on the age of sexual initiation. On the other hand, a 2003 study by Manning and Bulanda examined childhood experiences in homes with cohabiting parents, noting the effects of time and age of children.⁹ Their study controlled for the number of family transitions and still discovered correlations with early sexual activity and teen births. They concluded that instability was not the active mechanism, suggesting that two biological non-married parents do not offer the same benefits as married, biological parents.¹⁰



PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

How parents fulfill their role matters

How parents choose to interact with their children has a lasting impact. Correlations between parental attitudes and activities and later sexual activity were observed in the study. Parents who reported frequently disciplining children when angry or who were inconsistent with discipline were more likely to have teens who were sexually active at 11 per cent and 16 per cent respectively, with the stronger association for girls. Boys and girls reporting that their relationship with their father was close or very close correlated with a decreased likelihood of sexual activity during the teen years by 16 per cent and 12 per cent respectively.

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How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity

Another interesting finding suggests that children who are read to by parents on a daily basis were 23 per cent less likely to be sexually active as teens, but children read to less than once a week by parents were 33 per cent more likely to be sexually active as teens.

Perceived parental values and attitudes influence teen behaviour. A survey periodically conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a Washington DC-based, non-partisan coalition of academics, non-profits and policy groups, has consistently found since 1996 that parents are the most important influence on teen sexual choices, this according to the teens themselves.¹¹ The same study found that parents continue to underestimate their own influence. Numerous other studies have confirmed that teens tend to delay sexual activity when they perceive their parents disapprove.¹² Research reveals that an authoritative parenting style that is warm, communicative, supportive, and involves supervision and setting limits, protects teens against risk behaviour over the long term.¹³ Parents who are involved in the lives of their children and teens provide increased protection against risk behaviour.¹⁴

Does television and video game time matter?

Parents are the primary media gatekeeper for children, a task that is becoming increasingly challenging as parents wrestle with how growing access to various forms of media can help and hinder children. While our study did not explore these issues extensively, it did compare the amount of time children engaged television and video games with later sexual activity. Children who spent relatively little time watching television or playing video games were less likely than average to be sexually active as teens. An exception was observed in the regression analysis where playing video games was correlated with a decreased likelihood of later sexual activity among girls. More research into these findings would be helpful. A number of surveys of adolescents suggest that teens believe television influences sexual behaviour of their peers and younger children. However, these studies also show that young people believe television has little influence on their own personal behaviour.

PARENTAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Parental community involvement models values

The IMFC study found that healthy parent-child relationships during childhood correlated with lower likelihood of sexual involvement in the teen years.¹⁵ Children who participated in weekly worship were less likely to be sexually active as teenagers. For boys, 27 per cent of those who went to church weekly were sexually active as compared to the national average of 38.1 per cent. As for girls, 33 per cent of those who went to church weekly were sexually active as teens compared to the

national average of 41.6 per cent. Parents who were devoted to volunteerism and attended weekly worship with their children in 1995 were correlated with having teens who were 40 per cent less likely to be sexually active in 2003.

DISCUSSION

Using data from two cycles of the NLSCY, the study examined childhood environments and behaviours and the likelihood of sexual activity in the teen years.

The study found that parental attitudes and behaviours correlated with later sexual activity. Children of parents who got intoxicated or used other substances, were more likely to be sexually active as teens, while children of parents who volunteered and were members of a faith community were less likely to be sexually active as teens compared to the national average. Children who did not watch a lot of television or play video games were less likely to be sexually active in the teen years. The one exception were girls who frequently played video games during childhood. They were less likely to be sexually active in the teen years.

Childhood family structure revealed strong correlations with teen sexual activity. Having two biological parents correlated with a lower likelihood of teen sexual involvement. Having divorced or separated parents as a child correlated with a higher likelihood of sexual activity for girls, and having common-law parents as a child correlated with a greater likelihood of teen sexual behaviour for boys. Regression analysis found no statistically significant correlation between growing up in a lone-parent household and future sexual activity. Girls from low conflict families were less likely to be sexually active as teens, as were boys and girls who reported having close relationships with fathers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As previous studies have shown, teen sexual activity is associated with increased risk of physical and psychological ill health. Delaying sexual activity in the teen years significantly reduces these risks. Parents have the primary obligation in helping teens make good choices. As the IMFC study demonstrates, parental influence begins long before the teen years.

Recommendations for parents:

- **Model a healthy lifestyle:** Our data suggests that parent behaviour regarding substance use correlates with later teen sexual activity. Parents who make healthy choices, even early in their children's lives, are making a positive contribution to better health in the teen years. Our study found correlations

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How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity

between poor parental emotional health and teen sexual behaviour. Parents who address their own emotional health benefit their children

- Create a healthy, stable home: As with previous studies, our data suggests that family structure correlates with teen sexual behaviour. Instability and family transitions can create stress for all family members. Strong parent/child and parent/parent relationships provide a protective factor for children. Our study contributes to the wealth of existing literature that demonstrates the benefits of healthy parental marriage for children
- Practice authoritative parenting: A number of studies affirm the benefit of a parenting style that is warm, caring and communicative. Sufficient parental supervision, expressed expectations and limits help teens transition towards becoming healthy, autonomous adults
- Parents are the prime sex educators: Helping young people develop a healthy understanding of their sexuality goes beyond having “the talk.” Parents are uniquely well positioned to guide teens through puberty. Parents help teens articulate values and integrate them into everyday life
- Parents in community: As our data demonstrates, parents who were involved in volunteering and in a faith community with their children were correlated with a decreased likelihood of their teen becoming sexually involved.”

Public policy recommendations:

Over the past few decades, sexual health has become increasingly the domain of government policy, particularly as sexually transmitted disease and infection rates continue to increase. Where young people and children are concerned, parents are the primary sex educators and policy must recognize the critical role of parents in the lives of children and youth.

- Public policy must recognize the primacy of parents as sex educators, their wishes and values. Policy should engage parents
- Acknowledge the unique risks for girls and boys: To be effective, policy must reflect that life experiences influence boys and girls differently

The full research is available at www.ccri.ca

APPENDIX: ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Frank Jones Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada and the Director of Research at the Christian Commitment Research Institute (CCRI). Dr. Jones has formerly been a Lay Chaplain at the University of Ottawa, a Senior Analyst with Statistics Canada and an Adjunct Professor of Economic Science at the University of Ottawa.

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How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity

Endnotes

- 1 The NLSCY question regarding sexual activity asks, “[h]ave you ever had consensual sexual intercourse?” This may exclude other sexual activities from inclusion in the survey and may underestimate sexual activity broadly considered. Brener, Billy and Grady (2003) report that 93 per cent of the adolescents in their findings considered vaginal penetration to be sexual intercourse compared to 63 per cent who qualified anal sex as intercourse and 22 per cent who viewed oral sex as intercourse.
- 2 Note that the percentage difference is between the national average and percentage of sexually active respondents who share the variable in question, not the “percentage point” difference between the two. For percentage point difference see the full study.
- 3 The first model assumes the likelihood of teen sexual behaviour is related to teen marijuana use—something this study and other studies have observed. The model measured the significance of teen sexual activity and marijuana use with a number of childhood factors observed in the 1995 cycle, including parental age, gender, marital status and education as well as economic indicators. This model also examines the child’s participation in religious worship services. The second model assumes sexual activity is related to childhood factors, this time excluding the consideration of marijuana use. It examines family structure and parental characteristics like age and education as well as the amount of time children watch television and play video games. This model also considers childhood faith affiliations. The third model examines the effects of sexual activity on a number of behaviours assumed to be related, including childhood worship frequency, age, sex, marital status and education of parents and household income in 1995.
- 4 The 2008 study *Trends in teen sexual behavior and condom use* by Michelle Rotermann at Statistics Canada estimates the rate of sexual involvement among teens in 2005 at 43 per cent. That study uses data from the Canadian Community Health Survey, and reports on 15 to 19-year-olds. Our study includes 14-year-olds, who are less likely to be sexually active, which may account for a lower overall sex rate.
- 5 The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2009, August). National survey of American attitudes on substance abuse XIV: teens and parents. New York: CASA, p. 17.
- 6 For a literature review, see Sturgeon, S.W. (2008). The relationship between family structure and adolescent sexual activity. Special Report no.1., Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.familyfacts.org/featuredfinding/ff_01.pdf
- 7 Wu, L., and Thomson, E. (1995). Family change and early sexual initiation. CDE Working Paper No. 95-26. Madison: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- 8 Osborne, C., McLanahan, S. (2007, November). Partnership instability and child well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (4).
- 9 Manning, W.D., Bulanda, R.E. (2003). Parental cohabitation experience and adolescent behavioral outcomes. Working Paper Series 03-03 Bowling Green: Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Albert, B. (2009). *With One Voice (lite)*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV_Lite_2009.pdf

- 12 For a list of studies see Kim, C. (2008, October 7). Teen sex: the parent factor. Backgrounder no. 2194. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.heritage.org/research/family/upload/bg_2194.pdf
- 13 DeVore, E.R., Ginsburg, K.R. (2005, August). The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 17(4). Retrieved September 17, 2009 from http://www.percdublin.org/Files/Protective_effects_good_parenting.pdf
- 14 Longmore, M. A., Manning, W.D., and Giordano, P.C. Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens' Dating and Sexual Initiation: A Longitudinal Analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63(2). Longmore, Manning and Giordano concluded that parental monitoring during the preteen years can have positive effects on teens in later behavioral decision making.
- 15 Relationship health was determined by reported closeness and through self assessed levels of relational conflict.

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HOW PARENTAL INFLUENCE IMPACTS TEEN SEXUAL ACTIVITY



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