



Risk Factors for Premarital Sex

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by Focus on the Family

Teenagers who feel incomplete, inadequate and unappreciated are more likely to seek comfort in a sexual relationship. But those with a life rich in relationships, family traditions, activities, interests and — most of all — consistent love and affirmation are less likely to embark on a desperate search for fulfillment that could lead to unwise sexual decisions. Those who have a healthy, productive faith in God are more likely to have deeply rooted reasons to respect and preserve the gift of sex and to respect rather than exploit others.

Be aware of these specific risk factors for teen sex:

- **Alcohol and drug use.** Aside from reflecting problem attitudes (rebellion, poor self-concept, invulnerability) that make sex more likely, intoxication also clouds judgment and weakens resistance to sexual overtures.
- **A steady boyfriend or girlfriend.** Strong attachments and feelings of exclusivity invite nature to take its course, especially when physical expressions of affection begin early in the relationship. This is a particular risk in a situation where the boy is more than two or three years older than the girl is. If a teen romance appears to be getting hot and heavy and a lot of physical contact is already displayed, you will need to speak with both boy and girl diplomatically but candidly about the physical process they are setting in motion.
- **Little parental monitoring.** Leaving adolescents alone for hours at a time or not requiring accountability is a setup for sex.
- **A parental belief that adolescent sex is appropriate.** If you think premarital sex is okay, your adolescent will too and will act on that belief.
- **A parental belief that adolescent sex is inevitable.** Many parents who disapprove of teen sex have also concluded that it is as certain as death and taxes. Their approach to the subject will thus be double-edged: "Don't do it, but in case you do, use this condom." Adolescents will get the message loud and clear and are likely to act accordingly.
- **Low grade-point average/low attachment to school.** While school performance is affected by a variety of factors, a basic desire to do well in school reflects a more hopeful outlook on the future and a willingness to put off immediate gratification for long-term goals. Teen sex, on the contrary, usually reflects ignorance of or little regard for consequences.

This doesn't mean, of course, that every scholar is a bulwark of morality or that all who are not academically oriented are destined to be promiscuous. What ultimately matters is a person's commitment to basic values such as responsibility, respect for self and others and concern about the effect of today's decisions on the future.

- **A history of physical or sexual abuse.** These acts against children and adolescents violate their bodies, minds and hearts. Sexual abuse creates a grossly distorted view of sexual behavior, destroys boundaries, and drives a deep sense of worthlessness into the emotions. Whether the abuse occurred in the distant or recent past, adolescents with this history need ongoing support, counseling and prayer to help them develop healthy attitudes about sex and about themselves.
- **Frequent family relocations.** Moving generally stresses both parents and adolescents (especially if the kids resent the decision). This can erode parental authority and distract parents from involvement with their children. Bonds to social supports such as church groups that help prevent sexual activity are severed by multiple moves. Loneliness and loss of friendships may lead some teenagers to use sexual activity to gain social acceptance. These issues should be considered by parents who are thinking about a possible relocation.
- **Only one parent in the household.** Parenting was meant to be a team effort, and some risks will naturally increase when one parent is left to do all the protecting and monitoring alone. Some studies do indicate that adolescents living with a single parent are more likely to become sexually active than those living with both parents. Work and household demands can prevent single parents from being as involved and attentive as they need and want to be. And the divorce and desertion that sometimes lead to a one-parent home can make teens uncertain about the value of marriage as the setting for sexual activity and about the role of sexuality in parental relationships.

This increased risk does not mean that adolescent sex is inevitable in single-parent families. But it does place an additional responsibility on single parents to send their teenagers clear and consistent messages about sexuality. And it is one more reason for single parents to enlist as much support as they can.

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