

Risk and Protective Factors

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The Relationship to Teen Pregnancy Prevention

There are two very important questions to address when considering programs to reduce the high rates of teen pregnancy.

- 1) What factors influence adolescents' decisions about sex?
- 2) Which of these factors can be altered?

Identifying the answers to these questions can greatly increase the chances of reducing sexual risk-taking among adolescents.

Factors that influence adolescents' decisions about sex include both risk factors and protective factors. **Risk factors** are defined as individual or environmental markers that are related to the increased likelihood that a negative outcome will occur. **Protective factors** are defined as individual or environmental safeguards that enhance a person's ability to resist stressful life events, risks or hazards and promote adaptation and competence. More than 500 factors have been identified that affect one or more sexual behaviors (the initiation of sex, frequency of sex, number of sexual partners, use of condoms, and use of other contraceptives) or consequences of those behaviors (pregnancy, childbearing or STD).

Risk and protective factors may be grouped into four key themes:

- 1) Individual biological factors (age, physical maturity, gender)
- 2) Disadvantage, disorganization, and dysfunction in the lives of the teens themselves and their environments (rates of substance abuse, violence, divorce; also levels of education)
- 3) Sexual values, attitudes, and modeled behavior (teens' own values about sexual behavior as well as those expressed by parents, peers, and romantic partners)
- 4) Connection to adults and organizations that discourage sex, unprotected sex, or early childbearing (attachment to parents and other adults in their schools and places of worship)

The extent to which a community organization can influence risk and protective factors varies. Factors

that are **impossible or extremely difficult** to change include biological factors, community disorganization, family structure and parents' education level. Factors that are **difficult** include those related to teens' attachment – or lack thereof – to various people or institutions in their lives. This group of factors also includes risky behaviors – such as alcohol and other drug use and being in a gang – and protective ones, such as girls' involvement in sports. Research suggests that these **factors can sometimes be changed if specialized services are available** – such as counseling programs for parents, youth and families; alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs; tutoring services; community-based mentoring programs and sports for girls. The factors **most susceptible** to change by organizations accustomed to addressing reproductive health are those involving sexuality and reproductive health. The majority of these factors involve sexual beliefs, values, attitudes, skills and behaviors of teens regarding having sex, using condoms and other methods of contraception, and avoiding pregnancy and HIV/STD.

It is clear that complex dynamics are at play when it comes to teens' decisions about sex. The breadth of these factors can be viewed as both good and bad – good in that there are many avenues organizations may pursue to reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy and STD; bad in that the sheer number of factors involved can seem overwhelming. It is important for organizations to focus on those factors that it can change given its mission and resources. Some organizations may address sexuality-related factors and thereby reduce sexual risk-taking, other organizations may most effectively address multiple and varied factors and thereby reduce teens' risky sexual behavior and its consequences.

Information contained in this fact sheet obtained from a report released by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, www.teenpregnancy.org. For a detailed matrix of risk and protective factors affecting sexual behavior visit http://www.teenpregnancy.org/works/risk_protective_kirby/Matrix_Kirby.pdf.