

kids voices count

**Delaware teenagers talk
to each other about sex
and teen pregnancy**





*A few members of the A.I. duPont High School Journalism Team
Standing: Stacie Peters, Dana Sorenson, Adam Swain, Dan Simmons, Nick Scarnati
Front row: Mrs. Barbara Roewe, Sasha Petraiva*

KIDS COUNT in Delaware is dedicated to making our state a better place for kids. We want to focus the attention of Delaware's policy makers, community leaders and parents on teen pregnancy, to better understand how we can help reduce the number of births to girls under the age of 18.

Kids Voices Count provides the teen perspective on a controversial subject. This interviewing and writing project was undertaken as a volunteer effort by the journalism students at the A.I. duPont High School, under the supervision of their teacher Mrs. Barbara Roewe. These young people spent several weeks during the spring of 1996 interviewing their peers in Dover and Wilmington on the subject of teen sex and pregnancy. The interviews were conducted with no adults present.

They are pleased to present their thoughts on an issue that deeply impacts their lives.

Note: The names of the teen interviewers and photos are real, however to protect confidentiality, the names of the interviewees are fictitious and their photos are not included. All interview excerpts are edited only for length and order of presentation. The words are those of the teen journalists themselves as submitted to KIDS COUNT. Any insertions for clarity are enclosed by [] brackets.





Greg



Stacie

Teen interviewers: Greg Shih and Stacie Peters

Greg and Stacie interviewed five African-American girls ages 13 to 17. They participated in a group discussion at Wesley College in Dover in May, 1996.

Greg:

“All between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, the five girls sprouted from schools such as Smyrna High School, Polytech Vocational School and Dover High and Middle Schools. These areas are noted to have a higher rate of teen pregnancy and violence.

Conversation started with small talk and slowly gained momentum into main topics of discussion. Many of the girls attribute the causes of teen pregnancy to social placement, peer pressure and boredom. Another reason for the high rate of pregnancy in this vicinity was blamed onto the school itself. A bold finger was pointed at the administration in not having enough programs to help with this problem. Most of the pregnancies at each of the three schools were split evenly between the races agreed most of the interviewees. Though Dover High School believes that most of the teen sex and pregnancies can be credited to the African-American population at that school.

So exactly where can young teens turn for information and dependence? The popular answer seemed to be the Wellness Centers incorporated into most of the schools in that area. The group unanimously appreciated the confidentiality and availability of the centers.

As more of the teens’ [interviewees’] personalities came into the spotlight, it became apparent that [we] were not talking to the group that contributes to the pregnancy rate.”

Stacie:

“It was obvious that the girls were ready to talk and were well-informed beforehand of our goals. We asked the girls to give us anonymous names so that they could say anything they wished without having to worry about anyone knowing who said it. ‘Shenna’ was a junior, ‘Charea’ and ‘Chanmae’ both freshmen, ‘Arianna’ and ‘Vaughn’ (twins) were both eighth graders.

The interview started out with light questions about each of the girls. When asked about plans for the future, all of the girls responded that they definitely wanted to go to college. They all wanted to have successful careers and eventually have families.

Now it was time to get down to the heart of our interview. We asked if any of these still relatively young women had come across teenage pregnancies. They all had. ‘Shenna’s’ friend got pregnant in the ninth grade, chose abortion until she saw her baby wave at her via sonogram. The girls have been able to see what pregnancy can do to a person so young.

When asked about the freedom of the new parent, they had much to offer. The group decided that there were positive’s as well as negatives. The major consensus of the group was that if you had a child as a teenager you’d loose your social life and would have to do everything for your child. Money would also be a problem with child care costs and baby supplies.

The ‘S’ word was in the back of everyone’s mind. Discussing sex cannot be avoided if the subject is teen pregnancy. You don’t have one without the other. We asked the girls if any of them had engaged in sexual intercourse. The result was unanimous — no one had.

There is a lot of controversy surrounding teenage sex. One of the questions that arises is ‘why do teens have sex?’ According to the group there are multiple reasons that a girl would have sex. We asked the girls their ideas on the percentage of the age group (13-17) that were sexually active. Arianna thought about 50%, Sheena thought about 80% were, Charea thought is was about 75%.

Now that we had the approximate numbers according to the teens who live among the teens, it was important to find out how many of these kids were having babies. All agreed that probably 10% of the pregnant girls within their school actually had their children.

The thought of discussing sex with parents is horrifying to most teens, but why? We can speak freely of it with our peers, and not our parents? Channea felt that this was due to lack of communication between parent and child. The feeling of the group was that parents don’t listen, thus giving their kids the impression that they don’t care.

While all the attention seems to be on the girls when discussing teen pregnancy, the male partners seem to become obsolete. The girls felt that if a guy gets a girl pregnant, he gains bragging rights within his social group. The girls thought the average age of the male’s involved is about 17-25. The older guy is irresistible to young girls because he is seemingly so much more mature than the guys their age.

The girls had told us some pretty interesting things. The problem that was facing us now was, how do we stop teen pregnancy from occurring? Surprisingly, the girls thought that most teens had sex for lack of a better thing to do. I’ll bet most adults didn’t know that once basketball and other sports get boring, sex becomes the after-school activity of choice.

Finally, it seemed appropriate to draw the interview to an end. We asked the girls to write down their thoughts on two questions: ‘What do you think the root cause for teen pregnancy is?’ and ‘What can be done about teen pregnancy?’ Four of the five girls attributed popularity and desire to keep their boyfriend as the main reason for teenage pregnancy.

Charea thought that classes throughout teen years would help eliminate teen pregnancy because they would increase awareness. Arianna thought a better communication between children and adults would help children to get information on pregnancy and sex. Vaughn thought a good way to stop the increase in teen pregnancy would be to have girls get their tubes tied. Channea believed that workshops after school would be beneficial.

The whole interview lasted about two and one-half hours, and in that time our eyes were opened to what kids our age were feeling about topics that involve all of us.”

Teens speak...

Arianna: “The older you get, the more mature you’ll be, and you’ll know more when you’re married.”

Shenna: “If God gives you something it will be clean and pure. If you are married, it will be clean and pure.”

Channae: “When someone comes home after school, they might not have anything to do but call up a boy. The school should provide kids with something to do.”

Charea: “Teen pregnancy just happens for no reason at all.”

Vaughn: “I think most people do it because they want to keep their boyfriends, or they just want to be noticed. It’s almost like bragging rights when you say to someone you’re pregnant.”

Arianna: “Parents get so hysterical. Some parents might get defensive, and if we try to talk to our guidance counselor, they will call our parents.”

Shenna: “Children and parents have bad communications. If they talked about it more, maybe it would work out and you could talk to your parents about it. They just don’t listen.”

Channea: “The more parents say, ‘no’, the more you want to do it. But if they don’t talk to you about it at all, you still might do it.”

Vaughn: “My stepdad told me if I ever get pregnant he’ll beat me so bad the baby will die.”

Shenna: “The whole school is bad. We have riots each year and the teachers don’t even prepare for it. The only good thing that happens is when somebody dies and we all gather together in a ceremony.”

Arianna: “White parents didn’t seem to be as concerned about their kids having sex or getting pregnant.”

Channae: “More black girls get pregnant than white girls.”

Arianna: “The root cause of teen pregnancy is that young people want to feel older faster.”



Teen Sexual Activity

Less than half of adolescents are sexually active before age 17. Nearly 20% of teens do not have sex as adolescents.

Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute (1994). *Sex and America's Teenagers*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.

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Sheena thought about 80% were,

Charea thought is was about 75%.

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Older Fathers

About 60% of the babies born to teen mothers have fathers who are 20 years or older. Data from 1993 California birth certificates documented that fathers were on average 6.7 and 4.2 years older than the mothers who give birth while in junior high school and high school, respectively. The California data is virtually identical to 1992 U.S. data. In 1988, 30% of babies born to women 15 years old had fathers who were six or more years older than mothers. In that same year, about 489,000 teen females became mothers while only 195,000 teen males became fathers.

Sources: Alan Guttmacher Institute (1994). *Sex and America's Teenagers*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.

Moore, K. A., Miller, B. C., Gleit, D., & Morrison, D. R. (1995a). *Adolescent Sex, Contraception and Childbearing: A Review of Recent Research*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

Males, M. & Chew, K. S. Y. (1996). The ages of fathers in California adolescent births, 1993. *American Journal of Public Health*, 86(4), 565-568.



Nick



Adam

Interviewers: Nick Scarnati and Adam Swain

Nick and Adam interviewed middle school students at the Clarence Fraim Boys and Girls Club in Wilmington in May 1996.

- Martin, age 12 *Martin is a soft-spoken 6th grader at Conrad Middle School. He aspires to become a professional basketball player. He believes that having an illegitimate child will affect his dream of stardom and that he only plans to have one child after he is married. "I want my kid to be happy and follow in my footsteps."*
- John, age 14 *John, a 7th grader at A. I. Middle School, doesn't plan to get married or have a child. He plans on "being his own man." He plans on entering the Army after high school and he gets information on teenage pregnancy from his parents and school.*
- T. J., age 13 *T.J. is a peppy future health class teacher who attends H.B. duPont Middle School. He learns all of his information from there and he is very involved in that class. He plans to have a child when he is married, but not until then. "Having a child before I'm married would go against my feelings towards the subject."*
- Sandy, age 12 *Sandy is a 6th grade "A" student at Conrad Middle School. She plans on attending the University of Delaware and doesn't think much about teenage pregnancy. She didn't say much except that she has learned a lot about teenage pregnancy from her parents mostly.*
- Don, age 13 *Don is a 7th grader at Conrad Middle School and not very aware of the information available on teenage pregnancy. He is not sexually active and does not plan to be until at least 18. He plans on attending college and would like to go to Penn State.*
- Shirley, age 14 *Shirley was the most informed member of the group on the topic. She received most of the information on teenage pregnancy from her mom more so than the school. She was very aware of the downside of teenage pregnancy and was a preacher of abstinence. She also learned of teenage pregnancy from her sister who had a child when she was 17. Shirley doesn't plan on having kids, or sex for that matter, at least until she is married and is contemplating a vasectomy.*

Pregnancy Intended?

About 15% to 20% of pregnancies appear to be intended, or at least not unwanted. An infant may be anticipated as a source of love. Producing a child may satisfy an adolescent's need for independence and autonomy from her family and elevate her to adult status in the eyes of family and friends. For adolescents with minimal or no educational or occupational aspirations, early parenting is not seen as an impediment to future endeavors.

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Joffe, C. (1993). Sexual politics and the teenage pregnancy prevention worker in the United States. In A. Lawson and D. L. Rhode (Eds.), *The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy* (pp. 284-300). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lawson, A. (1993). Multiple fractures: the cultural construction of teenage sexuality and pregnancy. In A. Lawson and D. L. Rhode (Eds.), *The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy* (pp. 101-125). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The idea that a lot of girls want to have a baby was surprising.

"They think they can handle the responsibility," comments Sarah.

"A lot of girls think it's cool, but it's not," adds Melissa.

"Some girls feel their child will be someone who will love them unconditionally."

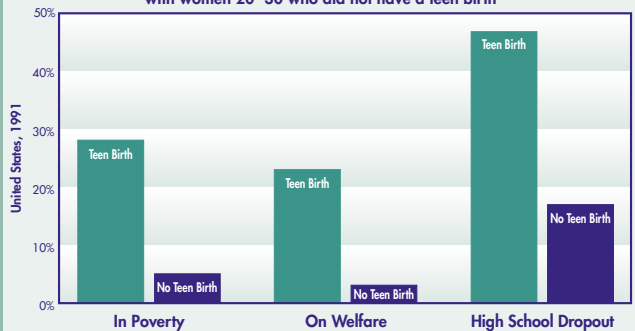
—Ann, age 13

"I think most people do it because they want to keep their boyfriends, or they just want to be noticed. It's almost like bragging rights when you say to someone you're pregnant."

—Vaughn, age 13

Outcomes of Teen Pregnancy

Comparison of women 20–30 who had a teen birth with women 20–30 who did not have a teen birth



Sources: Tabulations from Panel Study of Income Dynamics, by Saul D. Hoffman, University of Delaware; KIDS COUNT in Delaware



Interviewer: Sasha Petrova

Sasha interviewed high school students at the Clarence Fraim Boys and Girls Club in Wilmington.

Teenagers are faced with a lot of problems of the today's world. Pregnancy is one of them.

Most teens see themselves having kids in the future, and somehow most don't really realize that if they chose to have sex, there is a chance that they might end up with a kid.

Of course there are those who are concerned about the problem with teen pregnancy. Mike, Bob, Sarah, and Melissa, all around age seventeen, are just a few of those kids.

"I think that I'd like to have kids in the future, but right now I don't think I could handle kids," says Sarah. Bob disagrees, "I don't want the responsibility; it's just gonna be me and my wife."

They all agree that it takes a lot of time and effort to take care of a kid when you're a teen. "It takes a lot of your time," says Mike, "You gotta find babysitters, a job..."

The idea that a lot of girls want to have a baby was surprising. "They think they can handle the responsibility," comments Sarah. "A lot of girls think it's cool, but it's not," adds Melissa.

But what's a girl to do when she finds out she's pregnant and she doesn't want the baby; well, there's abortion:

"A lot of girls get abortions and nobody knows about it. They have places that you can go," says Mike. Melissa estimates that about 70% of all girls who get pregnant get abortions. Sarah shakes her head, "I don't like it, I would never have it." She is referring to abortion. "If I would become pregnant, I wouldn't abort the baby. I wouldn't be proud of it, but I would love it," comments Melissa.

As for adoption, the teens believe that it's better to be adopted and get a chance to live, than to be aborted.

They also think that pregnancy affects girls more than guys. "We could just leave," says Bob. The girls agree, "Not many boys stick around," comments Melissa. Sarah had a strong opinion about this, "The boy should go to jail if he doesn't want to help with the kid." Looking at teen pregnancy as a problem, after some arguments, our four teens decided that it's right up there with drugs and gang violence. Pretty scary.

"I feel affected by this problem," says Mike. "A lot of girls I know have kids. I could never see them getting pregnant."

When asked what they thought should be done about the rising rate of teen pregnancy, the teens said that education is the key. "Tell the kids what could happen if they chose to have sex," comments Melissa. "They should start to tell you early—when you're eight, nine, ten years old," says Sarah. Bob frowns, "It's stupid getting pregnant when you're a teen." What else is there to say?



Sasha



Different Attitudes

Attitudes toward early childbearing differ by race and ethnic group. The greater interest in early, nonmarital childbearing among black youth, compared to other racial or ethnic teens, persists even when social class and educational aspirations are controlled. In a study by Michael and Tuma (1985), black adolescents felt the ideal age for giving birth to a first child was under 20, and the ideal age of marriage was later. Hispanic adolescents value early childbearing but at a later age than blacks, and are more likely to marry at earlier ages than blacks or whites. Hispanic and white adolescents who become pregnant are more likely to marry than black teens. White and Asian teens generally value later childbearing. White adolescents who become pregnant may see childbearing as a way of dealing with psychological problems because they are more likely than other teens to have a family history of psychiatric illness, to have lost a parent through death, or to be a runaway.

Sources: Abrahamse, A. F., Morrison, P. A. & Waite, L. J. (1988). Teenagers willing to consider single parenthood: who is at greatest risk? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 20, 13-18.

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"From what I've seen, the majority of girls with babies in our school are Blacks and Hispanics, but not all."

—Mary, age 15

"White parents didn't seem to be as concerned about their kids having sex or getting pregnant."

—Arianna, age 13

"More black girls get pregnant than white girls."

—Chanmae, age 15

"Race just isn't an issue."

—Mary Jane, age 15

Mrs. Roewe's journalism students were asked to interview fellow students at A. I. duPont High School. Following are some excerpts from several of those reports.



Taresa

Interviewer: Taresa LaRock

"Having children is such a large responsibility I don't think as a teenager that I am equipped with the skills I need to handle this responsibility."

These are the words of a very intelligent teen, one who has her head on straight. Sbeiquita age 15 and a sophomore has very strong views on teen pregnancy.

"I watched [my close friend] go through pregnancy at age 14. It was really hard to look at your best friend and know you'll never get to just hang out anymore, or just go out somewhere and not have to worry about anything, because now [she] has a baby to take care of, and that's like a full time job." Way to go Sbeiquita!

Interviewer: Daniel Simmons

At the vanguard of issues concerning teens is sex. As one teen said, "Sex is like the great unknown for teens and we are fascinated by it."

Interviewer: Greg Nusz

Imagine having the immerse burden of another life, resting upon your shoulds at the tender age of 16. Your social life is over. Your education is basically over. Your life has come to a screeching halt. Why did this happen? Because you really thought you "loved" someone else.

Ann feels that most girls who get pregnant do so by accident, but there are a few exceptions. "Some girls feel their child will be someone who will love them unconditionally."



Daniel

Interviewer: Karen Kuebler

Many teenagers in today's society are becoming sexually active at a very young age. Pregnancy among teens has become an increasing problem.

Mary, a sophomore at A.I. duPont High School, gave some of her views on pregnancy facing teens. "I think most teens choose to have sex because of curiosity or carelessness. Unfortunately, many teens end up getting pregnant and then find our that they aren't mature or responsible enough to raise and care for a child. From what I've seen, the majority of girls with babies in our school are Blacks and Hispanics, but not all."



Karen

Parental Support Key

Parental support and the quality of interaction are related to sexual activity. Lack of parental support was related to depression and alcohol use for both genders. Depression was more strongly related to sexual activity for females, and alcohol use was more strongly related to sexual activity for males. Conversely, close family relations have a beneficial influence on sexual behavior. Quality family interaction measured directly through observation and indirectly through peer and teacher ratings predicted virgin status of males 4 years later.

Sources: Feldman, S. & Brown, N. (1993). Family influences on adolescent male sexuality: The mediational role of self-restraint. *Social Development*, 2(1), 15-35.

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"Children and parents have bad communications. If they talked about it more, maybe it would work out and you could talk to your parents about it. They just don't listen."

— Shenna, age 17

"The more parents say, 'no', the more you want to do it. But if they don't talk to you about it at all, you still might do it."

— Channea, age 15

The thought of discussing sex with parents is horrifying to most teens, but why? We can speak freely of it with our peers, and not our parents? Channea felt that this was due to lack of communication between parent and child. The feeling of the group was that parents don't listen, thus giving their kids the impression that they don't care.



Stacey

Interviewer: Stacey Ostrowski

Mary Jane is an average 15 year-old high school student who loves to act and sing. She plans on going to college to get a doctorate in psychology. Mary Jane eventually wants to have kids, but after she's married. "I don't want to have to go the Dean's office with a kid on my lap. That wouldn't make a good impression."

Mary Jane feels that about 50% of teen girls ages 13-17 are sexually active, and those who get pregnant, is by accident because they didn't use birth control. But all children born to unmarried girls aren't necessarily teens. "Adults are dumb sometimes, too."

She doesn't believe that teens of any one race become more pregnant than the other. "Race just isn't an issue."

Interviewer: Ben Mendelsohn

In a world of sex, drugs, and ignorance, Richard sees clearly through the blinding midst of sexual propaganda.

"There's no advantage to it. It's a stupid mistake that will ruin your life," Richard replied to a question about the advantages to teen pregnancy.

"I've had all the sex-ed classes. I know the technical stuff, but those classes cannot provide a moral structure upon which choices can be made."

"I don't think teenage moms get pregnant to get on welfare. It's a twenty-four hour a day job and with welfare that comes to about \$1 an hour."

Interviewer: Aaron Carroll

Sue feels that teens have sex "just because" and get pregnant because they don't use protection. Sue recommends that teens go to Planned Parenthood for information because it's in the city and most teen parents are Black and Hispanic and most of them live in the city. Parents should be more strict and give children better home teaching and teach them respect.



Aaron

Interviewer: Adam Matthews

"I think most teens just have sex for pleasure," says Sophomore X. "I don't think love generally plays a big part. It's all just raging hormones."

When asked to specifically name some of the dangers [of teen sex], Sophomore X ran down an entire litany of horrible diseases and possible consequences. AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and herpes were some of the diseases he mentioned. Plus there is the big one, pregnancy.



School-Based Clinics

School-based clinics can play a vital role in healthy adolescent development by providing comprehensive care, including reproductive health services which reduce the risk of pregnancy, the transmission of HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Both males and females can be reached. Follow-up with students is facilitated, although those who attend sporadically or drop-out may be lost. The primary and preventive health care provided in these clinics may be the only source of health care for teenagers in families and neighborhoods with few resources (especially in working poor families with no health insurance). Clinics which serve only enrolled students encourage school attendance. Clinics can focus services on the greatest needs in a community (e.g., substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, STDs).

Like sex education, school-based health clinics should be available to students in elementary and junior high schools. Younger African-American males were more frequent users of the birth control clinic than older black males. Reproductive health services in junior high school clinics are age-appropriate because 9% of 12 year olds and 16% of 13 year olds reported that they have been sexually active.

Sources: Alan Guttmacher Institute (1994). *Sex and America's Teenagers*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.

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"When someone comes home after school, they might not have anything to do but call up a boy. The school should provide kids with something to do."

— Chanmae, age 15

"Tell the kids what could happen if they chose to have sex."

— Melissa, age 17

"They should start to tell you early—when you're eight, nine, ten years old,"

— Sarah, age 17.

"Even just handing out information would help."

— Sanga Leah, age 15

Interviewer: Djenaba Parker



Djenaba

Everyone has an opinion on teen pregnancy, but what kind of answers would you get when you ask a normal fifteen year old some serious questions on teen pregnancy? Many might think that the teen would be oblivious to some of these things going wrong in society, but they thought wrong.

Through the interview I found out that Jane didn't really stereotype a specific group as having more teen mothers. "You can't characterize any one race by saying that. I mean, everyone has the same hormones."

As far as the fathers of the children, Jane believes that there is usually a two year age difference, mostly favoring an older male. Although, she doesn't believe that these boys or men wish to be fathers.

As far as trying to lower the teen pregnancy rate, Jane believes it is all in the home and church. "We have to start promoting morals and teaching women to respect themselves by using birth control."

Interviewer: Keri Heuberger

The rising rate of teen pregnancy is definitely becoming a problem, thinks Sanga Leah, a sophomore. "One way to help decrease the problem would be to give our free birth control to all teens," she said.

Sanga stated that she has never really been given information on teen pregnancy and prevention of it. "Even just handing out information would help."

"Teens don't want kids, they just forget to be careful and want to be sexually satisfied."

Interviewer: Amy Hennessy

"Getting pregnant forces teenagers to make an important decision which will affect the baby's life forever. If someone is not responsible enough to take care of a child, then they are not responsible enough to have sex in the first place," states Sally.



Amy



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