

THE
NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN TO
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY



Bridging Two Worlds:



How Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs Can Better Serve Latino Youth

by Erika Johanna Vexler
and Katherine Suellentrop

January 2006



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Introduction

The United States has made great strides in reducing teen pregnancy and childbearing, but the success has been neither even nor uniform. Too many teens are still becoming parents, often with burdensome consequences for themselves, their children, and society. Nowhere is the problem more acute than in the Latino community. Despite having a rich culture and growing influence, Latinos still have high rates of teen pregnancy and birth. Although pregnancy and birth rates among Latina (that is, Latino women or girls) teens have declined over the last decade, it is still the case that **51% of Latinas get pregnant at least once before age 20**—compared to the national average of 35%—and Latina teens have had the highest birth rate among the major racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. since 1995.¹ Moreover, Latina teen birth rates have declined at a slower

pace compared to other groups and preliminary birth data from 2004 show that there was a **slight increase in the birth rate for Latina teens** from 82.3 in 2003 to 82.6 in 2004.² While this increase is small, it does suggest that declines seen in recent years may be leveling off. In fact, teen birth rates have actually increased significantly in a number of states—particularly in those states with growing numbers of newly arrived immigrants.

It is also true that Latinos have disproportionately high rates of poverty and school drop out. At present, almost half of Latino adults living in the United States do not have a high school diploma,³ and one-third of Latino children in the United States are living in poverty.⁴ Latino teens are more likely to drop out of high school than are white or African American youth—a fact that is undoubtedly related to

the high teen birth rates of Latinos.

Preventing teen pregnancy and parenthood is one of the most direct and effective ways to help turn around some of these troubling social indicators. Simply put, by continuing the progress made to date in preventing too-early pregnancy and parenthood, more Latino teens will have the opportunity to get an education, participate in the workforce, and build strong families. Of course, it is important to recognize that teen pregnancy is both a cause and consequence of poverty. That is, high rates of Latino teen pregnancy and childbearing reflect in part the existing disadvantage and limited opportunities for many in the Latino community. Still, having a baby during adolescence often makes matters worse. To help ensure a prosperous future for this generation and the next, pregnancy

prevention programs, adults, and others should continue to underscore that although family and children are a blessing, **starting a family too soon in America can keep young people poor and insufficiently educated.**

- ▶ Half of all single mothers on welfare were teenagers when they had their first child.⁵
- ▶ 2/3 of teen mothers never finish high school. This leaves them unprepared for the competitive job market and more likely to raise their children in poverty.⁶
- ▶ Children born to teen mothers are less likely to succeed in school, are at greater risk of poverty, and are more likely to have health problems and engage in problem behavior.⁷

With this publication—made possible with generous support from the Turner Foundation—the National Campaign hopes to provide additional information and ideas to various community programs working directly with Latino youth. Over the past several years, many teen pregnancy prevention programs have come to the National Campaign in search of advice on how they can better serve the increasing number of

Latino youth in their communities. In fact, the most common request now made to the National Campaign is for help in working with Latino communities. We applaud the enthusiasm and commitment programs have already shown toward reducing teen pregnancy, and we hope this publication helps further these efforts. In particular, this publication provides:

- ▶ relevant and up-to-date demographic data about the Latino community
- ▶ an overview of the few pregnancy prevention programs shown to be effective with Latino youth
- ▶ key insights from program leaders in the field
- ▶ the views of Latino teens themselves.

Of course, this publication is by no means a comprehensive report on “what works.” It does, however, highlight several important new insights about preventing teen pregnancy in the Latino community while making clear that there is still much we don’t know and still much work left to be done. For example, very few programs serving Latino teens have been rigorously evaluated, and not enough is known about effective interventions.

Key Ideas:

▶ **Latinos are a diverse group, with diverse needs.**

As with many large ethnic groups, the Latino community is extremely diverse in terms of cultural traditions, countries of origin, language proficiency, educational attainment, generational status, levels of acculturation, and socioeconomic status—and all of these factors bring with them a different set of challenges for programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy. Knowing whether a program serves third generation Mexican-Americans, newly immigrated monolingual migrant workers, or urban Puerto Rican communities is critical to program relevance and success.

▶ **This diversity extends to the family unit.**

Two-thirds of Latino teens are the children of immigrants, and as research suggests, youth tend to acculturate faster than their parents. These varying levels of acculturation often lead to widely different world views between parents and teens. Thoughtfully examining and addressing such differences needs to be a central part of any program.

▶ **Culture needs to be viewed as a source of strength.**

When developing tailored programs addressing the needs of different communities, it is crucial to do so with an open mind. What may appear as a cultural barrier to preventing teen pregnancy is often a source of strength. For example, teen pregnancy prevention programs should find ways to help reinforce such cultural values and reshape them to help fit into the bicultural world in which many Latino teens are living. Put another way, turn what some perceive as cultural barriers into cultural motivators.

▶ **Working with Latino teens means working with their families.**

Conversations with parents, teens, and leaders in the field make clear the important role that family plays in the Latino community. Research shows that while parents cannot determine

their children's decisions about sex, the quality of their relationships with their children can make a real difference. For example, teens whose parents are clear about the value of abstinence are more likely to delay having sex. Many Latino teens look to their parents for information about sex, love, and relationships, yet many Latino parents have told us that they don't know what to say or how to say it. Programs need to give parents the motivation and skills to begin having these important conversations, and practical tips to help them get started.

▶ **We need to pay closer attention to what Latino teens are telling us.**

While Latino teens share many of the same common goals and concerns of teens more generally, it is clear that there are differences as well. For example, more in-depth conversations with

Latino teens are needed to learn more about the special challenges of growing up in a bicultural world and how their experiences influences ideas and behavior related to teen pregnancy and family formation.

▶ **The case for preventing teen pregnancy needs to be made.**

Although many teens and many communities in America need some convincing—some explanation—about why avoiding pregnancy and parenthood in adolescence is wise, Latino teens may need extra discussion and explanation. In essence, the challenge is to support childbearing and family formation generally—strongly held values in Latino culture—while simultaneously explaining the social, economic, and health benefits to adults and children of postponing family formation until after the teen years. In other words, the issue is timing. ●





Part I: The Facts

Overview

Despite significant declines in recent years, the United States still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy among comparable nations. And while rates of teen pregnancy and birth remain high among all major ethnic groups, the problem of children having children is particularly prominent among Latinas. Each year over 800,000 teenagers aged 15-19 get pregnant. Over a quarter of these pregnancies occur to Latino teens even though Latino teens account for just over 14% of the female teen population.⁸ Moreover, while the teen pregnancy rate in the United States decreased 28.5% between 1990 and 2000 (the most recent data available), the Latina teen pregnancy rate only decreased 15%.⁹ In addition, Latina teens have had the highest birth rate among the major racial/ethnic groups in the United States since 1995.¹⁰

Demographic projections further underscore the need to focus on preventing teen pregnancy in the Latino community. The Latino community is growing in numbers and influence each day. At present, Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States. The rapid increase in the U.S. Latino population is especially pronounced among youth. In 2002, 37.4 million Latinos were living in the United States, 13.3% of the total population.¹¹ In 2004,

an estimated 1.6 million girls aged 15-19 were Latina.¹² Among Latinos, 34.4% were under the age of 18 in 2002 compared with only 22.8% of non-Hispanic Whites.¹³ In 2000, 14.4% of the youth population aged 10-19 in America was Latino and it is projected that by 2025, almost one-quarter of the youth population will be Latino (Figure 1).¹⁴ These data suggest that the high rates of teen pregnancy and birth in the Latino

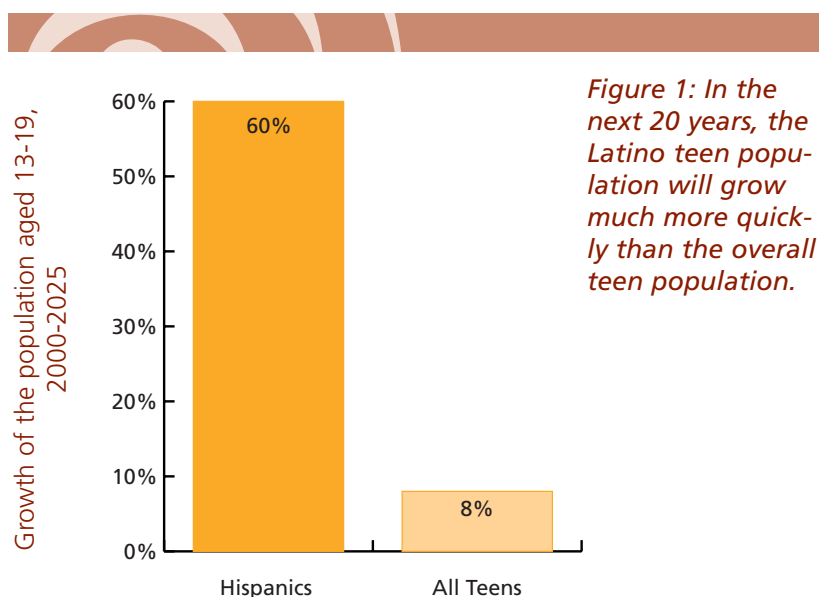


Figure 1: In the next 20 years, the Latino teen population will grow much more quickly than the overall teen population.

community merit immediate, focused attention by teen pregnancy prevention programs and others as well.

This section provides a snapshot of current facts and figures collected from the latest data available. We hope that it helps program leaders better understand some of the factors at play in the lives of Latino youth and aids them in developing effective programs that address the unique needs of this community.

Country of Origin and Generational Status

Two-thirds (66.9%) of the Latinos in the United States are of Mexican descent, 14.3% are Central American or South

American, 8.6% are Puerto Rican, 3.7% are Cuban and 6.5% are of other Latino origin (Figure 2).¹⁵ Among the foreign-born populationⁱ in the United States, over half are from Latin America (53.3%) of which 69% are from Central America, including Mexico.¹⁶ They emigrate from approximately 20 different countries, each with their own culture and motivation for coming to America. Both country of origin and immigration status play a role in the lives of Latinos in the United States. Research suggests that there are marked behavioral and cultural differences between foreign-born Latinos (first generation), Latinos born in the United States to immigrant parents (second generation), and Latinos born in the United States whose parents and/or grandparents were also born in America (third generation).

In 2000, 39.1% of Latinos were first generation, 28.5% were second generation and 32.4% were third generation.¹⁷ Among Latino youth in high school, more than one in five (24.3%) are first generation, approximately four in 10 (41.0%) are sec-

ond generation and more than a third (34.8%) are U.S.-born to U.S. parents.¹⁸ Immigration status also affects education attainment, language use, poverty status, family size and the degree of risky behavior, such as having sex without using contraception and tobacco and alcohol use.

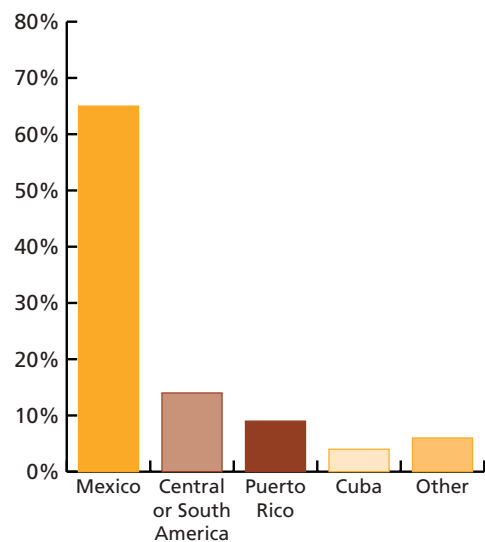
The historical circumstances and timing of their immigration to this country (e.g. Cubans in the 1950's and 1960's, as compared to Mexican migrant workers in the 1960's and 1970's) also plays a role in the experience of Latino immigrants. And similar to other immigrant experiences in U.S. history, where immigrants settle, the types of educational experiences and opportunities offered, social interactions, and the level of education they had when they left are all important factors to consider.

Education

Nearly six in ten Latinos in the United States 25 years and older have at least a high school education (57.0%) compared to almost eight in ten Blacks (78.7%), and nine in ten non-Hispanic Whites (88.7%).¹⁹ Among Latinos, Mexicans are the least likely to have a high school education



Figure 2: Place of Origin of Latinos Living in the United States, 2002



ⁱ Note that foreign born are those who were not U.S. citizens at birth and does not include Latinos born in Puerto Rico.

(50.6%) followed by Central and South Americans (64.7%), Puerto Ricans (66.8%) and Cubans (70.8%). Latinos of other origins are the most likely to have at least a high school education (74.0%).²⁰ **Almost 1 in 10 (8.8%) Latinos aged 15-24 drop out of grades 10-12 per year—higher than both non-Hispanic Blacks (6.3%) and non-Hispanic Whites (4.1%).**²¹

More than 4 in 10 (43.4%) first generation Latinos do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent compared to 15.4% of second generation Latinos and 14.4% of Latinos born in the United States to U.S.-born parents.²² According to data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, the proportion of 8th graders proficient in science increases with generational status, and reading proficiency is higher for second and third generation students compared to first generation students. However, proficiency in math decreases slightly from first generation students to third generation students. In addition, **although 70% of first generation Latino 8th graders expect to graduate from college, only 61% of second generation Latinos and 63% of third generation Latinos have the same expectations.**²³ In 2003, 10%

of the 16.6 million students enrolled in college were Latinos.²⁴ However, even those Latinos who make it to college are less likely to graduate than their non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White counterparts due to a variety of educational and economic pressures (e.g. many continue to support their families or lack the financial resources to stay enrolled).²⁵

Language

English speaking ability varies by generational status and, as one would expect, third generation households are much less likely to speak only Spanish than first generation households. A “linguistically isolated” household as measured by the U.S. Census Bureau is a household in which no one over the age of 13 speaks English “very well.” Among first generation Latino youth, 44% live in linguistically isolated households. This decreases to 31% for second generation Latino youth and only 9% of Latino children born in the U.S. to U.S. parents live in linguistically isolated households.²⁶ Language proficiency, measured as the language spoken in the home, is often used to determine the level of acculturation. Among first generation youth, 87% live in a household in which Spanish is the language spoken at home. This is

similar to the 80% of second generation youth who live in a household in which Spanish is spoken at home. However, for third generation and higher youth, only 40% live in a household in which Spanish is spoken at home.²⁷

Economic Status and Employment

In 2003, more than one in five (22%) Latinos were living below the poverty level compared to almost one quarter of Blacks (24%), and 8% of non-Hispanic Whites.²⁸ **In addition, although Latinos represent only 13.3% of the total population, they represent 24.3% of the population living in poverty. Almost a third of all children living in poverty are Latino (30.4%).**²⁹ Almost one in ten (8.1%) Latinos are unemployedⁱⁱⁱ compared to 5.1% of non-Hispanic Whites. Among Latinos, Puerto Ricans are the most likely to be unemployed (9.6%) followed by other Latinos (8.6%), Mexicans (8.4%), Central and South Americans (6.8%) and Cubans (6.1%).³⁰ In addition to higher rates of unemployment, Latinos have a different occupational distribution compared to non-Hispanic Whites, with more workers in service and laborer positions than in managerial or professional positions—differ-

iii Among population in the civilian labor force over the age of 16.

ences that undoubtedly reflect limited opportunities for education, training, and other barriers.³¹

In 2002, over half (53.8%) of non-Hispanic Whites who worked full-time earned \$35,000 or more compared to just over a quarter (26.3%) of Latinos who also worked full-time. Among Latinos who worked full-time, more than a third of Puerto Ricans (34.8%), Cubans (34.4%) and Latinos from other native origins (34.3%) earned \$35,000 or more compared to just 28% of Central and South Americans and less than a quarter of Mexicans (23.6%).³² In 2003, Hispanic households had a median income of \$33,000, higher than that of Black households (\$30,000), but lower than that of non-Hispanic White households (\$48,000).³³

In general, the mean income of Latino families increases with each generation. Data from 1988 indicate that for families with first generation Latino youth, the mean income in 1988 was \$22,400 compared to \$27,800 for families with second generation youth and \$29,000 for families with third generation youth.³⁴ Despite improvements with each generation, Latinos earn significantly less than non-Hispanic Whites.

Family

The proportion of Latino youth living in two-parent households has declined in recent decades.

Among Latinos ages 5-17 in 2001, two-thirds lived in two-parent households, as compared to three-quarters in the early 1970s. The proportion of Latino teens living in two-parent households was less than the proportion of non-Hispanic whites (76%), but more than that of non-Hispanic black youth (38%).³⁵

Latinos tend to have larger family household sizes than non-Hispanic Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites. In 2004, Latinos had an average of 3.34 people per household compared to 2.43 people per household for non-Hispanic Whites, and 2.62 people per household for non-Hispanic Blacks.³⁶

In 2002, among Latinos, three in 10 (30.8%) Mexican households had five or more people compared to 22.3% of Central and South American households, 19.6% of other Latino households, 16.8% Puerto Rican households and 10.6% of Cuban households.³⁷ In addition, approximately 10% of Latino youth in 1998 lived with four or more siblings in the household compared to 8% for non-Hispanic Blacks and 4% for non-Hispanic Whites.³⁸ Among

immigrant generations, 14% of first generation youth have five or more siblings compared to 9% of second generation youth and 8% of third generation youth.³⁹

Eighty percent of all teen mothers continue to live at home one year after giving birth. This may help to explain why younger siblings of teen parents are *two to six times* more likely to become pregnant as teens than younger siblings of teens who are not parents. Younger siblings of teen parents also are more likely to be sexually active during early adolescence than teens whose older siblings are not teen parents.⁴⁰ Given the high rate of teen pregnancy in the Latino community and their relatively large family household sizes, sibling pregnancy and parenthood may be an important factor shaping Latina teen sexual and reproductive behavior.⁴¹

Within Latino families, parents often have very different expectations for boys and girls. In terms of sexual activity, girls are more often encouraged to remain abstinent until marriage while sexual activity among boys is frequently viewed as a "rite of passage." Furthermore, motherhood is strongly valued even among teens and Latina girls might not be as encouraged as in other cultures to continue their edu-

cation or start a career.⁴² **More than one in ten (13%) Latino girls report ever being married, compared to 5% of non-Hispanic White teens and 8% of non-Hispanic Black teens.** Five percent of teenaged Latino boys report being married, which is higher than for teenaged boys in other racial/ethnic groups.⁴³

Risky behavior

The proportion of Latinos engaging in risky behavior—such as unprotected sex and alcohol and tobacco use—varies according to national origin and generational status. Among sexually experienced Mexican teens, the proportion of students using contraception at first sex increases with each generation, from 42% among first generation youth to 53% among second generation youth and 57% among third generation youth.⁴⁴ For Latinos from other national origins, the patterns are not as clear. Among Cubans, the proportion of teens using contraception the first time they had sex decreases from the first (62%) to the second generation (58%). For those from Central and South America, 57% of first generation youth used contraception the first time they had sex compared to 65% of the second generation. The proportion drops among third generation youth to 58%.

Among Puerto Ricans in 1995, the proportion of teens using contraception the first time they had sex increased from the second generation (58%) to the third (63%).⁴⁵

The proportion of Latino students who reported smoking regularly increased with each generation, regardless of national origin. In 1995, third generation youth from Puerto Rico were most likely to be regular smokers (30%) and first generation Cuban youth the least likely (5%). Among first generation youth from Mexico, Cuba, and Central and South America, less than 10% reported smoking regularly. For second generation youth, smoking ranged from 11% to 23%. For third generation Latino students, regular smoking ranged from 16% to 30%.⁴⁶ According to national data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), in 2003 18.4% of Latino students reported smoking compared to 24.9% of non-Hispanic White students and 15.1% of non-Hispanic Black students. The proportion of Latino students who smoke regularly has decreased since 1997 when 34.0% students reported smoking.⁴⁷

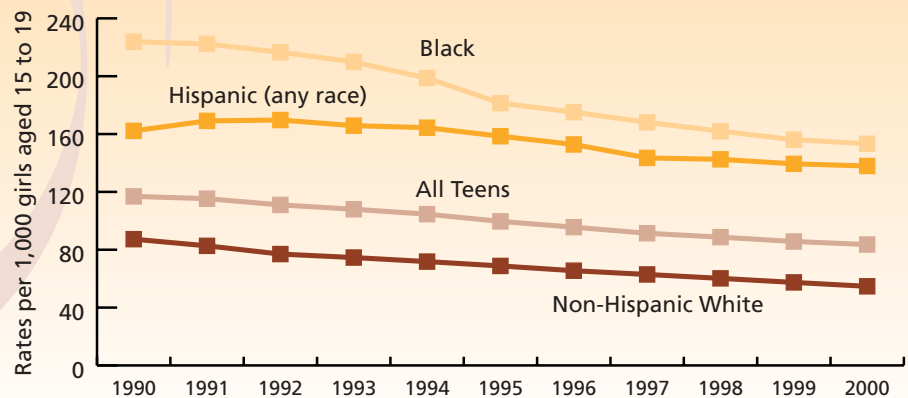
Like smoking, binge drinking increases with generational status and varies according to national origin.

In 1995, one in five (21%) third generation Mexican students reported getting drunk at least once a month compared to only 5% of first generation Mexican students and 15% of second generation Mexican students. Among Central and South American Latino students, 18% of third generation students reported getting drunk monthly while only 8% of first generation students and 11% of second generation student reported getting drunk monthly.⁴⁸ In 2003, the proportion of all Latinos who reported binge drinking (29%) was less than that of non-Hispanic whites (32%), but more than the proportion reported by non-Hispanic black students (15%). For all Latino high school students, 28% report binge drinking in the past 30 days—a decrease from 1995 when 37.7% of Latino students reported binge drinking in the 30 days.⁴⁹

Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing

In 2000, the Latina teen pregnancy rate was 137.9 per 1,000 teens aged 15-19, well above the national rate of 83.6 per 1,000. The Latina teen pregnancy rate is higher than that of non-Hispanic whites but below that of non-Hispanic blacks (Figure 3).⁵⁰ Latina teens had a total of just over 200,000 pregnancies in 2000. Between 1990 and 2000, the teen pregnancy rate

Figure 3: While the overall teen pregnancy rate decreased 28 percent between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic teen pregnancy rate only decreased 15 percent during the same time period.



for Latinas decreased 15.0%—much less than the 28.5% decrease in the overall U.S. teen pregnancy rate.⁵¹ At present, fully 51% of Latina teens become pregnant at least once before the age of 20 compared to 35% of U.S. teen girls generally.⁵²

Among the major racial/ethnic groups in the United States, Latina teens have had the highest teen birth rate since 1995 (Figure 4). In 2003, there were 128,524 births to Latina teens and the Latina teen birth rate for those aged 15-19 was 82.3

per 1,000—almost double the national rate of 41.6 per 1,000.⁵³ The Latina teen birth rate varies according to national origin. Among Latino subgroups, Mexican teen girls have the highest birth rate at 93.2 per 1,000 followed by Puerto Rican teen girls (60.8 per 1,000) and Latina teens of other origin (60.4 per 1,000, Figure 5).⁵⁴ The Latina teen birth rate is higher than the birth rate for African American teens, even though Latina teens have the lower pregnancy rate, because African-American teens are more likely

than Latina teens to have an abortion.⁵⁵

Overall, the teen birth rate for the United States has decreased 33% between 1991 and 2003; for Latina teens the birth rate has only decreased 21%.⁵⁶ **Declines in the teen birth rate also differ by Latino subgroup.** The teen birth rate among Latina teens has decreased the most among teens of Puerto Rican descent (45.0%) and has decreased the least among teens of Mexican descent (11.3%).⁵⁷

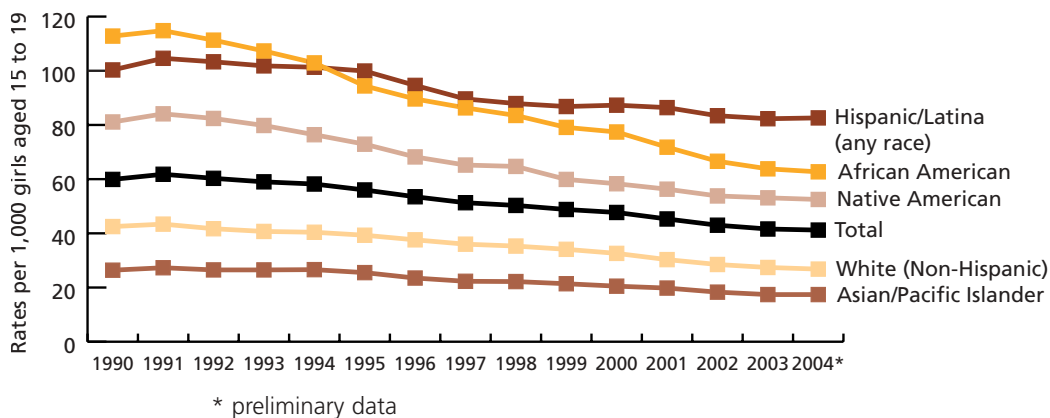
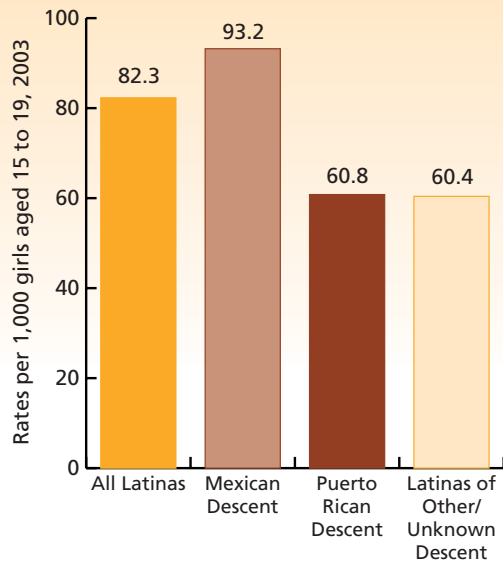


Figure 4: Since 1995, Latina teens have had the highest teen birth rate among the major racial/ethnic groups in the United States.

Figure 5: Teen birth rates vary among Latina subgroups.



Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing by State

The birth rate for Latina teens varies dramatically by state (Figure 6). Given the changes in immigration patterns in the last two decades, it is important to explore the rates of Latina teen births and teen pregnancy by state to better assess teen pregnancy in each state and target pregnancy prevention

activities. While there is limited information about the teen pregnancy rate for Latinos by state, Georgia, Arizona and Tennessee appear to have the highest teen pregnancy rates among Latinos (169, 164 and 155 per 1,000 respectively).⁵⁸ In 2002, 43 states had large enough Latino populations to calculate a birth rate for teens aged 15-19.⁵⁹ States with growing numbers of newly arrived immigrants, many of which are in the southeastern United States, have the highest Latina teen birth rates. For example, in 2002, North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama had the highest

Figure 6: Latina teen birth rates vary among the states.

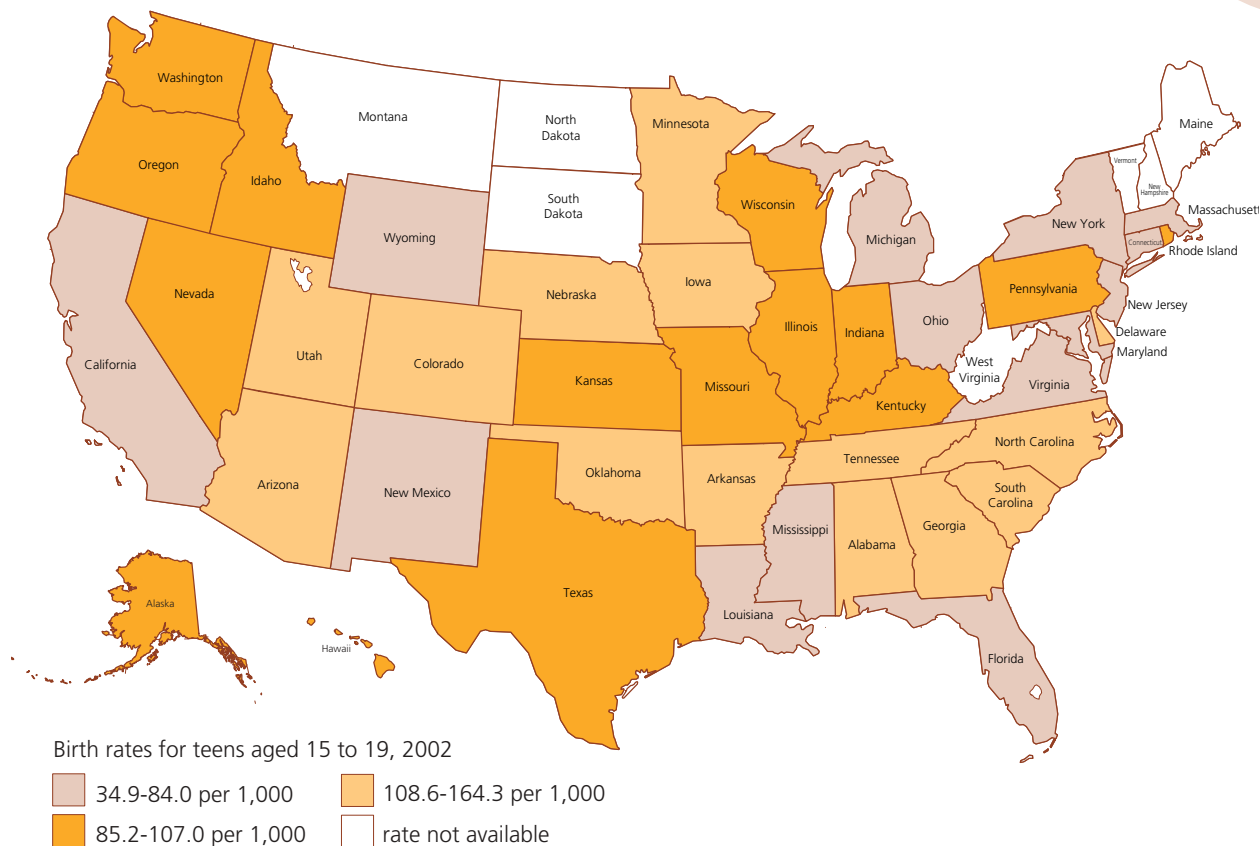


Figure 7: Between 1990 and 2002, Latina teen birth rates decreased in 20 states and increased in 17.

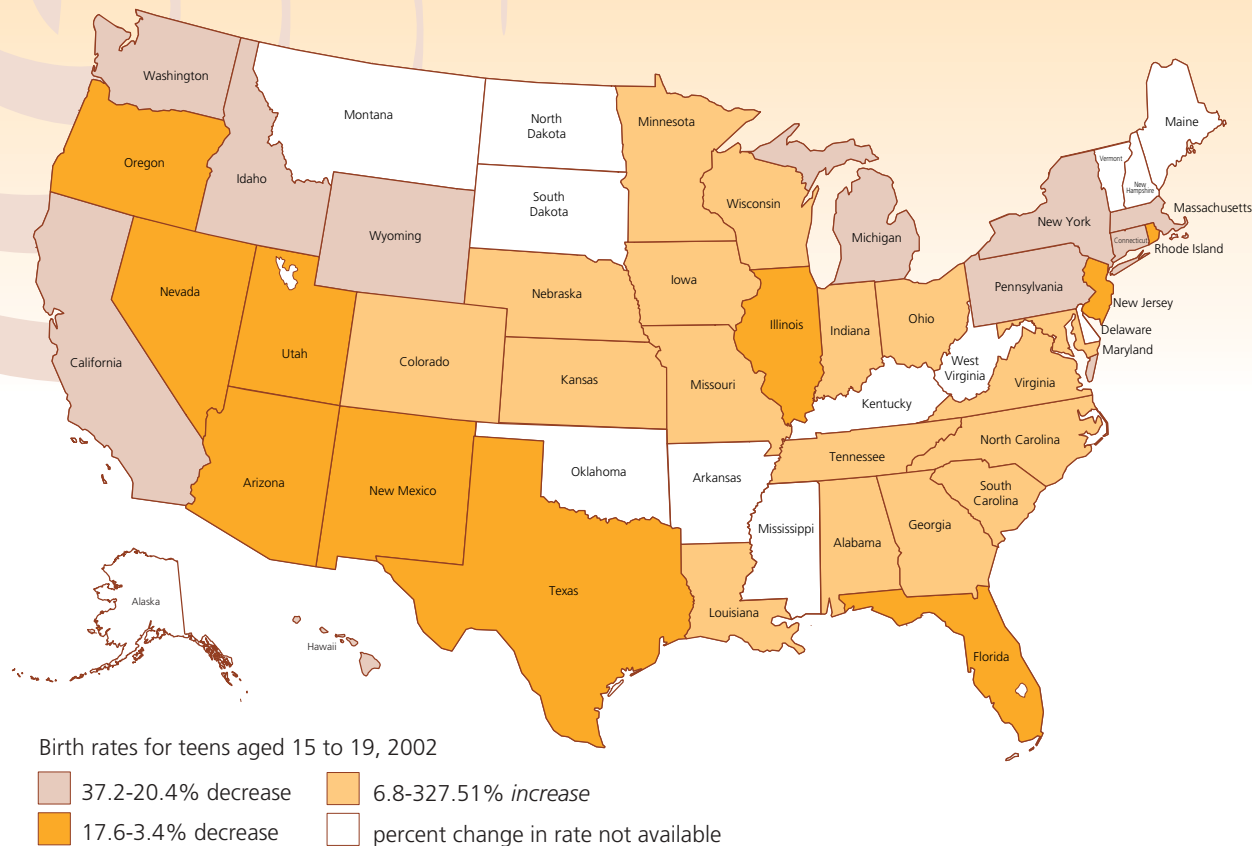
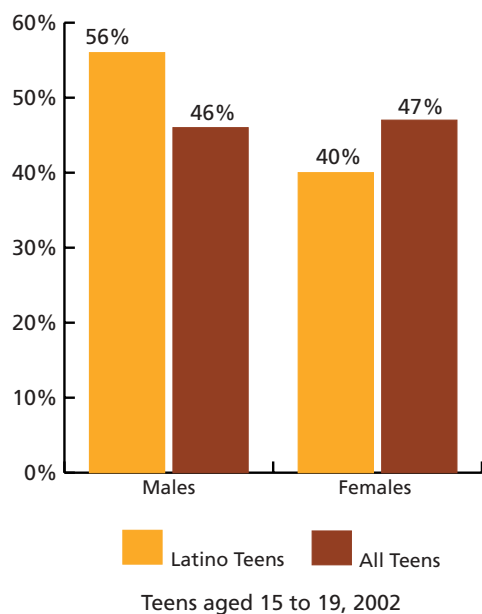


Figure 8: Latino teens who report ever having had sexual intercourse, 2002.

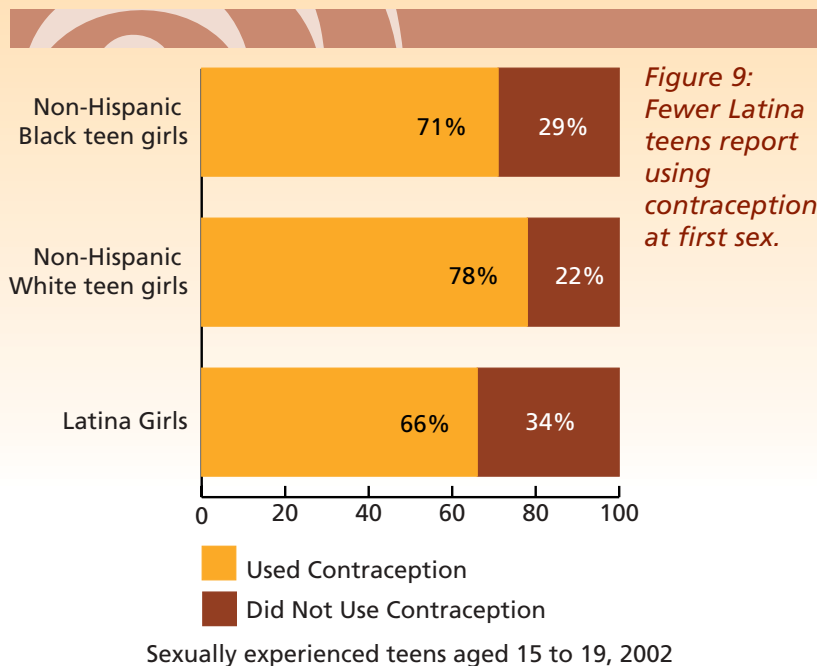


rates among Latino populations, ranging from 144 per 1,000 in Alabama to 164 per 1,000 in North Carolina, almost four times the teen birth rate for all teens in 2002 (34 per 1,000). New York, Florida and Louisiana had the lowest rate of Latina teen births (58.2, 56.1 and 34.9 respectively). In addition, between 1990 and 2002, Alabama had the largest percentage increase in the birth

rate among Latina teens followed by Tennessee and Missouri (Figure 7). California had the largest percentage decrease in the teen birth rate among Latinas (-37%).⁶⁰

Teen sexual activity⁶¹

The proportion of Latina teens who have had sexual intercourse is now slightly lower than that of the general teen population while the proportion of Latino boys who have had sexual intercourse is slightly higher (Figure 8). In 2002, 46.8% of all girls and 46.0% of all boys aged 15-19 reported



being sexually experienced while among Latinos, 40.4% of girls and 55.5% of boys reported being sexually experienced.

Latina teens are more likely than others to have older sexual partners.

Among sexually experienced teens aged 15-19, Latinas (35.2%) were more likely to report that their first male partner was four or more years older than were non-Hispanic Black (19.0%) and non-Hispanic White girls (19.6%). Latina teens were also more likely than were non-Hispanic White girls to be cohabitating, engaged or married to their partner at first intercourse (13.0% vs. 2.9% respectively). Among Latina teen mothers aged 15-17, about one in four had a partner who is at least five years older. While four or five year age differences

among teens and their partners may be a more accepted social norm in the Latino community, research makes clear that teens with romantic partners three or more years older are more likely to have sex, are less likely to use contraception, are more likely to report later that they didn't really want to have sex in the first place, have more lifetime sexual partners, and are at increased risk of getting pregnant as a teen.⁶²

Contraceptive Use⁶³

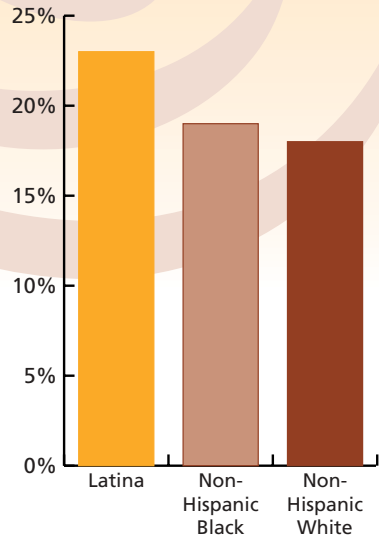
Latino teens are less likely than others to use contraception the first time they have sex (Figure 9). Two-thirds (66.2%) of sexually experienced Latina teens aged 15-19 used contraception the first time they had sex—less than both non-Hispanic Black (71.0%) and non-Hispanic

White girls (78.0%). Latina teens who did use contraception the first time they had sex were most likely to use a condom (55.5%) followed by the pill (8.6%) and withdrawal (8.2%). Sexually experienced Latino teen boys are also less likely than non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White teen boys to use contraception the first time they have sex (73.4%, 84.8% and 85.6% respectively).

Pregnancy Intention and Attitudes towards Pregnancy

Latina teen mothers are more likely than others to say their pregnancy was planned. Latina teen mothers aged 15-19 were more likely to say that their pregnancy was intended compared to non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White teen mothers (23.7% vs. 19.6% and 18.5% respectively) (Figure 10).⁶⁴ In addition, never-married Latina teens were almost twice as likely as the general never-married teen girl population to report that they would be either a little pleased or very pleased if they got pregnant (24.7% vs. 12.7%). Never-married Latino teen boys were also almost twice as likely as teen boys more generally to report that they would be either a little pleased or very pleased if they got a partner pregnant now (26.7% vs. 14.7%).⁶⁵

Figure 10: Proportion of teen mothers aged 15-19 who say that their pregnancy was intended, 2002



In Sum

While rates of teen pregnancy and births have declined among Latinas, both remain above the national average. In fact, Latinas currently have the highest teen birth rate among racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Teen pregnancy and childbearing are associated with adverse consequences for teen mothers and for their children. Often unprepared for the responsibilities and demands of childbearing, teen parents face many obstacles that are made more difficult by their often lower levels of education and lack of job skills. At the same

time, it is important to note that many of the negative consequences for teen mothers are due to the disadvantaged situations in which many of these girls already live. Currently, Latinos aged 25 and older are less likely to have a high school education than other racial/ethnic groups and more than one in five Latinos lives below the poverty level. In other words, it is not as if all teen mothers were doing well *before* giving birth and then sank into poverty as a result of having a child. Still, having a baby during adolescence can make matters worse and can make escaping poverty more difficult. ●



Part II: Evaluated Programs

The data in the previous section make clear that the reasons behind the high rates of teen pregnancy in the Latino community are often complex and overlapping. For example, the Latino community is extremely diverse in terms of cultural traditions, countries of origin, language proficiency, levels of acculturation, and socioeconomic status—factors that should all be considered when trying to prevent teen pregnancy. Consequently, the types of programs adults design to combat the problem should also vary. One strategy to help address the problem of teen pregnancy in the Latino community is to put in place programs that have been used successfully with other groups, thereby extending their reach into new communities so that more teens benefit. For those thinking of copying a successful program, modifying an existing one, or designing a new one to better serve Latino teens in

your community, it is important to carefully consider which programs have the best evidence of success among Latinos and build new efforts around the common elements of these proven programs.

Even though there is a growing number of programs designed to serve Latino youth, few have been rigorously evaluated. Consequently, little is known about the effectiveness of teen pregnancy prevention programs in the Latino community. In fact, research to date has only revealed two programs with particularly strong research designs and/or multiple studies consistently showing positive results for Latino youth: *Safer Choices* and the *Children's Aid Society-Carrera Program*. Details of the programs and the evaluation studies of them are highlighted below. It is also true, however, that there may well be many other programs for Latino

youth that are very effective in delaying sexual activity, improving contraceptive use, and/or reducing teen pregnancy, but absent top notch research about them, we don't know which are useful.

It is also important to note that other programs that *have been well-evaluated and shown to have positive results with other groups of teens may well have the same positive results with Latino teens but simply have not been tested in this population.* For example, in National Campaign publications *Emerging Answers* and *Progress Pending* (available at www.teenpregnancy.org), author Douglas Kirby identifies eight programs as having “strong evidence of success.” Two of the eight that have been specifically tested with Latino youth—*Safer Choices* and the *Children's Aid Society-Carrera Program*—are noted

here. Others have been shown through careful evaluation to delay sex, increase contraceptive use, or reduce pregnancy among low or mixed income communities, and/or among African-Americans, Whites, or mixed race/ethnicity participants. Reason suggests that these programs might also be effective with Latino youth and should be tried before starting from scratch.

Accurate, research-based information is critically important in helping communities choose which program to put in place to prevent teen pregnancy. However, it is also important to recognize that communities may choose to develop or operate particular prevention programs for other reasons, too, including, for example, compatibility with religious traditions, available resources, and com-

munity standards. Therefore, while the programs described here have been shown to be effective, they may not be right for your community. Clearly, the need to continue to explore, develop, and evaluate innovative and promising approaches to working with Latino youth is great. ●

Safer Choices: **A School-Based HIV Prevention Program**

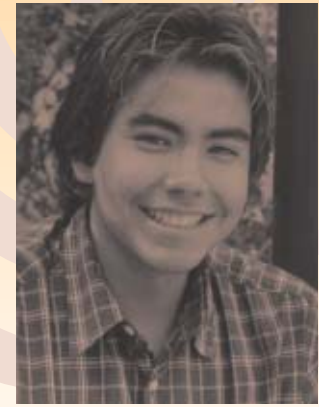
Safer Choices is a sex education program designed to encourage abstinence as the safest way to avoid pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and to encourage condom use among sexually experienced students. This school-based intervention program has been tested in urban and suburban high schools in San Jose, California and Houston, Texas. The program is designed to have classroom-level, school-level, family-level, and community-level components. Participants receive lessons and participate in skill-based and interactive activities within each of the five components of the program: a school health protection council, class curriculum, peer resources and school environment, parent education, and school-community linkages.

The research design used to evaluate *Safer Choices* was very strong with random assignment, large sample sizes, long-term measurement of behavior, and proper statistical analysis in two different locations. *Safer Choices* increased condom use and reduced unprotected sex among youth over a 31-month period. It had positive results across a variety of groups, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or sexual experience. However, it had a significantly greater effect on teen boys than teen girls on all four outcome measures related to condom use (use of condom at last sex, use of contraception at last sex, number of partners not protected by a condom, and frequency of sex without a condom). *Safer Choices* may have had a

greater impact on Latinos than any other ethnic group, especially with regard to delaying first intercourse. Finally, *Safer Choices* appeared to have a greater impact on measures of condom use among higher risk youth who had unprotected sex before the intervention than among those youth who initiated sex after the intervention.⁶⁶

Children's Aid Society-Carrera Program: **A comprehensive after-school program**

A very rigorous study of the comprehensive *Children's Aid Society-Carrera Program* has demonstrated that, among girls, it significantly delayed the onset of sex, increased the use of condoms and other effective methods of contraception, and reduced pregnancy and birth rates. The program did not reduce sexual risk-taking among boys. The *CAS Carrera Program*, which is long-term, intensive, and expensive, includes many components: (1) family life and sex education, (2) individual academic assessment, tutoring, help with homework, preparation for standardized exams, and assistance with college entrance, (3) work-related activities, including a job club, stipends, individual bank accounts, employment, and career awareness, (4) self-expression through the arts, (5) sports activities, and (6) comprehensive health care, including mental health and reproductive health services and contraception. This is the first and only study to date that includes random assignment, multiple sites, and a large sample size and that found a positive impact on sexual and contraceptive behavior, pregnancy, and births among girls for as long as three years.⁶⁷



Part III: Advice from the Field

In addition to considering well evaluated programs, practitioners should also learn from the experiences and wisdom of others. This is particularly important given the very limited number of teen pregnancy prevention interventions that have been rigorously evaluated (see Part II). Parents, community leaders, and those who run programs often have unpublished data and experiences that can enhance and enrich our understanding of and appreciation for what works in certain communities or with specific groups.

In order to identify and describe some of the less well known approaches being used by program leaders across the country, National Campaign staff interviewed leaders from 16 different organizations nationwide. These leaders were asked to share ideas, tips, and strategies for effectively working with Latino youth, their

families, and the community at-large in preventing teen pregnancy. The scope and nature of the agencies spanned community-based organizations that provide a variety of social and civic services (where teen pregnancy prevention is a small component of their work) to organizations that are dedicated exclusively to teen pregnancy. Several common-sense ideas for working with Latino youth and families surfaced from these interviews, 11 of which are highlighted below:

1) **A personal approach—*personalismo*—works best.**

“The keys to our success have been consistency and personal contact. It isn’t enough to just send an invitation by email or mail – we have to call them and go to where they are to make sure they come.”

– Alejandra González, Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Coalition of North Carolina

For many Latino parents and teens, conversations about sex and pregnancy take place only with very close circles of **trusted** family and friends—if at all. Therefore, many program leaders believe it is essential to focus on developing these interpersonal bonds before broaching sensitive topics like sexual behavior. Program leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance of making personal contact and providing individualized attention to those they hope to help. For many, this concept of *personalismo*—a Latino cultural value prescribing warmth, individual attention, and openness in human interactions—was instrumental in the success of their programs. Here are a few strategies they shared:

- ▶ **Make it a two-way street.** Just as when conversing with a trusted friend, intimate and personal conversations require a give and take. Make sure to share a

little about your own life experiences, so that people can begin to develop a better sense of who you are and why they should trust you. Remember, relationships are built slowly; be careful not to reveal too much too soon.

► **Get help spreading the word.**

The best way to foster trust is to begin with it. Word-of-mouth endorsements of your program by members of the community are an excellent way to get people through the door with an open and willing mind. For example, the Plain Talk program involved the community with the help of *promotoras*—parent volunteers who work within the community to build relationships through one-on-one conversations. Consider organizing your own volunteer groups of parents or teens to help spread the word throughout the community. Remember that it is important to coach the volunteers to help them recognize and manage their own feelings about teen sexuality and pregnancy.

► **Incorporate informal discussions—*charlas*—and offer one-on-one sessions.**

Sex may be considered a taboo topic for some in the Latino community, but that

doesn't mean sex isn't discussed or that conversations about sex are off limits. For many Latinos, sex just isn't a conversation that takes place easily in public. To make conversations about sex, love, and relationships come across more naturally, consider holding small and intimate discussion sessions where sex is discussed in the context of love and relationships, and scientific jargon is left out. In addition, offer private sessions where parents or teens can ask their questions one-on-one. Often times, having teens that have been trained to conduct the *charlas* with their peers can lessen the tension many feel talking about sex.

"In general, Latinos don't have good access to health information because our way of interacting with the health care system is different. In Latin America, we are accustomed to more personalized service—a conversation with our providers. It is different here, and that creates a barrier."

— Eliza Jaramillo, Casa de Maryland

2) **Culture is better viewed as a motivator than a barrier.**

"Sending positive cultural messages is very important because as a community we are growing so fast that we are losing the cultural traditions that are considered protective factors—factors that help a teen go

through life with a sense of values, traditions, and a strong base. It's important that we teach these values first because if we keep teaching classes about sex, without having the right values, we get nowhere."

— Ricardo Lopez, El Joven Noble Program, Los Angeles, CA

Programs often view the role of culture in teen pregnancy prevention as a barrier. However, many cultural values shared by Latinos—the importance of and connection to family, a strong religious tradition, faith in marriage as an institution, and the belief that childbearing should be restricted to marriage—are values that can help teens delay sexual activity, avoid teen pregnancy, and reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. Instead of challenging traditional cultural values that are fundamental sources of strength for many Latinos, teen pregnancy prevention programs should find ways to reinforce these values and reshape them to help fit into the bicultural world of Latino teens. Programs should, for example:

► **Recognize and embrace the importance of family.**

The deep cultural value placed on family and motherhood by many in the Latino community is often considered a barrier to teen pregnancy prevention programs, but when framed within a U.S. cultural con-

text, it can also be used as a source of motivation for delaying pregnancy. Conversations about the importance of family provide opportunities to talk about what it takes to be a parent here in the United States, and why having a child as a teen can compromise opportunities for stable relationships, healthy marriage, economic success, and a supportive home for children.

► **Turn faith communities into allies.**

More than half of Latinos (53%) say that religion provides a “great deal of guidance” in their daily lives. Research shows that religious faith and a strong moral sense play important roles in protecting young people from early sexual activity, teen pregnancy and other risky behavior (including drugs, violence and sexually transmitted diseases). Faith leaders, churches, and other religious organizations are in a unique and powerful position to make a difference in preventing teen pregnancy among Latinos, and program leaders should find ways to encourage their involvement and cooperation despite sometimes differing views.

► **Traditional gender roles can be beneficial.**

While it is often suggested that the traditional Latino

roles of men and women, such as *machismo*, have a detrimental effect and can even contribute to teen pregnancy in Latino communities, there are characteristics within these roles that may support a positive shift in behavior and attitudes. For example, for Latino men, the attributes of being “a man of your word” and being protective of your family (especially mother and sisters) can be translated into extending this care, responsibility, and protectiveness to their partner or girlfriend.

3) **Acculturation affects behavior.**

“One of the challenges in working with Latinos is helping them adapt to life in the United States. They are anxious to be part of American culture, but they don’t understand the culture fully. They don’t know how to access services and information, and they aren’t ready to confront this new lifestyle...”

– Margarita Solorzano,
Hispanic Women’s Association of
Arkansas, Springdale, AR

Two-thirds of Latino teens have immigrant parents.⁶⁸ This means the majority of programs serving Latino teens are faced with the unique set of challenges characterizing the immigrant experience—often including a clash between American and native cultures,

widening gaps in parent-teen connectedness, and a disruption in the traditional patterns of parental authority and child deference. These factors are further compounded by the language barriers many immigrant parents face when they try to approach teachers or health care professionals with their concerns.

In fact, most agency leaders interviewed identified the cultural disconnect that exists between parents and teens as a major challenge in developing successful programs. These gaps are not only language (i.e., many parents don’t speak English and their kids “filter” the information that the parents receive), but also social and cultural gaps within the family (e.g., most Latino kids live two lives: the well-behaved *niño* or *niña* role they play at home and the “wild kid” role they play on the streets or at school). Program leaders can help families work through the challenges that come from adapting to a new culture.

► **Offer workshops for parents on teen culture in the United States.**

Arming parents with information about the culture their kids are growing up in will help parents develop a greater sense of self confidence and help them manage in this country’s new and different environment.

Consider holding a series of parent workshops on topics such as teen popular culture, the U.S. educational system, or overall U.S. teen attitudes about sex, love and relationships. Remember, though, that some Latino parents (especially the newly immigrated) may believe that their stay in the United States is temporary and therefore see no need to adapt to U.S. culture. They may reject U.S. culture as being foreign to their own ways. The key is helping parents recognize that things are—for better or worse—different here and to help their children learn how to successfully navigate the best of both cultures.

► **Guide teens through the acculturation process with the help of real life role models.**

Ask community members, experienced parents, or older teens who understand first-hand the practical and emotional challenges of growing up in a bicultural world to speak with teens in your program. As real people who have overcome similar challenges, they not only serve as role models, but they can become trusted confidants. If teens and parents identify and connect with role models, they might be motivated to follow their lead.

► **Don't make the teen be the interpreter.**

In discussions with parents and their teens, use a bilingual moderator to help address language barriers whenever necessary. It isn't fair to the parent or the teen to make the teen be the interpreter. Bilingual moderators equalize the playing field and ensure that important points aren't getting filtered out by the teen. If you don't have bilingual staff on board, find a volunteer to help out. Again, remember that this needs to be someone who is trusted by both parent and teen.

4) **Work with parents, not against them.**

"We sometimes see mothers who think that it is okay for their 18 year-old daughter to become a parent. They tell us that if they could do it, so can their children. They justify it saying that when they were 18 they already had three kids, and they see it as culturally acceptable. The values pass from family to family, not because they were taught that, but because that was the example that was set...For parents, we offer special classes on communication that help them get along better with their teens and start conversations. We teach them how to talk about pregnancy, sex, and alcohol, and we teach them how to reinforce positive cultural traditions."

– Ricardo Lopez, El Joven Noble, Los Angeles, CA

When it comes to teens' decisions about sex, parents and other caring adults play a critically important role. Program leaders interviewed for this publication were unanimous in their view that involving parents is central to the success of any program. Many of them also cited parental involvement as a significant challenge for them. Below are some tips they provided for working with parents and extended family members who include uncles, aunts, *padrinos/madrinas*, or close family friends.

► **Involve parents in ways that work for them.**

Some parents may have difficulty participating in programs for various reasons, such as inconvenient meeting times or childcare problems. Programs need to consider strategies for accommodating parents so they can become involved. Think about scheduling after-hour meetings and weekend programs for parents who work extended hours or double shifts. Select a variety of settings and ask parents what would work best for them. Include childcare as necessary and offer food and incentives to those who come.

► **Help Latino parents break the pattern of silence when it comes to talking about sex.**

Teens today are growing up in a highly sexualized culture. In fact, almost one-half of Latino teens are sexually experienced, and research shows they are less likely to use protection than are teens from other racial and ethnic groups. Given all this—and given what research says about the important role parents play in teens’ decisions about sex—it’s especially important for Latino parents to discuss sex, love and relationships with their children even if their own parents never did so with them. On matters affecting sexual behavior, the gap between the generations can be profound. Latino parents told us that the practice of not communicating with teens about the subject of sex is an “old way” that worked in countries of origin. But when practiced in *this* culture, silence doesn’t protect teens from risky behavior. The need for open, candid communication in *this* environment is pressing. Provide parents with the tools and training to talk with their teens about sex, love, and relationships. Ask them if they would like assistance in speaking with their children, and try to help if invited.

- ▶ **Be respectful of differing parental values.**
Latino parents—like all par-

ents—want the best for their children. Program leaders need to be careful not to push parents away by criticizing their attitudes and behavior. When talking with parents it is important that you do so with great respect and cultural sensitivity. Acknowledge the important role they play in the lives of their children and the rich heritage they can offer them, and appeal to their own dreams for their children.

Some Latino parents, for example, may be very involved in the lives of their teens, but may choose not to participate in a particular program because it promotes values that the parents don’t share, such as delayed childbearing. It may be necessary for program leaders to work with parents separately to help them recognize why it is in the best interest of their children that they delay childbearing, even if they themselves did not. You may not always be successful in modifying parental attitudes, but opening the lines of communication with parents will help you better understand the needs of the teens in your program.

- ▶ **Talk with parents about the risks associated with dating relationships that**

involve big age differences.

The average age difference within Latino couples is often large, particularly between teen girls and their male partners.⁶⁹ Teen girls who date men that are even two or three years older are at greater risk for early sex and teen pregnancy than those dating someone their same age or just slightly older. Inform parents about this risk and encourage them to set rules that discourage romantic relationships with older boys and young men.

- 5) **Fathers and sons cannot be left out of the solution.**

“Fathers and sons need help clarifying their vision of what it is to be a man. I use the word “clarify” because often boys get one message from their parents, but what they see and live in everyday life reflects another message. When we talk to Latino men we have to talk about the responsibility they have as parents to be there for their children. We need to talk about what it means to be a man of your word, to be responsible. It is important that we change male attitudes – not by reprimanding them, but by showing them why their children need them, what it is to be a real man, and how to be a man in everyday life.”

– Refugio Rodriguez, Community Action Commission, Goleta, CA

When considering teen pregnancy and related issues it is critical that programs address male roles and responsibilities. Within Latino families, parents often have very different expectations for boys and girls. In terms of sexual activity, girls are often encouraged to remain abstinent until marriage while boys are offered a wink and nod about sexual activity.⁷⁰

Programs need to confront this double standard and remind boys and young men that having sex doesn't make men out of them despite what they may see or hear. Being a man means having the ability to fulfill the emotional, spiritual and financial needs of one's family.

Programs should also encourage fathers—not just mothers—to provide guidance and support and to convey these positive expectations to both their sons and daughters. Male involvement should be fully integrated into any program. Practitioners should work hard to create opportunities for boys to discuss their views of manhood, and structure their programs so that they respond to the needs of fathers, too.

6) Encourage young people to set goals and promote educational achievement.

“At first, parents thought that they were going to lose their children if they became educated, so they did not want them to go to college. Once the par-

ents in our program saw the first graduate, a lot of their fears went away. Now 100% of the parents want their kids to go to college. We changed the expectations the parents had for their children and that has contributed to our success.”

– RoseAnne Bilodeau,
Pathways/Senderos,
New Britain, CT

Research, anecdotal evidence, and common sense suggests if young people have goals for the future and a clear sense of how to achieve those goals, they are less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy or to choose to become a parent at an early age. Ask teens about what they want to accomplish and discuss how the choices they make today will affect their goals for education, career, and family. Research makes clear that staying in school and getting a good education helps young people avoid early pregnancy and parenthood. That is why it is important to note again that Latino youth are more likely to drop out of high school than either white or African American youth. In some cases, students drop out to help their parents financially, and in other instances, some parents feel unable to give their children the academic support they need because of language or educational limitations.

Collaborate with community agencies that work with elementary and middle schools, as

many academic problems begin long before high school. Given that mastering English is an important component of educational success, help ensure that there are ample opportunities to learn English in the Latino communities you serve. Expose students to Latino role models who have pursued educational opportunities so that students can see success for themselves. Encourage educational achievement by organizing tutoring, homework assistance, mentoring programs, and opportunities for community service. Most importantly, celebrate successes.

7) Teens need to be involved in all aspects of program planning: design, development, implementation, evaluation.

“It is important to provide opportunities for teens to work with other teens in the community. Teens can be very good promoters. When they like something, they start talking, and when they don't like something they start talking. That's why it is important to give them the opportunity to become formal volunteers. Not only does it work well, but it helps with recruitment.”

– Marta Flores, Plain Talk/Hablando Claro, San Diego, CA

One of the best ways to get young people involved in teen pregnancy prevention programs and to keep them

engaged is to involve them in all aspects of your program and to help them build meaningful relationships with adults. For example:

- ▶ **Take teen involvement seriously.** Respect the teens you involve and hire staff who are eager and willing to work with them. Incorporate teen voices into decision-making and take teens' opinions seriously.
- ▶ **Adjust to their reality.** Keep in mind that several teens in your program may have work or family child-care obligations after school. Make sure to structure your program around these obligations.
- ▶ **Let teens be your ambassadors to Latino youth culture.** Use their input when developing messages, designing marketing campaigns, and writing any printed materials for teens.
- ▶ **Provide teens with appropriate training and information and make them feel responsible for projects.** Encourage teens to become the leaders and decision-makers of tomorrow. Focus on providing young people with skills that will help them succeed as adults.
- ▶ **Offer incentives, awards, and recognition for the work that teens do for your organization.**

Everything from a pizza dinner to a simple pat on the back can work wonders.

8) **Programs should hire and train staff who understand Latino culture and the unique challenges facing Latino youth.**

"If we tell a guy we'll meet him at 2 o'clock at a pancake house, we are there. If we tell a guy we are going to be in court to testify for him, we don't have the luxury to say no, I don't feel like it. It is extremely critical for us to honor our word and model everything we are trying to teach. They have to know that they can depend on us, and that we'll do what it takes to see them succeed."

– Carl Dellinger, New Mexico Young Fathers Project, Albuquerque, NM

"All of the staff that participates in the program is bilingual, and the reason for that is because while the teens may be bilingual, the parents often times are not. It is important to us that when working with teens we can talk to their parents in the language they speak."

– Refugio Rodriguez, Community Action Commission, Goleta, CA

Recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff is important for any teen pregnancy prevention program, but for programs serving Latino youth and their families, proper staffing is even more critical. In

addition to being personally committed to preventing teen pregnancy, staff should be keenly aware of the environment in which Latino adolescents are living. They should be able to connect with Latino teens—not as a teacher, a parent, or a peer, but as a trustworthy adult who understands their unique needs and can help them gain access to community resources. Staff should be able to relate to and communicate with families in Spanish and English with great sensitivity and cultural understanding. They should be quality role models for teenagers. And, above all else, they should be passionate about doing what it takes to see teens succeed.

9) **Programs alone cannot solve the problem.**

"One of the keys to our success has been getting people from the community involved—as employees or volunteers—and giving them a sense of ownership. We build leaders and community advocates by getting people involved and giving community members a forum to continue learning."

– Marta Flores, Plain Talk/Hablando Claro, San Diego, CA

Effective programs involve the community at-large. There is a role for *all* community members—police, the clergy, teachers, parents, shop owners and others in the business sec-

tor, and more. Members of the community can be actively involved in specific program activities. They should also be involved in more general ways, including raising community awareness of your program's process and progress through information bulletins, articles in local newspapers, church newsletters, and other periodicals. The idea is to keep the community informed and aware of teen pregnancy as an issue that affects everyone. Community members also can play an important role in sharing information on new educational and employment opportunities, can serve as role models and mentors, and can help to generate the types of economic development necessary to make fundamental improvements in the lives of Latino teens.

10) Pregnancy prevention is only one piece of the puzzle.

"It is important that we talk about pregnancy in relation to other problems. We need to provide teens with information and skills that will help them not only prevent pregnancy, but also the other problems they confront."

– Maria Gomez, Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Health, Washington, DC

The neighborhoods your program serves may be beset by numerous problems including poverty, violence, drug abuse, and gang activity, all part of a lack of hope or vision for a positive future among youth, as well as a pervasive lack of good educational and social services and job opportunities. In fact, in some tough neighborhoods, pregnancy and childbearing may seem to be one of the rare bright lights in sight. Therefore, the services that community-based programs offer need to go beyond the mechanics of teen pregnancy prevention and strive to provide youth with the motivation, skills, and opportunities they need to help them avoid becoming parents too soon. Carefully evaluate the needs of your community and look for ways to fill gaps in services including health care, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. Take advantage of other efforts already underway in your community to address some of the broader issues that Latinos are facing. Become involved in and support activities such as employment and economic

development fairs as opportunities not only to help prevent teen pregnancy but to also demonstrate your solidarity with and commitment to solving other community challenges.

11) Success isn't built overnight.

"Programs come and go, but as community leaders we must always demonstrate that we are here to stay because the problem belongs to us and we also own the solution."

– Soraya Galeas, Planned Parenthood of the Metropolitan Washington DC Area, Washington, DC

Consistency and continuity lead to credibility and trust. Problem-plagued communities are accustomed to seeing programs come and go and, for that reason, they often are reluctant to embrace new initiatives. In order to gain the trust and participation of the community, teen pregnancy prevention programs should pledge from the outset that they are committed to becoming integrated, permanent members of the community. ●



Part IV: Teen Voices

“Pregnant girls are cute and they get a lot of attention.”

“We don’t get attention for the things we do right.”

“I live in two worlds.”

“Parents are easy to fool”

“Our parents need to make time for us”

“They just don’t get it.”

“People need to believe in us.”

“My parents have no idea what I do when I leave the house... and they don’t care.”

“Our parents need to talk to us.”

When it comes to preventing teen pregnancy, few voices are as powerful or authentic as those of teens themselves. And, as noted in the previous section, any effort to reduce teen pregnancy can clearly benefit from carefully listening to what teens have to say. To help develop this publication, Latino teens involved in pregnancy prevention programs across the country were asked to share their thoughts about why or if they think teen pregnancy is a problem in their community,

and what they think program leaders and caring adults should do about it.

Not surprisingly, many of the responses from Latino teens mirror those of teens generally—they talked about the struggles they have with their parents, their challenges in making sense of their lives and fitting in with friends, and the difficulty of making smart decisions about sex and love in the face of peer pressure and negative influences from other sources. As a general matter,

the hopes, aspirations, and concerns of Latino teens interviewed for this paper echoed findings from general teen focus groups and polling surveys conducted previously by the National Campaign. At the same time, however, many Latino teens described struggles unique to growing up in two, often-competing cultures.

Below are some of the teens’ thoughts. While these voices and ideas provide valuable texture to understanding lives of Latino teens, they are

merely snapshots and only provide provocative ideas and clues about what today's Latino teens are thinking.

1. **“We want to talk to our parents, but they just don't understand.”**

Many of the Latino teens we spoke with saw their parents as embarrassingly out of touch with the real world. Some teens referred to their parents as “uneducated,” “ignorant,” and “clueless.” Interestingly, the same teens who referred to their parents as ignorant also told us that they want help from their parents. However, while they respected their parents for the hard work they do and for their sacrifices, they didn't think their parents were capable of guiding them. This made them feel alone and overwhelmed. As one teen put it, “If I can't ask my parents for help with my school work because they can't read the instructions, how am I going to get help applying to college?” Many teens said this gulf between them and their parents makes it hard for them to talk with their parents, and it leaves teens all alone when they need guidance the most.

2. **“We need to talk with adults who aren't scared to hear the truth and who understand what**

our life is really like.”

Program leaders should, of course, always encourage open conversation among parents and teens, but sometimes they may be called upon to be the ones to listen and help when parents do not. Teens—especially those growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods or newly immigrated families—are grappling with a host of new and competing influences, including pressure to do drugs, join gangs, or begin having sex too soon. Unlike parents who “don't understand that there are a lot of bad decisions out there to make,” “are so worried that we are doing something bad that they don't even want to talk with us,” and “are too busy blaming our friends, the media, and U.S. culture,” Latino teens often look to their program leaders to be the kind of person who “gets it” and can help them make smart decisions. Program leaders can help teens find direction and “give them a sense of roots” as they begin to create their own set of bicultural values.

3. **“No matter what we may say about our parents, we still love them.”**

Teens may like to complain about their parents, but most of them really want to

spend more time with them. They said it themselves: “I just wish they were around to spend time with me.” “They don't give me enough attention.” “Our family is just so scattered now. I miss hanging out.” At the same time, many teens recognize the often-heroic lengths to which their parents will go to support the family—work multiple jobs, etc. Given the huge influence parents have on their teens and the important role family plays in the Latino community, it's important that program leaders not criticize parents or undermine them. Reaffirm the respect and honor teens have for their parents and remind parents of the important role they play in their teens' lives. Most parents will be shocked—and happy—to hear that their kids actually want to spend time with them.

4. **“Let me be me.”**

Several teens we spoke with mentioned playing different roles but never being allowed to be themselves. At times they said they “play the parent” role, acting as a translator in formal settings; at other times they are the well-behaved, “innocent” niño or niña helping take care of their cousins; and when parents aren't watching, they are rebelling and

experimenting with new and competing identities. What they really seemed to want and need from their program leaders is an opportunity to learn how to be themselves—free from the pressures of peers, teachers, and families.

5. **“If it happens, it happens. Lots of people we know have kids.”**

Teen pregnancy is normal and accepted in many Latino communities. Several of the Latino teens we spoke with didn't see preventing teen pregnancy as important to their future. Comments like “my parents will help out like they did with my sister,” or “my friend has a baby and she is a good mom,” revealed a general acceptance of teen pregnancy among the teens we spoke with. In fact, early pregnancy and parenthood were sometimes even seen as an equally good life choice as going to college. It is also worth noting that some Latino parents share this casual attitude toward early pregnancy (see, for example, the National Campaign publication, *It All Starts at Home*). Families and communities need to reinforce the idea that while motherhood and children are a gift, early pregnancy and parenting strongly compromise future opportunities. It's not

enough to tell teens to wait. They need to hear why and how, they need to see role models in their community, and they need to be celebrated when they make good choices. The key idea is to support childbearing but urge that it occur after adequate education.

6. **“If you don't want us to have babies, why do you shower us with attention only when there is a baby involved?”**

Pay attention to teens before they become teen parents. Baby showers and celebrations are great, but if you don't celebrate teens for such achievements as academic success or gaining job skills, you may be sending a confusing message. “My parents never cared about what I did until I had a baby. At school I even got special treatment when I had a kid—different classes, extra help, and daycare.” All teens need encouragement, attention, and support. Reward teens for doing the right thing—even when it seems like no big thing. If young people don't get encouragement at home or at school, they need to hear it from other caring adults.

7. **“Telling us not to have sex is not enough. We need to know why and how sex changes things and we need to know**

more about how to protect ourselves.”

Latino teens, like all teens, need someone to talk to them honestly about love, sex, and relationships. Just because they're young doesn't mean that they can't fall in love or be deeply interested in sex. Help them handle their feelings in a safe way and understand that values that should govern sex, as well as the health risks that may be present. As one boy shared, “They shouldn't just talk about getting girls pregnant or STDs. They should talk about what we mostly don't know. How it can hurt feelings, cause emotional and social problems, interfere with school-work. That's what worked with me.” Don't assume anything about what teens know and don't know. Be sure to reinforce your messages frequently—and in a variety of ways—as it is unreasonable to assume that a one-time “dose” will stick or the same message works for all teens. And don't forget to reach out to those teens who may have already left school or who may be in the work force. Although they may seem knowledgeable, many teens are confused and have questions. Start communicating early and start from the beginning.

8. **“We’re not all just another statistic. Help us reach our goals.”**

Don’t close doors on teens or assume they are a pregnancy waiting to happen. Teens are sensitive and intuitive, and tend to pick up on this attitude and resent it. “When my school counselor suggests shop instead of biology, I know what she is trying to tell me. Maybe she’s right, but all I’m saying is give us a chance to prove you wrong. Just because my sister had a baby, doesn’t mean I will.”

9. **“Contraception is more the guy’s responsibility.”**

Interestingly, although many girls we interviewed recognized that using protection was important to preventing pregnancy and STDs, most girls admitted to leaving decisions about contraception up to the guy. When asked why they might have sex without protection, they told us “Latino guys are

macho...they think they are invincible and don’t need a condom,” “My boyfriend didn’t want to,” or “I didn’t feel comfortable asking for it.” They expressed a sense of feeling powerless and “in the moment.” Others said they didn’t carry contraception because that would mean “you planned it.” Some said access to contraception was hard and they didn’t buy condoms because “someone will see me.” Few girls expressed a sense of control over their decision to use protection, although some did admit to “giving up too easily” or “just getting carried away in the moment.” Boys, on the other hand, were much more willing to accept responsibility for their decision to use or not use protection. Programs serving Latino youth should carefully consider these findings when discussing the responsibilities of sexual activity and contraceptive use.

10. **“Be a friend, be honest, and set a good example.”**

Teens know what hypocrisy looks like, and they don’t like it. Above all else, show teens that you care, that you mean what you say, and that they can rely on you as a trustworthy friend.

If we are to make progress on the teen pregnancy challenge, we must learn to listen to what Latino teens themselves are telling us. They may not have all of the answers to the tough problem of preventing teen pregnancy in their communities, but we need to understand their views in order to connect with them—and their parents—and help them safely navigate the difficult decisions of adolescence. We encourage you to conduct your own focus groups (formal or informal) to find out what teens in your own communities think about these issues. ●



Conclusion

There has been important progress in reducing teen pregnancy and birth rates among Latino teens. However, there is still much work to do. Program leaders, parents, national organizations, elected officials, and community leaders all have important roles to play in helping parents and young people deal with the challenging issues of love, sex,

and relationships. The good news is that there is already much useful information available from various surveys and studies, focus groups, interviews, and the like. Practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and organizations at the national, state and local levels can all become familiar with this information, disseminate it further, and act on its

implications. At the same time, gaps in information clearly exist; in particular, we need to know more about what community-level programs are most effective with Latino youth. The National Campaign looks forward to continuing to learn from and support the work of practitioners on the front line through new research, materials, and assistance. ●





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Other Materials of Interest from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

Available at www.teenpregnancy.org

Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy
(available in English and Spanish)



Consejos a los padres para prevenir el embarazo en la adolescencia (Tips for parents to help their children avoid teen pregnancy)



Faith, Hope, and Love: How Latino Faith Communities Can Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy
(available in English and Spanish)

It All Starts At Home: Hispanic Parents Speak Out on Teen Pregnancy



Two Spanish language postcards:



Si nos cerramos, esto puede abrirse.
(If we close [shut] down, this could open up.)

Tu silencio puede cambiar la vida de una quinceañera. (Your silence can change your teenager's life.)



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