

Research Brief



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When Sex and Dating are the Same:

LATINOS' ATTITUDES ON TEEN PARENTHOOD AND CONTRACEPTION

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OVERVIEW

Hispanics have the highest teen birth rate in the United States, and that has been the case since the late 1990s. In fact, despite recent declines in teenage childbearing among all groups, estimates suggest that 28 percent of Hispanic women will have a baby by the time they celebrate their twentieth birthday, compared with 11 percent of white women and 24 percent of black women.¹ This brief is one in a series that will explore issues related to Latino teen pregnancy and childbearing and consider promising approaches for teen pregnancy prevention programs for this population. This brief reports on what we learned through recent focus groups and interviews with Latino teens and parents about their values, ideals, and attitudes about teen parenthood, teen dating and sex, and the use of birth control by teens. It discusses the potential implications of these values, ideals, and attitudes for teen pregnancy prevention programs.

KEY FINDINGS

- Teens and parents saw dating and sex as inextricably linked (in that dating would inevitably lead to sex). So, many parents looked at dating through a negative lens.
- Parents generally agreed that adolescents should use contraception if they were sexually active. Yet many were hesitant to acknowledge that their own teen might be having sex or to suggest that they use birth control, because they did not want to appear to be condoning or encouraging their teen to engage in sex.
- Most teens and parents held positive attitudes about birth control, in particular condoms and to a lesser extent the Pill, which they saw as important tools in preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
- A minority of teens and parents looked askance at birth control and were particularly distrustful of potential harmful side effects from hormonal methods.
- Parents reported clearly and forcefully that they wanted their children to avoid teen pregnancy, and teens agreed. Parents and teens recognized that pregnancy can limit teens' abilities to reach their goals in life, particularly educational goals.
- The disconnect between these goals, positive attitudes about birth control, and the high rates of teen pregnancy among Hispanics suggests the need to align teens' sexual and contraceptive behaviors with their goals and those of their families.

About the Study

The focus groups and interviews on which this brief is based took place between September 2012 and March 2013 in a mid-Atlantic metropolitan area. The focus groups' discussions and the interviews were conducted by researchers who had particular expertise in using these approaches to gather information and who were matched to the study participants by ethnicity and gender when possible. Child Trends received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for all research procedures.

Altogether, we held six focus groups with 44 Latino adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17. The teen sample was roughly evenly split between males and females and across the three ages (15, 16, and 17). About 70 percent of the teens we spoke with were born in the United States, and almost all had parents who were not. These focus groups were all conducted in English.

To gain insights into parental attitudes, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with parents of Latino adolescents in the three age groups, with most of the interviews carried out in Spanish. Of the participants, five were fathers and 14 were mothers, and most reported a family income of less than \$24,000 a year and were born outside of the U.S. We recruited the parents and adolescents for the study separately and generally did not include parents and adolescents from the same family in our research sample.

After each interview or focus group, we drafted a summary and transcribed the audio recording, if available, translating from Spanish to English when necessary.

We drew on results from these same focus groups and interviews to develop a second brief, titled *Let's (Not) Talk About Sex: Communication and Teen Pregnancy Prevention within Hispanic Families*, that looks at how Latino parents and teens communicate about sex, birth control, and teen pregnancy.

BACKGROUND

Hispanics represent the largest racial/ethnic minority group and one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population. In this sense, what affects Hispanics affects the nation's future well-being. Thus, the relatively high rate of teen pregnancy among Hispanics is a cause for concern.

This concern is grounded in the evidence of teen childbearing's negative outcomes for young parents and their children. For the young mothers, teen childbearing is linked to negative outcomes related to educational attainment, employment, financial well-being, mental health, and intimate partner and sexual violence.^{2,3} The children of these young mothers are also at risk for worse health, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes than are the children of older parents.^{4,5} Young men also experience negative outcomes associated with teen childbearing. Teen fathers tend to have lower levels of education than their peers who do not become fathers.^{6,7} For example, research finds that only half of fathers who have a child before the age of 18 finish high school or complete a GED.⁷ And men who had a child in the teen years are more likely than men who delayed parenthood to have lower earnings.^{6,7}

Not surprisingly, the two most direct behaviors that put teens at risk of a pregnancy are engaging in sexual activity and not using contraception. Female adolescents, regardless of their race or ethnicity, are similarly likely to report that they have ever had sex.⁸ In other words, there is no statistically significant difference across racial and ethnic groups in the percentage of female adolescents who report they have ever had sex. Yet when it comes to contraceptive use, research tells a different story: one of racial and ethnic disparities. In particular, young Hispanic women are less likely than are their white counterparts to report that they used a method of birth control either the first time they had sex or the most recent time they did. Hispanic teens are also the least likely to report consistent condom use.⁸

Research finds that Latino teens' attitudes and norms shape their sexual behaviors.⁹ Latino adolescents with more traditional attitudes about sexuality are less likely to have had sex than Latino adolescents who hold less traditional attitudes, and adolescents who would feel proud of themselves for not having sexual intercourse are less likely to have sex.^{9,10} Other

research has linked parental attitudes and expectations toward sex, childbearing, and use of contraception to Latino adolescents' behavior.^{9,11,12} Latino adolescents who perceive their parents to be permissive toward their engagement in sexual activity are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than other adolescents, whereas parents' clear disapproval of sexual intercourse is associated with reduced rates of pregnancy¹³ and with fewer sexual partners.¹⁴

A WINDOW INTO STUDY PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES

Though the stories of the Latino adolescents and parents we spoke with differed, participants had common experiences that are important to consider in understanding their perspectives:

- The most prominent of these experiences was being an immigrant or having parents who were immigrants. For many, this reality resulted in a tug-of-war between appreciating the greater freedom that many perceived the United States afforded them and wanting to stay connected to and respectful of the values and beliefs of their home countries.
- Employment experiences also provided critical context around family relationships and expectations. Both adolescents and parents spoke about Latino parents working long hours, often in multiple jobs, to make ends meet. At times, this meant that parents and adolescents saw little of one another.
- The Latino parents interviewed were intensely focused on a better life for the next generation. The Latino teens we spoke with also wanted a better life for themselves, and they were aware of and spoke about the sacrifices their parents were making to provide them with opportunities.

THEMES FROM OUR FINDINGS

I DON'T WANT TO BE A TEEN PARENT OR FOR MY CHILD TO BE ONE

The adolescents and parents we spoke with were unanimous in reporting wanting to avoid a teen pregnancy or for their child to avoid a teen pregnancy. Both teens and parents saw teen pregnancy and early parenthood as obstacles to achieving life goals. As one father of a teen boy and girl put it: "I tell them they don't want to become a parent before their time or they are going to be sidetracked from what they want to do in life."

For teens, education and reaching their goals in life were key reasons to delay parenthood. As one female adolescent stated: "I don't think you can be really financially good like at this young age [to have a child], you have to put school first because nowadays a high school diploma is really not enough for a good job." Many of the teens we spoke with also discussed their parents' sacrifices as motivating factors for avoiding a teen pregnancy. One male adolescent reported a sentiment shared by several teens: "Some Latino parents bring their children here [to the United States] to have a better life and if they come and do that stuff [teen pregnancy/childbearing]... it screws it all up for them."

The overwhelming majority of parents also discussed completing education as an important goal they would like their adolescents to achieve before becoming parents. And, some expressed a desire (also echoed among some teens) to stop the cycle of children having children. As one parent of a female teen put it: "A lot of high school girls have to drop out because of pregnancy or taking care of a baby. I think about a better future for Latinos. It's a baby having a baby, it's not easy." Although both parents and teens viewed teen pregnancy as a circumstance that would limit teens' chances of completing educational and other life

goals, parents were much more pessimistic about teens' ability to overcome the obstacle of a teen birth. One mother of a male teen reported: "They [teens] are ruining their future; their plans for the future are gone, because they got that girl pregnant."

Parents and teens also agreed that adolescents simply were not ready to be parents, given all the responsibilities that parenthood entails. As one male teen put it: "I look at [becoming a father] as like, if I'm not financially well, how am I gonna take care of that child if I don't have a job and I'm only this age? Like certainly everybody here will have a kid eventually, in the future. But not now!"

Given these concerns, most teens and parents identified the mid- to late-twenties as the ideal age range in which to become a parent.

SINCE DATING LEADS TO SEX, DON'T DATE

In general, both teens and parents reported that sex is often associated with teen romantic relationships, and that dating relationships without sex are rare.

In fact, male and female teens agreed that romantic relationships among those their age quickly turned into sexual relationships, in part because male romantic partners expected sexual intercourse and their girlfriends felt that they needed to meet those expectations. One female teen described this link between sex and dating: "If you [are] with your boyfriend ... you think you're forever, you're probably going to give it up to him [have sex with him] if he asks, if he pressures you." Male adolescents in the focus group discussions corroborated what the females reported, noting that males associate sex with, and expect sex in, a romantic relationship. One male adolescent noted: "If you want to make your man happy, how else are you gonna make him happy? Sex is the number one [way] ... in a relationship."

Many parents also believed that teen romantic relationships necessarily involved sex. The vast majority of the parents we spoke with did not think that teens should date, and many held traditional attitudes around sex and dating, summed up by the mother of a male teen:

"If someone is dating, they are going to have sex. If you start dating you will start touching, if you touch their hand and kiss them then you will feel things and want to have sex with that person. And that's not good because that's not going to be your wife. ...In my mind you are only with one person your whole life.... Having sex with different people gives you diseases. There are women who have two or three boyfriends; I don't know how they do it."

Regardless of whether parents held more traditional or more "liberal" attitudes about teen sex and dating, most, if not all, believed that dating distracts teens from pursuing their educational and other life goals. As one mother of a male teen said: "I told him 'focus on school and getting a job, not a girlfriend. She will affect your school work; she will distract you from your school work.'" The belief that dating is a distraction also seemed to reinforce parents' preference for teens to delay dating as long as possible.

IF YOU DO HAVE SEX, USE PROTECTION

When we asked Latino adolescents and parents what they thought about using contraception, we found that the majority looked favorably on at least one type of contraceptive methods with which they were familiar. (Most of our discussions about contraceptive methods were focused largely on the Pill and condoms—the two methods with which adolescents and parents appeared to be most familiar.)

A minority of participants in our study, however, did express negative views about teens using birth control—for a number of reasons. Some parents said they were concerned about what they saw as the harmful side effects of hormonal methods. For example, one mother of

a female adolescent stated: “I don’t really trust any [hormonal] methods. ...They affect your health.” Some adolescents reported that they did not use hormonal methods because these methods required a prescription, and therefore could lead to parents’ or others’ learning that they were having sex. As one female teen noted: “[To get] birth control [the Pill] you got to go a doctor and then your parents can find out and you don’t want that.” Some parents and adolescents said that they believed hormonal contraception should be restricted to those in long-term relationships who want to avoid a pregnancy, and not for those in “less-committed” relationships. In this context, one male adolescent explained that if you were a female who used the Pill but were not in a long-term relationship, “you’re probably considered like a ho.” A few adolescents also held negative attitudes about condoms either because they considered them to be unreliable or because they felt they were not “pleasant” to use, and diminished sensation.

Still, most of the participants in our study held positive attitudes around using contraception, particularly condoms. For example, adolescents indicated that they were aware that condom use can reduce the chances of pregnancy and acquiring STDs. One male adolescent who spoke openly about the fact that he was not prepared to be a father stated: “I always say ‘wear a condom, because it will save your life.’” Other adolescents noted the benefits of using hormonal methods and condoms together as a more certain way to avoid pregnancy, while also protecting against STDs. As one female adolescent stated: “just stick with condoms.... If you are using condoms and you are using the Pill you can be assured you won’t get pregnant.”

Parents also tended to share positive attitudes about certain methods of contraception. Many parents explained that they trusted condoms as a means for adolescents to protect against STDs and HIV, in addition to protecting against pregnancy. As one mother explained, she told her teen son he “has to” use condoms with his girlfriend because he could “...have a lot of consequences if he doesn’t use a condom. The girl will get pregnant, he could get STDs, a lot of things could happen that he is not ready for in the end. And it’s not just him; [the consequences] will affect a lot of people.”

At the same time, parents often voiced conflicting feelings about the idea of teens using birth control—especially their teens. They disapproved of their adolescents obtaining contraception without parental permission, and they often struggled with balancing their desire to protect their children against pregnancy and STDs with their desire for their teens to delay having sex. In the end, many appeared to resign themselves to what they perceived to be an eventual reality. For example, one mother of a teen daughter noted while she preferred that schools “never” give out birth control, she thought 17 would be an appropriate age to obtain it if “[teens] are going to have sex [anyway].” Another mother of a male adolescent, who believed in postponing sexual intercourse until marriage, explained, “I said [to my son] ‘It’s OK that you use birth control and take care of yourself, but I don’t want you to have sex.’”

BACK HOME, ATTITUDES ARE DIFFERENT

Implicit in some of our discussions with many Latino parents and teens was a tension between holding on to what they saw as the traditional values in their country of origin and the values, whether real or perceived, that their children were exposed to in the United States. (Study participants who had lived in the United States for a longer period of time were less likely to be troubled by this tension.)

This tug between different cultural norms seemed especially apparent in the way some parents regarded teen dating and romantic relationships. As one mother of a teen female explained: “In my country it’s very different. You have to get permission [to date], and a 15-year-old cannot have a boyfriend, maybe at 18. But here [in the United States]... at 13 or

14, here they have a boyfriend and are having sex.” Teens echoed this sentiment, with one female adolescent stating: “Usually Hispanic parents come from other countries and they be like ‘you can’t get a boyfriend until you’re 20 or until you’re in college.’” Yet, as noted above, some teens expressed a desire to honor and respect the values and ideals their parents held and conveyed to them.

PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

GOOD STARTING POINTS

The attitudes and values of Latino parents and teens around adolescent dating, sex, and birth control may have important implications for teen childbearing outcomes. Decisions about whether or not to have sex or to use contraception have a direct bearing on whether a teen has or fathers a child. Our focus group and interview findings offer good starting points to engage Latino teens and parents in discussions about the need for teens to make responsible decisions about these questions. Here, we highlight two of these starting points:

- Both adolescents and parents want Latino teens to avoid teen pregnancy. This fact may act as a catalyst for practitioners in teen pregnancy prevention programs to begin conversations with Latino families and engage them in efforts to address the teen pregnancy problem.
- Adolescents and parents generally have positive attitudes about condom use; these attitudes can be leveraged to launch discussions about safe sex, the full spectrum of birth control options, misconceptions and fears about different contraceptive methods, and the false perception that teens who use birth control are sexually promiscuous.

Our findings also suggest a need for teen pregnancy prevention programs to focus on describing a range of healthy adolescent romantic relationships as a way to counter the beliefs of many parents and teens that adolescent romantic relationships necessarily have to involve sex.

Finally, our findings can serve to encourage teen pregnancy prevention programs to build on the strengths of Latino culture, especially in light of evidence showing that respect for the traditional values played out in Latino families’ countries of origins may act to protect some teens from engaging in risky sexual behavior. Thus, building on the strengths of Latino culture is important not only as a starting point for discussions between Latino parents and children about making responsible decisions about dating, sex, parenthood, and contraception, but also because this approach represents a positive, sensitive way to help lower the still-high teen pregnancy rate among Hispanics in the United States.

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