

# Research Brief

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## Let's (Not) Talk About Sex:

COMMUNICATION AND  
TEEN PREGNANCY  
PREVENTION WITHIN  
HISPANIC FAMILIES

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### OVERVIEW

Despite dramatic declines in the U.S. teen pregnancy rate in recent years, the rate for Hispanics<sup>1</sup> continues to be among the highest.<sup>1</sup> In fact, recent estimates suggest that approximately half of Hispanic females experience at least one pregnancy—and one-third become a parent—before the age of 20.<sup>2</sup> This brief is one in a series developed by Child Trends to explore issues related to Latino teen pregnancy and childbearing and to consider promising approaches for teen pregnancy prevention programs for this population. It reports on what we learned through recent focus groups and interviews about the messages Latino parents are conveying to teens when it comes to teen dating, sex, contraception, and teen parenthood; what messages teens are hearing; what teens say about how their communication with their parent shapes their behaviors; and what factors seem to hinder or help parent-teen communication around these sensitive topics.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Most Latino parents and teens did not talk about sex, dating, and teen parenthood often or extensively, yet parents believed they were sending clear messages to their teens about the values and behaviors they expected them to uphold.
- Conversations about these topics were often halting, uncomfortable, and not detailed or informative. Parents and teens wanted to improve in this area.
- Certain messages resonated with adolescents (“Wait to have children”), while they deemed others ineffective (“Don’t have sex until you’re married”).
- Adolescents often felt their parents were giving mixed messages. Teens reported hearing (and parents reported sharing) “don’t have sex” and “if you have sex, use protection.”
- Barriers to productive discussions include: parents’ unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of their child having sex; differing cultural norms; teens’ beliefs that parents were not well-informed; and parents’ perceptions that talks could wait until teens were older or that teens were already getting the information they needed from school.
- Factors that facilitate productive discussions include: having a pattern of regular, trusted communication about everyday occurrences; using real-life examples to spark conversations; and wanting to have an open, trusting parent-child relationship.

i The terms “Latinos” and “Hispanics” are both widely used. Data collected by federal agencies uses the term “Hispanic,” while many other researchers use the term “Latino.” In this brief we use “Hispanic” when referencing data from federal databases, and “Latino” in other instances.

#### 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. Both the focus group 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. These focus groups were all conducted in English.

To explore parental perspectives, 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 United States. 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 also drew on results from the focus groups and interviews to develop another brief, titled *When Sex and Dating are the Same: Latinos' Attitudes on Teen Parenthood and Contraception*, that examines the attitudes of Latino parents and teens on issues related to teen pregnancy.

#### BACKGROUND

Teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States have declined in recent years, and are currently at historic lows.<sup>1,3</sup> These trends also hold true for Hispanic adolescents. Indeed, birth rates declined more for Hispanic teens since 1997 than for other subgroups.<sup>1</sup> Still, the preliminary 2012 birth rate for Hispanic females between the ages of 15 and 19 was more than twice that for non-Hispanic white females in this age group.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while Hispanic female teens begin having sex at the same age as other subgroups, they are less likely than white teens to report having used any kind of birth control method either the first time or the last time they had sex.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Hispanic males are less likely to report any contraceptive use the last time they had sex.<sup>5</sup>

When and how regularly parents talk with their teens and the messages that parents convey to their teens matter.<sup>6</sup> In fact, teens report that parents have the greatest influence over their decisions about sex.<sup>7</sup> Nearly nine out of 10 teens say they believe that open and honest conversations with parents about sex help teens avoid a teen pregnancy,<sup>7</sup> and research supports such views.<sup>6</sup> Yet Latino families may face culturally-based challenges when it comes to openly discussing these topics.<sup>8-10</sup>

#### FINDINGS

In general, parents who participated in our study believed they were sending clear messages to their teens that teen parenthood was to be avoided—and teens heard that message. What was communicated less clearly was how to achieve this goal.<sup>11</sup>

**“I’ll talk about it...if I have to.”** Parents and adolescents alike said that it was challenging to speak with each other about topics such as dating, sex, birth control, pregnancy, and even teens’ changing bodies. Both reported that such conversations could be “awkward”—so much so that conversations often did not get very far, or go into much detail. One adolescent female explained:

“When I try to talk... with my mom about, like, girls’ things, she’s gonna be like ‘I don’t want to talk about that.’ ...When I... turned 12 and I started on my period, my mom was like ‘Ahh, don’t talk to me about that!’” An adolescent male observed: “Your parents ask you [about sex] and you tell them like half the story.” And parents who tried to broach the subjects of dating and sex with their teens sometimes found themselves stonewalled. As the mother of an adolescent son told one interviewer: “Sometimes on the TV stuff comes up and I [ask] him if he has any girlfriends or anything. He is very closed, he doesn’t say anything to me.” This mother then added: “How do I start a conversation with him [so that] he feels comfortable talking to me about [it] ? I just don’t want to do it upfront, like [ask] ‘Are you having sex?’”

Many parents and adolescents recognized that even though it might make them uncomfortable to talk about such subjects, they should not shy away from doing so. As one adolescent female put it: “I just feel awkward [talking to my parents ], but if I ever had to have that conversation I would go to them first because I feel like if I had to have that conversation they would support me.” Likewise, a mother of a teen son summed up the sentiments of many parents when she explained: “I would be lying if I said I felt comfortable [talking to him about sex], but I have to do it.”

#### Key Messages: What parents are saying, and what teens are hearing

Even though most teens and parents did not spend a lot of time talking directly about dating, sex, and parenthood, parents were conveying—and teens were hearing—some key messages.

**“Wait to become a parent.”** Nearly all parents we spoke with reported telling their adolescents to wait to become a parent until they were “prepared”; in other words, until they had finished high school or college, or were emotionally mature and financially established enough to parent a child. The importance of this message was underscored by parents’ concerns that adolescents may not fully understand the impact of early entry into parenthood on their chances for later life success. As one mother of a male adolescent put it: “[I tell my son] that he shouldn’t get his girlfriend pregnant, that he doesn’t want a kid. It will take all of his time. It would be a shame for him to have a kid now, he needs to be prepared before he has a kid.”

Teens heard this message loud and clear, and they generally agreed with it. They spoke at length about what pregnancy during the teen years could mean for their life chances, and sometimes echoed the words or perspectives of parents. For example, one female teen remarked: “[Parents] never want us to have sex. ...Or if anything, they want you to finish ... high school and go to college and then you can do whatever. ... If you get pregnant at this age you’re basically kind of blowing your future away.” Similarly, male teens in the focus groups described teen pregnancy as “messed up,” “a burden,” or an event that can “ruin your life.”

In some cases, parents’ messages about postponing parenthood reflected their own experiences. For example, one teen female observed: “I think that some parents, they were young parents... they would be like ‘Oh, don’t follow [in] my footsteps.’” Indeed, the mother of two teen males shared how she told her sons: “I suffered by having you so young. So I don’t want you to have kids so young, I want you to study.” Similarly, a mother spoke of the advice she gave her adolescent son: “I told him I wanted him to work harder but not the way we had to work so hard [when we came to the United States]. Look at my hands—I have calluses. I don’t want him to have hands like [mine] from working hard in this country.”

**“Don’t have sex (until you’re married).”** Many teens (particularly females) shared stories of parents who simply told them “Don’t have sex” or “Wait until you’re married.” These messages could be strong and frequent. As one adolescent female said: “My mom she tells me every day: ‘You better not be with no dude. ... I didn’t raise you that way. ... You better not be showing everybody your vagina.’” However, teens noted a downside to such parental admonitions. One teen female explained: “If

[parents] just come up and say ‘Don’t be having sex and all that stuff,’ then it’s like they’re accusing you of something and that’s not good.” As a result, teens felt such messages made it hard for them to be open with their parents about dating, sex, and contraception, whether they were sexually active or not.

**“If you do have sex, use protection.”** Along with “don’t have sex,” teens also reported hearing the message to “use protection.” In addition to hearing this advice from parents, many reported hearing it from schools, friends, and other adults. Most teens reported that condoms were readily available in their schools, and through clinics and community programs. Although some teens did report that their parent(s) had helped them obtain birth control, most indicated that explicit discussion with parents about birth control were rare.

Parents, meanwhile, shared conflicted feelings around speaking frankly with their teens about contraception. Some parents who wanted to send their teens the message to delay sex explained that they would still want their teens to take precautions if sex happened. As one mother of a male teen recounted: “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.’” Likewise, another mother of a female teen acknowledged that it was good that schools discussed topics such as sex and birth control because “some parents don’t talk to their kids.” At the same time, she worried that schools were making it easier for adolescents to have sex.

**“Be prepared to face the consequences (on your own).”** Both teens and parents gave examples of parents sending the message that teens would have to face the consequences “on their own” if a teen became pregnant or fathered a child. As one mother reported telling her teen daughter: “You have to think really hard because I will not be with you .... I am not that type of grandma, I will not be with you if you get pregnant.” Likewise, a mother of a teen male recalled a similar conversation with her son about what would happen if he got a girl pregnant: “I can’t help you; it’s your responsibility.” For some teens, one unintended consequence of such messages was that they hesitated to speak openly with their parents about dating, sex, and birth control.

**“Expectations (and dangers) are different for boys and girls.”** Teens reported hearing (and parents reported sharing) gender-specific messages about sex. For example, male and female teens spoke about hearing the refrain that girls need to protect their honor—i.e., remain chaste and avoid even the appearance of impropriety. This expectation was captured in the words of one female teen who described a conversation she had had with her mother: “The girl has to have more pride than the boy because ... [she says] I would be stuck with the child if I get pregnant but not the boy. The boy can leave any time.” Teen males often confronted a different type of expectation: that they be sexually confident and experienced, or at least act as if they were. One adolescent male recalled his father saying “you da man” upon learning the teen was sexually active. And teen boys in one focus group spoke of how they—as Latino males—faced the stereotype of the “Latin lover.”

#### **Barriers and Facilitators to Communication: “We’ll talk about it...if we have to”**

Even though most teens and parents reported that they have had some variation of “the talk” about dating, sex and teen parenthood, they also admitted that they struggled with question of how to talk with one another about these issues.

#### **Barriers: What makes communication harder?**

**Overprotective parents.** Teens stressed how hard it could be to talk to parents they perceived to be too strict or overprotective, and how approaching such parents for information about sex and contraception was typically off-limits. As one teen girl put it: “I cannot talk to my mother .... If I talk to her about sex she’d be like ‘Girl, you are pregnant!’” From teens’ perspectives, strict parenting practices and communication could encourage teens to withhold information or even drive teens to engage in the very behavior parents were seeking to prevent. In the words of one adolescent male: “I think the stricter parents... their children, they don’t even listen, I think they go out and do it. Because they’re like kids, so they have to have some fun, you know?”

**Different cultural norms.** For immigrant households, differing cultural norms between the United States and parents' home countries could also present challenges to adolescent-parent communication around these topics. 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." Other parents echoed this observation, explaining that these topics were not discussed openly in their own households when they were growing up. As one mother of a teen male put it: "I come from a country where, when a child is born you don't talk to them about these things. It is a little uneducated, but there were things you didn't talk about. ... But yeah, now if [my son] gives me a small opportunity to share my thoughts, I take the opportunity." In a similar vein, the mother of another male teen stated: "Everything [related to sex and birth control] is shameful to talk about [in my native country]."

**(Parents think) conversations can wait.** Some parents shared their belief that dating and sexual activity didn't need to be addressed proactively. Typical was the response of one father of both an adolescent male and female, who explained that he hadn't talked with his teens yet about birth control because "I just don't feel that they have that need right now" since neither reported dating or being sexually active. Feeling that it was too early to start talking about these topics also appeared to make it hard for parents to understand why teens needed or wanted more information. For example, one group of adolescent females explained that any program with the words "pregnancy prevention" in the name would make parents "suspicious." As one teen girl put it, parents might ask: "You're not having sex so why [do you need to go]? You shouldn't need it."

**(Parents think) teens are getting information elsewhere.** Some parents said they didn't see the need for discussing these topics with their teens because their teens were already getting this information in schools. As one teen male said: "Some parents think school already talked about it, because that's why they [have] health class." One father of an adolescent male shared his opinion that schools were actually better equipped to talk with adolescents about these topics because parents may not have the time: "I think it's the schools [who talk to adolescents about this]. Because parents are working a lot and then they go to work at another job and then they go to sleep. And the kids go to school in the morning and the parents go to work again."

#### Facilitators: What makes communication easier?

**Trust.** Parents and teens both reported that building "trust" with each other—i.e., being able to speak honestly with each other—was critical. Teen girls in one group explained that speaking frequently with parents about more mundane aspects of their lives (e.g., "I went to Chipotle today.") helped to build the trust necessary to open up about more difficult topics (e.g., sex or contraception). Parents who reported being more comfortable discussing such topics with their teens echoed the view that trust was essential.

**Examples.** Among parents who discussed these topics with their adolescents, several reported using real-life examples of teen pregnancy as a jumping-off point. One father with a teen daughter recounted an experience he had while walking in his neighborhood with his daughter: "I told her to look at the little 13-, 14-year-old girls who have their babies. And I told her, 'That is not good' and I asked her 'How are you going to avoid that?'" Another mother of a teen daughter shared how she began a conversation with her daughter after the teen revealed a friend of hers was pregnant. This mother explained: "I was telling her that she needs to think about her future and think about her career. [H]er friends are going to have to put their kids in daycare, and will need to get a job. She shouldn't have sex with her first boyfriend she has and not use birth control." The use of these real word examples resonated especially well with teens.

**Openness.** As discussed above, many (mostly immigrant) parents we spoke with grew up in households where these topics were largely taboo. Given this background, several parents spoke of wanting to reverse this pattern in their own households. As one mother of an adolescent male explained: "My

parents never talked to me about [sex], so I was learning about this so I could talk to my own family.” Similarly, another mother of have an adolescent female observed: “I wish I had an open conversation with my mother the way my daughter has with me. I try to give my daughter what I didn’t [have].”

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

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How parents and teens communicate about dating, sex, birth control, and parenthood can have important implications for teen childbearing outcomes. Our findings suggest important implications for programs to engage Latino teens and parents in discussions about the need for teens to make responsible decisions about these issues. For example:

- Teens value open dialogue with parents, even if they are not engaged in such dialogues. And, most parents want to be able to talk with their teens, but often don’t know how.
- Both parents and teens need help moving past the “don’t have sex” or “don’t date” admonitions.
- Parents may need support to develop, practice, and reinforce the messages they want to send to their teens about these topics, as well as to avoid sending out mixed messages. Parents know—better than anyone else—what values and ideals they want to instill in their children; and programs can help parents to communicate these values and ideals. For example, programs can share ideas with parents about how to start conversations with their teens, how to craft effective messages for their teens, or how to engage their teens in activities to build trust and foster more open communication.
- Parents may also need help in conveying their desire for their teens to avoid pregnancy without sending the message that sex, dating and teen parenthood are off-limits, which can lead teens to avoid communicating with parents about these topics.
- At the same time, programs can also work with teens to identify additional sources of support and information (e.g., other family members or program staff) if or when they don’t feel comfortable talking with their parents.
- Teens themselves suggested that using “real-life” examples might be a particularly effective way to bring up these topics. Parents may also benefit from having opportunities to talk with other parents on how to broach these topics with their children.

Concerns about parents’ perceptions may make Latino teens reluctant to sign up for or stick with a teen pregnancy prevention program. Enlisting Latino parents as part of the recruitment and retention effort may allay these concerns. The first step in this direction might be to reach out to Latino parents to ensure that they understand program goals and content. Parents in our study expressed a strong desire to ensure that their children have a better life and greater opportunities, and one of the ways their children can realize their parents’ aspirations for them is to avoid a teen pregnancy. Thus, programs aimed at reducing teen pregnancy share common goals with Latino parents. Programs that are aimed at both preventing teen pregnancy and achieving educational and life goals and whose names reflect these dual objectives may be particularly appealing to parents and help alleviate teens’ concerns that parents might be reluctant to have their teens sign up for a teen “pregnancy prevention” program. Recognition of these common goals can provide a valuable opportunity for engaging Latino parents on sensitive topics such as teen dating, sex, and pregnancy.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

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The research on which this brief is based yields important insights into parent-teen communication about dating, sex, contraception, and parenthood in Latino families. However, we recognize that the study has several limitations. The most obvious is that the parents and teens who participated in the study constituted a self-selected group and may not be representative of

parents and teens in the broader Latino population. For example, the parents we spoke with generally wanted to be able to talk more openly with their teens about these topics, whereas parents who felt that these topics were strictly off-limits may not have agreed to do an interview.

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