

Introduction

Research is beginning to show what many of us have long known from working with teens — that religious faith and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teenage boys and girls from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. Clearly, the role of faith in preventing teen pregnancy is a vital and important one. By teaching and preaching religious values, faith communities can help shape the character of our children and give them answers to their most heartfelt questions.

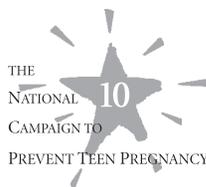
To support faith communities in this regard, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's Task Force on Religion and Public Values (see the back panel for a list of members as constituted when this publication was developed) has compiled *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy*, which summarizes a wealth of experience and advice from faith leaders around the country. The members of the Task Force, who are religious and secular leaders from a range of faith traditions, hope these tips encourage religious leaders of all faiths and denominations to take on the issue of teen pregnancy in the context of their religious beliefs.

Teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States have begun to decline, although it remains true that our nation still has the highest rates in the industrialized world by far — with nearly one million teen pregnancies every year. Communities of faith know that teen pregnancy is a complicated problem. They also know that their work with young people must compete with messages from a wider culture often at odds with the ethics and morality of their religious traditions and beliefs. That's why it's so important for faith communities to get to kids when they're young — and to stay with them through their teen years. As teenagers yearn for spiritual guidance, faith communities are uniquely situated to minister to this need, and faith communities quite properly place questions about sex firmly within the context of religious values and moral traditions.

God bless you as you continue the good work of helping young people meet the many ethical and moral challenges they confront every day.

Sister Mary Rose McGeady, DC.

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THE
NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN TO
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

CELEBRATING A DECADE OF PROGRESS
IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN,
YOUTH AND FAMILIES

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Over its ten-year history, the National Campaign has tried to encourage faith-based groups in the important work they are already doing for young people, to convince community-based leaders focused on preventing teen pregnancy to see religious institutions as allies, and to bring together local religious and secular leaders to do more to reduce adolescent pregnancy. Toward that end, the National Campaign is pleased to have the following additional resources available:

- ✦ *Faith Matters: How African American Communities Can Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy*
- ✦ *Keeping the Faith: The Role of Religion and Faith Communities in Preventing Teen Pregnancy*
- ✦ *Bridging the Divide: Involving the Faith Community in Teen Pregnancy Prevention*

For more information, please visit
www.teenpregnancy.org/religion.

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Nine Tips to Help Faith Communities and Leaders Address Teen Pregnancy

March 2005

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Why Should Faith Leaders Play a Role in Preventing Teen Pregnancy?

- + Research and survey data both show that religious faith and a strong moral sense play important roles in protecting young people from too-early sexual activity, teen pregnancy and other risky sexual behavior.
- + Among teens who haven't had sex, the primary reason cited by both boys and girls for not having sex is their religion or morals.
- + The overwhelming majority of teens (71%) and adults (65%) believe that religious leaders and groups should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancy.

Nine Tips to Help Faith Communities and Leaders Address Teen Pregnancy

Address the need teens have for spiritual fulfillment and offer them answers to the many challenging problems they face.

It is during the teenage years that many young people first struggle with the enduring questions of human existence, and the intensity and urgency of these questions can be very powerful to them. Many teens hunger for a framework of values and faith that can help them make moral decisions and manage the everyday problems of living that can be so stressful in these transition years. They also want help in seeing beyond the present moment. Because faith communities are uniquely able to provide the spiritual guidance that many teenagers crave, they should embrace this responsibility with energy and commitment.

Encourage parents to talk with their children about sex and morality within the context of your faith tradition.

Many parents are embarrassed and uncomfortable talking with their children about sex. This is not unusual, but it is unfortunate since parents are children's first and best teachers about values and moral expectations. A faith community is an ideal place for parents and children to learn how to talk with each other about these important topics. Consider sponsoring workshops for parents about how to talk with their children about sensitive subjects, such as human sexuality, according to the children's age and maturity and within the context of your faith tradition. And help your parents set proper limits for their children's behavior.

Enlist adults in your faith community to help young people.

Teenagers develop character and personal values through interacting with respected and empathetic adults. Sometimes faith leaders themselves are available to work directly with teenagers, but often they carry so many responsibilities that they need help from others. If this is the case, ask highly trusted and knowledgeable adults in your faith community to assist in the important work with teenagers. Whether the adults create an organized mentoring program or something more informal, be sure they understand teenagers and can talk about values and relationships within the context of your faith's principles.

Make sure children and teenagers in your faith community understand what your faith tradition says about sex, love, and marriage in general and teen pregnancy, in particular. Use clear and unambiguous language.

Young people need to know and understand where your faith tradition stands on matters of sexuality. Faith traditions can have a strong impact on helping teens avoid too-early sexual activity and pregnancy, but messages need to be clear, direct, and precise. Encourage open, honest, and frank discussions about the challenges — and choices — that young people face in their daily lives. Discussions about sex, love, and marriage within the context of religious faith should begin when children are young, rather than waiting until they're teens.

Learn about contemporary youth culture — what your young people are reading, listening to, watching, and doing.

Understanding the world of teens makes communicating with and caring for them easier. The influence of the entertainment media, in particular, on youth culture is extraordinary. Know the music that young people enjoy. Watch the television shows they watch so you'll know which actors they may be trying to emulate. Take a look at the magazines they are reading. With such information in hand, you can better explore with teens how the cultural messages they receive agree with or differ from what is expected of them as members of your faith community.

Organize supervised group activities for teenagers in your faith community.

Teenagers need things to say "yes" to, especially when we are asking them to say "no" to pregnancy. Encourage the parents and other adults in your faith community to organize and lead group activities with teens — a picnic at the park, an evening at the local bowling alley or ice skating rink, or even a simple pizza party. Activities that give youth learning experiences, like community service or day trips to museums or historic and religious sites, are another option. All the activities that you sponsor for young people — from prayer circles to field trips — are excellent opportunities for fostering fellowship and supportive friendships. By creating a positive and spiritually-oriented peer culture, you can help teens make the right decisions about sex.

Reach out to teenagers who are not involved in any faith community.

Though young people seek answers to spiritual questions, some are reluctant to find them in institutions of organized religion. And it is often the teens who are outside of faith communities and unattached to any positive group who are particularly likely to get in trouble. One dynamic youth minister in California reached out to neighborhood teens by encouraging them to structure their own youth program and creating a program based on those suggestions. He also moved his youth activities into a storefront center just a half-block from the church. A youth group of thirty teens that once met in the church basement now numbers in the hundreds.

Celebrate achievement and excellence.

By specifically supporting excellence and achievement by young people, faith communities can help to create an environment that reduces the risk of early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, research has shown that early school failure and dropping out of school are closely associated with becoming a teen parent. By encouraging educational achievement, for example, faith communities may be able to help persuade teenagers to stay in school. Encourage or offer scholarships for college and vocational training. Organize tutoring, homework assistance, and opportunities for community service.

Celebrate spiritual and non-academic activities as well, like volunteer work or achievement in the arts. Consider recognition ceremonies during regular worship services or designate specific days each year to honor teenagers for their accomplishments in a wide range of areas. Give the teenagers in your faith community a place to shine no matter what their abilities or interests.

Reach out to other faith communities, neighborhood organizations, and institutions that work with young people.

You don't have to go it alone. Working together, faith leaders can make a real difference in preventing teen pregnancy. Consider coordinating with fellow leaders to preach on the topic of teen pregnancy the same week. Or develop a particular prayer for all young people facing choices about sex and relationships. Look to clergy associations, ecumenical councils, and other local faith networks for support and collegiality in addressing this and other issues important to young people. And remember that other public and private institutions can be valuable partners in the helping young people in your faith community — including schools, local gyms, YMCAs and YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, and recreation centers.