

THE  
NATIONAL  
CAMPAIGN TO  
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY



# *Making a Love Connection*



Teen Relationships, Pregnancy,  
and Marriage

By Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson

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## Acknowledgements

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### **Barbara Dafoe Whitehead Wishes to Thank:**

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## Foreword

In the broadest sense, this is a paper about sequencing—that is, about both adults and young people doing things at the right time and in the right order.

Authors Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson argue that we need to teach young people about healthy relationships at the same time we teach them about avoiding risky sexual behavior and the value of waiting. Not after—or as is too often the case—not at all. They make clear that the order of some of life’s major events is critically important. Get an education, get married, then have children—in that order. Whitehead and Pearson also convincingly argue that if we want to help ensure that children are born to two parents, happily married and ready and able to take on the difficult job of parenting, then preventing teen pregnancy is a good place to start.

In the spirit of orderliness proscribed by this paper, let’s explore these thoughts in a bit more detail, one-by-one:

First, the authors convincingly argue that helping young people understand the very nature of *relationships* has been the missing ingredient in the nation’s efforts at delaying sexual activity, avoiding teen pregnancy, and helping prepare young people for successful marriages. Teens hear about biology and body parts,

they are instructed on how to reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but rarely are they given guidance about how to successfully navigate the minefields of teen and young adult relationships. In short, young people are often told what to avoid, but hardly ever told how to achieve responsible and respectful relationships. As the authors suggest, we need to address what motivates teens and appeal to their aspirations rather than continue to simply try to help them manage risks.

Second, the authors note that while young people aspire to successful futures and marriage, they are often unaware of the simple formula that can greatly help them achieve both. Namely, graduate from high school (at least), don't have a baby until you are married, and don't marry during the teen years. By doing so, young people greatly reduce their chances of poverty and divorce. The authors argue that too many young people, and adults for that matter, are—as teens would say—clueless about this sequence of success and shouldn't be.

Third, this paper helps connect some dots that have long needed connecting. The link between preventing teen pregnancy and parenthood and ensuring that more children grow up in stable, two-parent families is powerful, but woefully overlooked. Those in the world of teen pregnancy prevention tend to focus too narrowly on abstinence and contraception while those concerned with marriage and out-of-wedlock childbearing often neglect the value of preventing early pregnancy and childbearing in the first place. As the authors point out, the teen years are a time when young people's "habits of the heart" are first formed and when *half* of first out-of-wedlock births occur.

As members of the Board of Directors for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, we express our great appreciation to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson for this thought-provoking paper. We are confident that their insights will spark important conversations and help strengthen efforts to improve the well-being of children and families in the years ahead.

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# *Introduction*

*Half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers*


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The U.S. has made remarkable progress in reducing teen pregnancy and birth rates over the past decade—teen pregnancy is down 28% and teen birth rates have declined by one-third.<sup>1</sup> Yet more needs to be done. Too many teens are still getting pregnant and becoming young parents. One in three girls still become pregnant by age 20 and half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers.<sup>2</sup> One out of five teen births are repeat births.<sup>3</sup> Such high levels of teen pregnancy not only disrupt the lives of teens themselves; they also contribute to the persistence of maternal and child poverty, father absence and diminished life prospects for the children who are born to teenagers.

Teen parenthood also stands in the way of achieving two important public policy goals: helping build healthy marriages and increasing the proportion of children who grow up in stable two-parent families. Having a child as a teenager is often an early step in a cycle of unstable and troubled serial partnerships. Oftentimes, just as unwed teen mothers are making progress in getting their lives back on track, they are derailed by yet another pregnancy with the wrong partner or another failed relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Unwed teen mothers who want to marry in the future are also less likely to achieve their goal. And if they do marry, their marriages are more likely to end in divorce. Only 30 percent of unwed teen mothers who later married are still in their first marriages at age 40.<sup>5</sup> Few teens aspire to a future of turbulent relationships for themselves and their children. The vast majority of teens say that they want to be married and to stay married for a lifetime. Yet teens aren't always able to reach this goal.

*Today's teens struggle in a culture that no longer tells them how sex, marriage and childbearing should be sequenced, or what the optimal sequence might be.*



For one reason, the forces that place teens at risk for pregnancy are growing ever more formidable. The pathway teens must navigate between adolescence and a secure and successful adulthood is now prolonged. During these years, teens are subjected by the culture to insistent and unrelenting sexual messages and come-ons. Although the proportion of teens in high school who have had sex has declined, it is still the case that 62 percent have sexual intercourse by the time they graduate from high school.<sup>6</sup> And though teens aspire to marriage, that goal is remote in time. Marriage now comes closer to the end of early adulthood than at its beginning. Too often, therefore, teens get involved in unwise relationships that lead to an unplanned pregnancy, a disrupted education and a stalled future.

For another reason, teenagers also lack what earlier generations took for granted: a normative sequence for the timing of sex, marriage and parenthood. Today's teens struggle in a culture that no longer tells them how these three events should be sequenced, or what the optimal sequence might be. Not surprisingly then, a sizeable majority of teens today approve of unwed childbearing.

Nor are teens exposed to the recent social science evidence on the economic and social benefits of a low-conflict and long lasting marriage for men, women and children. This body of evidence has been widely disseminated in the academic and policy world for more than a decade but it has not reached many of the nation's classrooms or kitchen tables. Indeed, many teens hold attitudes that are directly at odds with the social science evidence.

To make continued progress in preventing teen pregnancy, therefore, it is necessary to confront these new realities and to fill the knowledge gap. More specifically, this effort means giving teens guidance in what to aim for, as well as what to avoid, in their current and future relationships. The ambition is to develop strategies that will give teens a positive vision and expectation for their lives—a North Star, if you will—and provide them with the supports to achieve it.

This paper outlines key steps toward this goal: (1) Teach teens about healthy relationships and healthy marriage; (2) Teach teens about a “success sequence” that will best promote the achievement of their dreams and desires for their future family and work lives; (3) Provide a knowledge base, practical skills and social support to help teens successfully navigate the now prolonged transition from adolescence into adulthood; (4) Engage parents as first teachers.

# *Facing the* *Cultural Challenge*

*Teens are street-savvy about the attractions of sex and school-smart about its perils but increasingly uninformed or misinformed about the steps to building healthy relationships, now and in the future.*

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Teenagers today grow up in a world that bears little resemblance to the world their parents grew up in. Almost from the cradle, today's young people are bombarded with sexual come-ons and appeals. By the time they reach their teens, they have absorbed messages about sex from the streets, the Internet and the entertainment media. They are inundated with stories of steamy relationships in soap operas, reality shows, tabloid celebrity news, chatrooms and teen magazines full of "hottie" fashion tips. They're exposed to pornography via the Internet and soon may be able to view it (or simply listen to moan tones) on their cell phones. But it's not only exposure to explicit pornographic images that is becoming a mainstream part of teen culture today.<sup>7</sup> Even though some media outlets portray the issues of

sex, love, relationships, and marriage responsibly, it's also the case that a pornographic aesthetic pervades much of the music, fashion, video games and cable television shows that teens now enjoy.<sup>8</sup>

Because of early exposure to a hypersexualized culture, teens are likely to get their first lessons about sex from the streets, the Internet and their peers long before they get information about sex and related topics from their teachers or even their parents. When they do enter the classroom, they usually learn about the health risks of sex but they receive little guidance in its larger meaning or purpose. The result is that teens are street-savvy about the attractions of sex and school-smart about its perils but increasingly uninformed or misinformed about the steps to building healthy relationships, now and in the future.

Parents and other trusted adults have the uneasy sense that teens are getting the wrong kind of messages about sex, but they aren't sure what to do about it. And though parents may talk to their teens about ways to avoid the risks of sexual involvement, they are often uncertain or perplexed about what to say to their teens about romantic relationships and especially marriage. As a result, teens may get the sense that grownups have few convictions or values about the larger context, purpose and meaning of sex.

Parental behavior also influences teen expectations and attitudes. Many teens have seen nothing but relationship failure and breakup in their own families and communities. They have lived through a cycle of troubled relationships, as their mothers and fathers date, cohabit, break up, marry, divorce and remarry. Others have never had first-hand experience of marriage at all, much less a healthy marriage. For example, more than one-third of all births and more than two-thirds of African-American births are to unwed parents. This experience breeds pessimism about their own chances of forming successful relationships. If a happy and lasting relationship is not possible, why not try to fulfill your need for sex and love whenever and wherever you can?

## WHAT CONTEMPORARY MUSIC TELLS US

It has become commonplace to deplore the content and language in a lot of popular music. And, indeed, much of the criticism is warranted. Much of the music is bleak, coarse, violent, misogynist, and hateful. So why does this music resonate with so many teens?

A close listen to the music may help explain part of its appeal. A fair amount of music today captures the emotional realities of many teen's lives. Just as many baby boomers used their music to protest against the war in Vietnam, this generation often uses its music to protest the intimate warfare within their own families. Themes of abandonment, betrayal, sadness, anger and pain reverberate through the songs. There is a palpable longing for missing fathers and for a functioning family.

(The authors acknowledge Mary Eberstat's article, "Eminem is Right: Primal Scream of Teenage Music," *Policy Review* 128, January 2005.)

### **Master P "Mama Raised Me"**

*...Pops wasn't home, left us all alone...  
mama had game  
She showed me everything except how  
to be a man...*

### **Tupac Shakur "Papa's Song"**

*...Had to play catch by myself...A different father  
every weekend...How can I be a man if there's no  
role model?*

### **Papa Roach "Broken Home"**

*...I'm caught in the middle of this. My wounds are  
not healing.  
I'm stuck in between my parents. Broken home...  
all alone.*

### **Jay-Z "Where Have You Been"**

*...hey dad.... Remember me? I remember being  
kicked out of the house 'cause I looked like you...  
you was an abusive pops...You left us with some of  
my loneliest nights...*

### **Good Charlotte "Emotionless"**

*Hey dad I'm writing you...Do you think about your  
sons. Do you miss your little girl. When you lay your  
head down at night do you even wonder if we're  
alright?*

### **Blink 182 "Stay Together for the Kids Sake"**

*...What stupid poem could fix this home...I'd read  
it everyday...*

### **Pink "Family Portrait Song"**


*Momma please stop cryin,...its tearin' me down...  
Can we be a family. I promise I'll be better...Daddy,  
please don't leave...*



# *Confronting the Knowledge Deficit About Relationships*




*For many teens, puppy  
love hasn't disappeared.  
It's been sexualized.*



Teenagers today have received a great deal of help and support in learning about the health risks of sex and how to avoid them. By age 18, the vast majority of teens have received some information about contraception, refusal skills and abstinence.<sup>9</sup> These health messages have been critically important to bringing down the rates of teen pregnancy.

But we have now reached a cultural moment where such messages—though they remain essential and must continue to be delivered—may not be sufficient to achieving further reductions in the still high rate of teen pregnancy. Here's why.

*Teens aspire to a life of successful work and future marriage but their attitudes are often at odds with the evidence on what it takes to actually achieve these goals.*



Health messages are intended to influence individual sexual behavior. However, a majority of first sexual encounters occur within dating relationships and most teen pregnancies occur in the context of a relationship. Moreover, teens move very quickly from dating to sex in their first romantic relationships; according to one study, almost one in three teens reported that they had sex in the same month or before their dating relationship began; another 35 percent reported that they initiated first sex within the first three months of their relationship. Sexually experienced teens are likely to have sex even earlier in a romantic relationship.<sup>10</sup> And sexually experienced teens are inconsistent users of contraception. Thus, for many teens, puppy love hasn't disappeared. It's been sexualized.

The postponement message is also necessary—research makes clear that declines in teen pregnancy and birth rates are due, in part, to more teens delaying sexual activity.<sup>11</sup> However, the “postponement until marriage” message fails to adequately address an important new condition: namely, that marriage itself has been postponed. In 1970, the median age of first marriage for women was 20.8, just a few years beyond the typical high school graduation age of 17 or 18. For men, it was 23.2. In 2004, the median age reached 25.8 for women, roughly 8 years after high school graduation. For men, the median age climbed to 27.4.<sup>12</sup> For young people who complete the four-year college degree, first marriage is likely to occur at even older ages. Therefore, those teens who are committed to waiting to have sex until marriage now have a much longer wait. This increases the risks that some teens will not be successful in sustaining their commitment to wait until marriage, especially given the challenges of remaining abstinent in today's sexual culture. And there is some evidence that when teens committed to sexual abstinence do have sex, they are less likely to use contraception than other sexually active teens.<sup>13</sup>

Whether the focus is on contraception or on abstinence, current health-based approaches seek to help teens avoid the disruptive consequences of a pregnancy or unwed birth. But neither approach devotes sufficient attention to instructing teens in how to achieve success in their current or future relationships or to exploring how postponing sex might contribute to healthy relationships down the road. On this score, teens are afflicted with a knowledge deficit about relationships. Teens aspire to a life of successful work and future marriage but their attitudes are often at odds with the evidence on what it takes to actually achieve these goals. Consequently, they often behave in ways that undermine their ability to realize their aspirations. For all these reasons, it is time to go beyond current health-based messages aimed at influencing individual behavior and begin to pursue a hope-based strategy aimed at teaching teens about healthy relationships and marriage.



# *Losing the Connection Between Sex, Marriage and Parenthood*




*Becoming an unwed mother at a young age dramatically reduces a young woman's chances of ever marrying.*

For past generations of teens, sex was closely linked to the timing of marriage and then parenthood. For today's generation, sex is increasingly separate from the expectation of marriage or the achievement of married parenthood.

For some teens, sex is just sex. It has nothing to do with romantic love. It's merely a physical transaction.<sup>14</sup> For many more teens, sex is a typical part of teen romantic relationships but it is not closely linked to any kind of longer-term commitment. Indeed, close to two-thirds of teens, ages 15–19, agree or strongly agree that it is all right for unmarried 18 year-olds to have sex if they have strong affection for each other.<sup>15</sup> As for marriage, that is something that is entirely separate from teen sex. It is what people do after they are much older, have careers underway and are able to afford a wedding, a house, a couple of cars, and the occasional vacation.

*A robust body of social science evidence on the benefits of marriage has been available to scholars and policymakers for a decade or more but these findings have not moved into the classrooms or into many homes.*



Teens also fail to make a connection between parenthood and marriage. Walk into almost any high school today and ask students why teen childbearing is a problem. They are likely to say that it is because teens are too young, not yet finished with school, lack good job prospects or parenting skills. Rarely will they say that teen parenthood is a problem because the teens are not married. The University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* survey provides empirical support for this observation. More than half of high school seniors agree with the statement "having a child out of wedlock is experimenting with a worthwhile lifestyle or not affecting anyone else." According to another study, close to 60 percent of 15–17 year old teenage girls approve of unwed childbearing. That figure rises to 73 percent among teenage girls, ages 18–19.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, many young people seem misinformed about how this "lifestyle choice" can effect their own relationship prospects and—perhaps even more important—the lives of their children.

Some also believe that having a child out of wedlock will not diminish their chances of marrying later on. Almost half of teen mothers who are unmarried at the time of their child's birth felt "good" or "certain" that they would marry the child's biological father. In fact, their expectations are often unrealized. Within one year of their child's birth fewer than eight percent of unmarried teen mothers actually marry the baby's father.<sup>17</sup> Overall, becoming an unwed mother at a young age dramatically reduces a young woman's chances of ever marrying—40 percent lower for those who have a first child outside of marriage and 51 percent lower for women who do not marry the biological father of their child within six months of the birth.<sup>18</sup>

Two-thirds of teens think it is okay to live with someone outside of marriage. Many view cohabitation as a steppingstone to marriage and as a good way to get to know their partner and thus avoid future divorce. Yet research suggests that cohabitation is not a reliable step toward marriage. Parents who live together are less likely to marry than in the past. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children has dropped to 44 percent in 1997 from 57 percent a decade earlier.<sup>19</sup> Nor are cohabiting parents as likely as married parents to stay in the relationship. A study of first births found that 31 percent of cohabiting couples had broken up after five years compared to 16 percent of married couples.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to holding attitudes at odds with the social science evidence, teens are generally unaware of the advantages of marriage for adults and children. A robust body of evidence on the benefits of marriage has been available to scholars and policymakers for a decade or more but these findings have not moved into the classrooms or into many homes. According to research,

married people are better off than those who are not married in a number of ways. On average, they are happier, healthier, and wealthier and report greater sexual satisfaction than single, divorced or cohabiting individuals. They are better equipped to cope with major life crises such as severe illness, job loss, and the responsibilities of caring for a sick child or an aging parent. They are far less likely to be poor.<sup>21</sup>


Low conflict, long-lasting marriages are also good for children. Compared to children in other family arrangements, children in married parent households have fewer behavioral problems, are more likely to stay in school, and have higher levels of educational attainment. They are also less likely to have sex at an early age and are more likely to have satisfying dating relationships and marriages.

The failure to teach teens about marriage is all the more troubling because most young people of all racial and ethnic groups want to marry. According to the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* survey, the vast majority of high school seniors—82 percent of girls and 70 percent of boys—agree that a good marriage is extremely important to them. A similarly large majority—83 percent of senior girls and 78 percent of senior boys—agree that they expect to marry in the future.<sup>22</sup> Teens also disapprove of divorce. A majority of teens reject divorce as the best solution when a couple can't work out their marital problems.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is good reason to believe that despite their ambitions for a lasting future marriage, many will fail in achieving this personal life goal.

Finally, teens lack knowledge of what might be called the “success” sequence: Finish high school, or better still, get a college degree; wait until your twenties to marry; and have children after you marry. Teens who follow this sequence are likely to avoid poverty and to do well economically. Those who depart from this sequence are at a much greater economic risk. A child born to an unmarried teen mother who has not finished high school is nine times more likely to be poor than a child born to an adult parent who is married and has graduated from high school.<sup>24</sup>


Failing to follow this sequence not only poses economic risk. It also threatens the success of relationships. Marrying as a teenager is the highest known risk factor for divorce; people who marry as teens are two to three times more likely to divorce than people who marry in their twenties. Further, women have a much better chance of marrying if they do not become single parents first. As one study noted, “having children is still one of the least desirable partner characteristics a potential partner can possess.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, both men and women with a college education are more likely to marry, and less likely to divorce, than people with lower

*The vast majority of high school seniors agree that a good marriage is extremely important to them.*



levels of educational attainment.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, though the overall divorce rate remains close to fifty percent of all marriages, the risk of divorce is far below fifty percent for educated people going into their first marriage, and lower still for people who wait to marry until at least their mid-twenties and who haven't lived with many different partners before marriage.<sup>27</sup>

*Much of the economic polarization in this country consists of the large divide between the people who are able to acquire both a college degree and a marriage license and people who acquire neither.*



Of course, this paper is not arguing that teens should get married, that marriage is for everyone, that all marriages are healthy, or that marriage is a panacea for the social ills of poverty, crime, discrimination, and inadequate education. Nor should marriage be seen as the only chosen way of life or as the only road to satisfying adult relationships.

Nevertheless, much of the economic polarization in this country consists of the large divide between the people who are able to acquire both a college degree and a marriage license and people who acquire neither. Achieving these goals is a high wire act. It takes sustained effort, skill, practice, discipline, deferred gratification, parental dedication and social support to complete the success sequence. It is unrealistic—if not irresponsible—to expect teens to try to walk this high wire alone. They need information, guidance, skill and support to make it safely through a prolonged adolescence and into a flourishing adult life.

# *What We Need To Do*



*It is necessary to correct the widely held notion that having a child as an unwed teen has few, if any, negative consequences on future relationships and marriage, or for children.*

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It is clear that we need to look beyond the goal of managing the health risks of sex to the goal of building healthy relationships. We should help teens craft a positive vision for their future relationships and family life and help young people understand that the sequencing of major life events—getting an education, getting married, then having children—greatly increases the chances for a positive future. We must also enlist and support parents as teens’ first and most effective teachers.

### ***Provide teens with accurate information about healthy relationships and marriage***

One of the classical aims of education is to transmit useful knowledge and to correct mistaken ideas and attitudes. It also happens to be one of the chief aims of teen pregnancy prevention. If teens know better, they can do better. For that reason, it is crucial to expand efforts to disseminate the social science evidence on the benefits of healthy relationships and marriage to teens. This effort should not be limited to formal classroom teaching but should also include communicating this body of knowledge to parents, other caring adults, asset-building programs for youth and other youth-serving organizations

### ***Build awareness of the success sequence***

Parents and teachers have made a strong effort to help young people understand the rules of educational attainment. In order to achieve their educational goals, teens know that it is necessary to progress, rung by rung, up the learning ladder. If you don't take math courses, you aren't likely to become a bookkeeper or accountant. If you don't take courses in the life sciences, you may close off your chances for certain health careers. A similar effort must be made to teach teens the rules of the success sequence. In particular, it is necessary to correct the widely held notion that having a child as an unwed teen has few, if any, negative consequences on future relationships and marriage, or for children.

### ***Provide teens relationship education***

While teen pregnancy programs focus on managing individual sexual behavior and decisions, relationship education recognizes that sex usually occurs in the context of an intimate relationship. One of its principal goals, therefore, is to give teens the knowledge, language and skills to manage their early attractions without engaging in sex too soon.

New relationship curricula for teens draw upon a body of knowledge and skills originally developed in marriage education for adults. Such programs are based on more than twenty years of research into patterns of behavior that damage relationships as well as patterns that protect and preserve relationships. When tailored for teens—both those who are not having sex and those who are—curricula may cover a range of topics, including:

- Teaching the characteristics of healthy relationships and marriage;
- Learning how to communicate effectively and manage conflict;

- Understanding what’s important to look for in a romantic partner;
- Learning about crushes and infatuations;
- Understanding the building blocks of positive relationships;
- Developing a “go-slow,” low-intensity approach to teen relationships;
- Understanding how to gauge the health and safety of a relationship;
- Learning to handle sexual pressures; and
- Understanding how to enjoy romantic relationships without having sex.

Relationship education may be especially beneficial for teens at high risk for pregnancy and parenthood. One such group is teen mothers. They are likely to have a second unwed birth relatively soon after the first unwed birth—about one-fourth do so within 24 months.<sup>28</sup> Since teen mothers are likely to have romantic partners, they might be encouraged to raise their expectations for respect and commitment from the men in their lives. Relationship education could provide them insights into how to choose potential partners more carefully—and particularly how to avoid partners who are abusive, addicted or otherwise unsuitable. It could also help them understand how their relationship choices can play a crucial role, for good or ill, in the lives of their children. Such knowledge might help forestall another unwed birth.

Like teen mothers, teens in foster care are vulnerable to early pregnancy and childbearing. Although they typically have access to contraceptive information and health services, they often lack the motivation to use these resources. Indeed, according to a recent National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy report, some teens in foster care want to have babies in order to have someone to love, to create a family of their own, and to prove that they are better parents than their own parents were.<sup>29</sup> They too might find more compelling reasons to postpone pregnancy and parenthood if they could envision and aim for the kind of relationships that could truly help them fulfill their desires.

***Teach teens about the healthy development of children and the ethical consequences of their relationship decisions on children***

Health messages focus on the risks of sex to the individual. Yet sexual relationships have consequences that go beyond individual health. Every time teens have sex, they face the possibility of creating a life. Every time a teenager gives birth, she is making choices for the future of her child.

## AN EXAMPLE OF RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Alabama is providing relationship education for teens using lessons drawn from the *Love U2*<sup>30</sup> curriculum series. During 2004–2005, nearly 300 9th–12th grade students in high schools in several counties completed the program called “Relationship Smarts.” The overall objectives of the Alabama program are to reduce the risk of maltreatment in dating relationships (Alabama has some of the highest rates of abuse among dating adolescents in the country) and to promote future healthy relationships of adolescents as they transition into adulthood and parenthood. Specifically, the program set out to assist adolescents in developing the skills and knowledge necessary for healthy dating relationships, and for making good choices about partners in the future.

Students participated in sessions on topics such as Maturity Issues—What I Value; Attractions and Infatuation; What’s Love? Three Sides of Mature Love; The Low-Risk Dating Strategy and How to “Really” Get to Know Someone; Dating and Emotions; What Abuse Looks Like; Breaking Up; Committed Relationships and Marriage; and Communication Patterns and Conflict. The classes were typically delivered a few days a week over a six to eight week period. Those who took the Relationship Smarts class showed a statistically significant improvement in their knowledge about healthy relationships before and after the class, and compared to a control group of students who did not take the class. Program participants also reported significantly lower levels of verbal aggression after taking the course than did the comparison participants. In fact, the level of verbal aggression *increased* over time for those in the control group.

Classes were taught by Family and Consumer Science teachers, Family Life Extension agents, and several Auburn University graduate students all of whom received training and materials. Alabama made some minor adjustments in the curriculum to enhance existing features for use with a diverse adolescent population.

The Alabama teen relationship initiative is part of its Cooperative Extension System’s “Healthy Couples, Healthy Children” Project. The larger project is designed to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect and improve child well-being by fostering healthy couple and co-parenting relationships. After serving adults for two years, through community education programs focused on building healthy relationship and marriages, the project expanded to deliver relationship education for high school-age youth. Funding for the project came from the Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Board.

Auburn University recently received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for a rigorous five-year evaluation of the Relationship Smarts program for adolescents. The curriculum will be slightly expanded to include more concepts from all four units of the *LoveU2* curriculum series.<sup>31</sup>




Yet rarely are teens—both boys and girls—encouraged to reflect on what it means to bring a child into the world or what a child needs and deserves from the most important adults in his or her life. Rarely are teens asked to consider how their choice of a partner will affect their child’s lifelong attachments. Rarely are they encouraged to think about how a broken or destructive relationship will affect their children. This is a missed opportunity to engage teens.

Teens have a strong moral sense. They are deeply concerned about right and wrong, fair and unfair. Perhaps because they are chronologically closer to childhood than to full-fledged adulthood, they can be especially sensitive to what is fair or unfair to a child.

One way to foster ethical reflection on what’s fair for children is to teach teens about child development. A substantial body of research points to the role of secure attachment, stable parental relationships and lasting stable marriages in fostering healthy brain development and overall infant and child well-being. If teens were exposed to this knowledge, they might understand how their early relationship choices can have consequences for the children they may bring into the world. These research findings might give teens greater motivation to postpone parenthood until they are capable of forming healthy parental partnerships, and ideally, healthy and long-lasting marriages.

*“Wow...what an awesome responsibility. I should have had this [classroom lessons about what children need in the first few years and the problems that early childbearing often pose for the child] in high school—that would have been real pregnancy prevention!”*  
—teen mother



### ***Support teens who are not having sex***

Fifty-three percent of all teens, ages 15–19, are not having sexual intercourse, but very often they feel alone, uncool and unsupported. In fact, they may get less attention from adults precisely because they are not getting pregnant and having babies. However, teens dedicated to abstinence, the many teens who are ambivalent about sex, those who may regret having sex when they did, and those who are sexually active, also have have romantic relationships. They still feel sexual attractions. It takes as much care and thought and planning for them to abstain as it does for a sexually active teen to use contraception consistently and carefully. And they need support and information just as much as do their sexually active peers.

Some of that support might actually come from peers who have already had sex. Almost two-thirds of sexually experienced teen girls and over half of sexually experienced teen boys say they wished they had waited longer before having sex.<sup>32</sup>

It is also important to acknowledge the role values, morals, and faith play in many teens’ decisions to choose abstinence. The

primary reason why teens say that they do not have sex is because it is “against their morals or religion.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, 64 percent of teens believe that morals and values influence teen sexual activities just as much as health information and services.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Pay More Attention to Teenage Boys***

Boys need as much help as girls in the conduct of their youthful relationships, yet we have barely begun to attend to the unique needs and circumstances of boys. Many lack male role models who are able to teach them how to express their sexual and physical energy constructively. Many are struggling to figure out what it means to be a man. Many are caught up in a “player” culture and have no idea of what it takes to become a good boyfriend, husband or father. Roland Warren, President of the National Fatherhood Initiative, puts it this way: “Every male has within him the potential to be a protector and a predator.” It is the socialization and enculturation of boys that, to a great degree, determines which one it will be.

### ***Engage Parents as First Teachers***

A substantial body of research supports what common sense has long held: parents have an enormous influence on their teenagers.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, teens need their parents just as much as toddlers do. Feeling strongly connected to parents helps teens steer clear of risky behavior, including early sexual activity. Therefore, one of the chief objectives of relationship education must be to engage parents as first teachers. Here are four ideas on how to do so:

- Encourage parents to do more than talk about the facts of life. They must also communicate their values and convictions about sex, love, commitment and marriage.
- Encourage schools, communities, religious groups, youth development programs and other youth-serving institutions to include parents as partners in sex and relationship education. Curricula and programs should include materials that both share the content and scope of the curriculum and prompt parent-teen discussions.
- Provide parents with resources on how to talk to teens about sex, love, emotions, commitment, relationships and marriage. Online assistance, talking points, fact sheets, sample scripts, and booklets may help parents start and sustain a conversation that can be difficult to initiate and even harder to keep going over time.

*Many teen boys are struggling to figure out what it means to be a man. Many are caught up in a “player” culture and have no idea of what it takes to become a good boyfriend, husband or father.*



- Disseminate available research to parents in an easy-to-use format.

Parents may not know what the research says about the advantages of following the success sequence or the benefits of putting marriage before babies. If they did, they might feel more confident in giving advice and guidance. As one parent put it: “My son is moving in with his girlfriend and I don’t think it is too wise . . . I can just see him getting stuck in a less-than-ideal relationship, but what can I say to convince him?”

### ***Explore dual track relationship programming for parents and teens***

In communities with very high rates of teen pregnancy and unwed parenthood, parents as well as teens might benefit from learning relationship skills. Indeed, surveys indicate that adults in low-income communities have a keen interest in acquiring these skills. A number of marriage education initiatives currently address—and more are beginning to address—helping parents who face high stressors, obstacles and challenges in forming healthy relationships.<sup>36</sup> However, it may be useful to develop separate but parallel relationship programs for teens and parents in low-income communities with high levels of nonmarriage and single parenthood. This “dual track” approach would help both parents and teens gain the insights, skills and knowledge for healthy relationships. Parents might then be able to make wiser choices for themselves and also better guide their teenage sons and daughters in the successful conduct of their love lives.<sup>37</sup> One young unwed mother of three children by three different fathers summed it up this way: “I’ve been helped with getting my GED, with dealing with drug addicted parents,

## **A NOTE ABOUT MONEY**

In February 2006, new federal funding was approved that could support education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting. This activity is one of the allowable uses of approximately \$100 million a year over five years for healthy marriage promotion that was included in the reauthorization of welfare reform. An additional \$50 million was

provided for programs designed to encourage responsible fatherhood. In addition, the basic Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant which was extended for five years under this law can be used for teen pregnancy prevention and a number of states have done so over the years.

with parenting my own children, with housing, with getting to college and finding a job. But I have never been helped with relationships. I don't even know what a good relationship looks like, let alone how to develop one. What's going to help me do it differently next time?...It breaks my heart to see my 12-year-old daughter going down the same path I did as a young teen. I have no wisdom to offer her about sex, love, and relationships. My only advice is 'please, please be careful and use protection.'"

***Make teen pregnancy prevention integral to the national strategy to promote healthy marriage***

Preventing teen pregnancy is one of the most effective known approaches to promoting healthy marriages. Teens who avoid early parenthood have a much better chance of forming healthy marriages in the future than teens who become parents. Teen mothers face a number of severe barriers to marriage. They are at high risk for a second unwed birth. Unwed childbearing reduces their opportunities to ever marry, or to form an intact healthy marriage. What's more, they are likely to be involved in troubled relationships with their current or past partners, to have children with different partners, and to expose their children to conflictual relationships. Teen fathers face other difficulties. They typically lack the emotional maturity or economic means to become responsible husbands and fathers. They incur child support obligations without having adequate resources to fulfill those obligations. And unlike teen mothers, who receive social support and, in some communities, social esteem, some teen fathers are derided for their failure to grow up and give up their wild ways, while some wear their wild ways as a badge of honor. Even young fathers who want to do right by their children are often unable to resist the lure of the streets or the freedom of the single life for very long.

Given all this, we urge policymakers and practitioners to make full use of the opportunity to teach teens about healthy relationships and marriage under the healthy marriage funding (see box on page 25). We also encourage them to place a strong emphasis on preventing teen pregnancy and early unwed childbearing in the first place as they put in place healthy marriage initiatives in communities around the country.



## *Conclusion*

New federal dollars for relationship education offer both an opportunity and a challenge to current teen pregnancy prevention efforts. The opportunity is to enrich and expand the existing prevention tool kit with new ideas and approaches. A body of skill-based knowledge now exists that can help teens evaluate the quality of relationships, make sound judgments about partner choice, and gain insight into what makes early romantic relationships mutually respectful and satisfying without early sexual involvement.

The challenge is to go beyond the messages about the health risks of sex and begin to address questions and concerns that matter to teens. Teens hear a lot from adults about how to manage first sex. What they don't hear is how to handle first loves. Talking to teens about sex without talking to them about relationships makes little sense. Most teens have sex for the first time because they believe they are in love.<sup>38</sup>

More to the point, teens want this kind of support. Survey research tells us that teens would like more guidance, information and conversation with parents and other adults about their early relationships.<sup>39</sup> They want to know how to deal with their feelings and attractions. They seek “bigger” meanings for sex than the health-and-risk avoidance messages they commonly get. They would like alternatives to the sexualized peer culture.

To continue to make progress in reducing teen pregnancy, therefore, it is not enough to tell teens to “just say no” or to give them information and access to contraception. The simple truth is that many teens are bored with such messages. It is necessary to find new reasons to inspire and motivate teens to avoid pregnancy and early parenthood. Relationship education offers the promise and possibility of giving teens more compelling reasons to postpone sex. It can provide the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies to help teens develop a positive vision of healthy relationships, an appreciation for why they matter, the hope that they can achieve them, and a roadmap they can follow to build healthy relationships during their teen years and later, for those who choose it, a healthy marriage.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

Award-winning journalist and social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has written extensively about marriage, adolescent and young adult relationships, and teen pregnancy. She is currently the Co-Director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

She is the author of two books; *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman*, and *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitment to Marriage and Family*. She is frequently called upon by the media to discuss marriage and relationships and has authored numerous articles in newspaper and magazines, including two influential cover stories in *Atlantic* magazine, “The Failure of Sex Education,” and “Dan Quayle Was Right.”

Whitehead has also authored or co-authored several publications for the National Campaign, including “What’s God Got To Do With Teen Pregnancy Prevention?,” in *Keeping the Faith: The Role of Religion and Faith Communities in Preventing Teen Pregnancy*, and *Goodbye to Girlhood: What’s Troubling Girls and What We Can Do About It*. She also serves on the National Campaign’s Task Force on Religion, Public Values, and Public Policy.

She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and holds a Ph.D. in American social history.

### Marline Pearson

Marline Pearson has taught social science and criminology for 25 years. She currently is a social science instructor at the Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wisconsin.

Her long-standing interest in high-risk kids led Pearson to develop two curricula. *Love U2: Getting Smarter About Relationships, Sex, Babies, and Marriage* is a four-unit comprehensive relationship education curriculum for teens. *Within My Reach*, co-authored with Scott Stanley and Galena Kline, is a relationship skills and decision-making program for low-income mothers. Her classes with teens and young adults have been featured in *Time* magazine and in the PBS special, “Marriage: Just a Piece of Paper?”

In her work as a teacher, she has seen many teens who have overcome tremendous economic and personal obstacles in their lives only to be side-tracked by an unwise relationship, sex-too-soon, or a pregnancy. Too often, this first mistake is followed by another poor partner choice, sex-too-soon, and a second birth. She has also seen many teen parents who make tremendous strides in getting their lives on track only to see their own growing children start acting out in response to the chaos of their parents’ earlier unstable love life. This convinced Pearson that addressing relationships must be a part of helping young people achieve success in their education, career and family goals.



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The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Our goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third between 2006 and 2015.

Authors Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson argue that we need to teach young people about healthy relationships at the same time we teach them about avoiding risky sexual behavior and the value of waiting. Not after—or as is too often the case—not at all. They make clear that the order of some of life's major events is critically important. Get an education, get married, then have children—in that order. Whitehead and Pearson also convincingly argue that if we want to help ensure that children are born to two parents, happily married and ready and able to take on the difficult job of parenting, then preventing teen pregnancy is a good place to start. —*William Galston and Stephen Goldsmith from the foreword*