

Teen pregnancies in the Philippines

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MANILA, Philippines—The sexual revolution has ushered in a period in which the average adolescent experiences tremendous pressures to have sexual experiences of all kinds. Filipino teens get a higher exposure to sex from the Internet, magazines, TV shows, movies and other media than decades ago, yet without any corresponding increase in information on how to handle the input. So kids are pretty much left to other kids for opinions and value formation when it comes to sex.

Sexual misinformation is therefore equally shared in the group. Parents at home and teachers in school feel equally inadequate or uneasy to discuss the topic of sex with youngsters. The problem mounts because the barkada (gang) has a more profound influence than parents do and they exert pressure and expect the adolescent to conform to the rest of them.

In fact, female adolescents whose friends engage in sexual behavior were found to be more likely to do the same compared to those who do not associate with such peers. If the teen perceives her peers to look negatively at premarital sex, she was more likely to start sex at a later age.

Numbers

Statistics in the United States show that each year, almost 1 million teenage women—10 percent of all women aged 15-19 and 19 percent of those who have had sexual intercourse—become pregnant and one-fourth of teenage mothers have a second child within two years of their first.

In the Philippines, according to the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (Uppi) and the Demographic Research and Development Foundation, 26 percent of our Filipino youth nationwide from ages 15 to 25 admitted to having a premarital sex experience. What's worse is that 38 percent of our youth are already in a live-in arrangement.

The 1998 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reveals that 3.6 million of our teenagers (that's a whopping 5.2 percent of our population!) got pregnant. In 92 percent of these teens, the pregnancy was unplanned, and the majority, 78 percent, did not even use contraceptives the first time they had sex. Many of the youth are clueless that even on a single intercourse, they could wind up pregnant.

Risks

There are many reasons teen pregnancies should be avoided. Here's a low down on the facts:

- Risk for malnutrition

Teenage mothers tend to have poor eating habits and are less likely to take recommended daily multivitamins to maintain adequate nutrition during pregnancy. They are also more likely to smoke, drink or take drugs during pregnancy, which can cause health problems for the baby.

- Risk for inadequate prenatal care

Teenage mothers are less likely to seek regular prenatal care which is essential for monitoring the growth of the fetus; keeping the mother's weight in check; and advising the mother on nutrition and how she should take care of herself to ensure a healthy pregnancy. According to the American Medical Association, babies born to women who do not have regular prenatal care are 4 times more likely to die before the age of 1 year.

- Risk for abortion

Unplanned pregnancies lead to a higher rate of abortions. In the United States, nearly 4 in 10 teen pregnancies (excluding those ending in miscarriages) are terminated by abortion. There were about 274,000 abortions among teens in 1996.

In the Philippines, although abortion is illegal, it would shock you to know that we even have a higher abortion rate (25/1,000 women) compared to the United States where abortion is legal (23/1,000 women). For sure, there are more abortions that happen in our country that are not even reported. Backdoor abortions are resorted to with untrained "hilots" with questionable sterility procedures, increasing the possibility for tetanus poisoning and other complications.

- Risk for fetal deaths

Statistics of the Department of Health show that fetal deaths are more likely to happen to young mothers, and that babies born by them are likely to have low birth weight.

- Risk for acquiring cervical cancer

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually-transmitted, wart-forming virus that has been implicated in causing cancer of the cervix. This is the most common cancer in women secondary to breast cancer. Women who are at increased risk for acquiring this are those who engage in sex before 18, have a pregnancy at or younger than 18, or have had at least 5 sexual partners, or have had a partner with at least 5 sexual partners.

If you start sex at an early age, you have a higher likelihood of going through several sexual partners before you settle down, thus increasing your exposure to acquiring the virus and acquiring cervical cancer. The men can get genital warts from this virus and can certainly pass it on to their partners, thus increasing her risk for cervical cancer. Is that something you would want to gift to your wife with on your honeymoon? There is a way to test women (HPV Digene test) but no test for the man so you can't know if you have it. Using the condom does not confer protection against acquiring this virus since the condom cannot cover the testes where the warts can grow and proliferate.

(Conclusion)

- RISKS for the teen mother

Teen mothers are more disadvantaged, on average, than their same-age counterparts.

Teenage pregnancies are often associated with an increased rate of delinquent behaviors including alcohol and substance abuse.

To begin with, majority of them belong to the low income group. Teenage births are associated with lower annual income for the mother, 80 percent of whom eventually rely on welfare.

In the United States, seven in 10 teen mothers complete high school, but they are less likely to go to college when compared to women who delay childbearing. They are also more likely to drop out of school with only about one-third able to obtain a high school diploma.

With early termination of formal education comes limited employment opportunities. However, they have the responsibility of having to fend for their children before they even ever planned to. In hiring, an employer may lean toward someone without a child versus someone who is already with one just because there are more chances of absences with the latter when her child becomes sick.

They also face greater financial difficulties and marital conflict. With a lower capacity for earning and less emotional maturity, relationships are under more stress for breaking.

Young unmarried mothers also face social stigmas that can have harmful psychological and social impact.

- Risk for the baby

Children of teen moms also face negative health, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. This may result from lack of maturity, and emotional quotient or simply from ignorance due to a lack of life's experiences.

Children born to teenage mothers are less likely to receive proper nutrition, health care, and cognitive and social stimulation. As a result, they may have an underdeveloped intellect and attain lower academic achievement.

Children born to teenage mothers are at greater risk for abuse and neglect.

Boys born to teenage mothers are 13 percent more likely to be incarcerated whereas girls born to teenage mothers are 22 percent more likely to become teenage mothers.

How to prevent teen pregnancy?

1. Keep them at home with an intact family set up. The social institutions surrounding the youth jointly form a web of influence that either shield or lay them open to the lure of sexual risk-taking.

The family is one such social institution since an intact family with both parents raising the child was found to be correlated to less risk taking behavior by teens.

Those who left home early or were raised by separated parents were noted to engage in sex early and other risk taking behaviors. Family supervision and a stable parental union are associated with lesser chances of their children engaging in premarital sex.

2. Keep them in school. The other social institution that shields the youth from engaging in risk taking behavior is the school. Teens leaving school at an early age are more likely than other group of women to have their first sexual experience outside of marriage.

3. Keep talking to them. Increased parental communication decreases the likelihood of young Filipinos to engage in sexual risk-taking activities. It has been found that the mother, in particular, has a special role because their monitoring as well as open communication lines with their daughter were found to be associated with less chance for the teen to engage in intercourse or have fewer sexual partners.

4. Keep them morally and spiritually grounded. Over 80 percent of the 502 teens in a September poll told researchers that religion is important in their lives. Regardless of gender or race, survey results revealed that teens who attend religious services frequently are less likely to have permissive attitudes about sex. Orienting them with the proper values early helps them imbibe it in their lives and keeps them from succumbing to peer pressure.

Preventing teen pregnancies requires a concerted effort on the part of the parents, the school and government. They need to insure that the right information is transmitted to children especially during their pre-teen years and that they are well-monitored and supported emotionally and psychologically. We can't watch what our kids do all the time, but then again, we won't have to if they are equipped to make better decisions for themselves.

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