

TRENDS Child FACT SHEET

Publication #2008-07

4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20008
Phone 202-572-6000 Fax 202-362-8420 www.childtrends.org

Contraceptive Use Patterns Across Teens' Sexual Relationships

By Emily Holcombe, B.A., David Carrier, J.D., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., and Suzanne Ryan, Ph.D.

February 2008

BACKGROUND

Teens typically fail to use contraceptives consistently, which contributes to high rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among this age group. Existing research has focused primarily on how teens' own characteristics are related to contraceptive use, but has paid less attention to how the characteristics of teens' relationships and partners might influence contraceptive use and consistency. Using survey data from high school students, this *Fact Sheet* presents findings from recent Child Trends research examining how multiple dimensions of teens' sexual relationships and sexual partners may influence their contraceptive use and consistency. A better understanding of these issues can help parents, program providers, and teens themselves reduce high rates of unintended teen pregnancy, child-bearing, and STIs in the United States.

FINDINGS

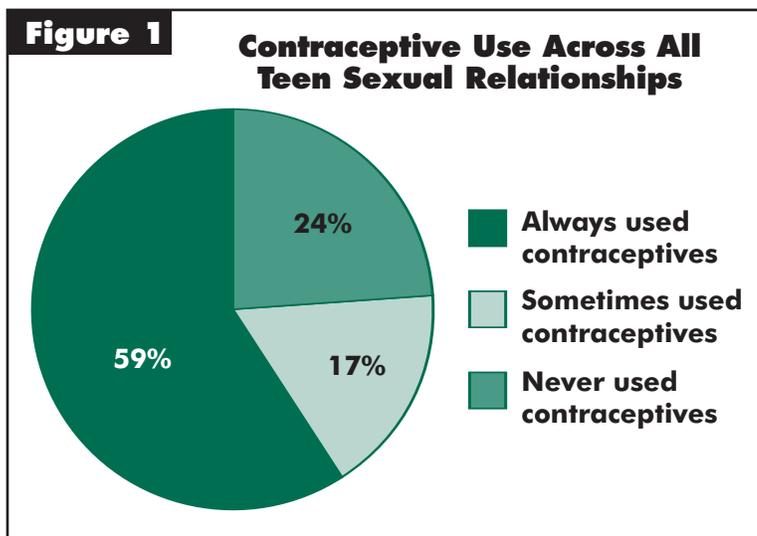
MANY TEENS REPORT INCONSISTENT CONTRACEPTIVE USE

- Teens reported that they or their partners always used contraceptives in 59 percent of their relationships (See Figure 1). However, they reported that they did not use any contraceptives at all in one-quarter (24 percent) of their relationships and that they used contraceptives inconsistently in 17 percent of their relationships.

TEENS' CONTRACEPTIVE USE PATTERNS VARY ACROSS SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

- As teens became involved in a larger number of relationships, they were more likely to report never using contraceptives and were less likely to report always using contraceptives. For example, teens who were involved in only one relationship were more likely to have always used contraceptives and were less likely to have never used contraceptives in that relationship than were teens who reported multiple relationships (See Figure 2).

- For teens who had been involved in two or more sexual relationships, more than one-half reported that how consistently they used contraceptives varied across these relationships (analyses not shown here). For example, in one relationship, a teen may have used contraception every time that the teen had sex with his or her partner, but the teen may have only used contraception some of the time or not at all in another relationship. This pattern suggests that characteristics of the teens' various partners may be associated with teens' own contraceptive use and consistency.

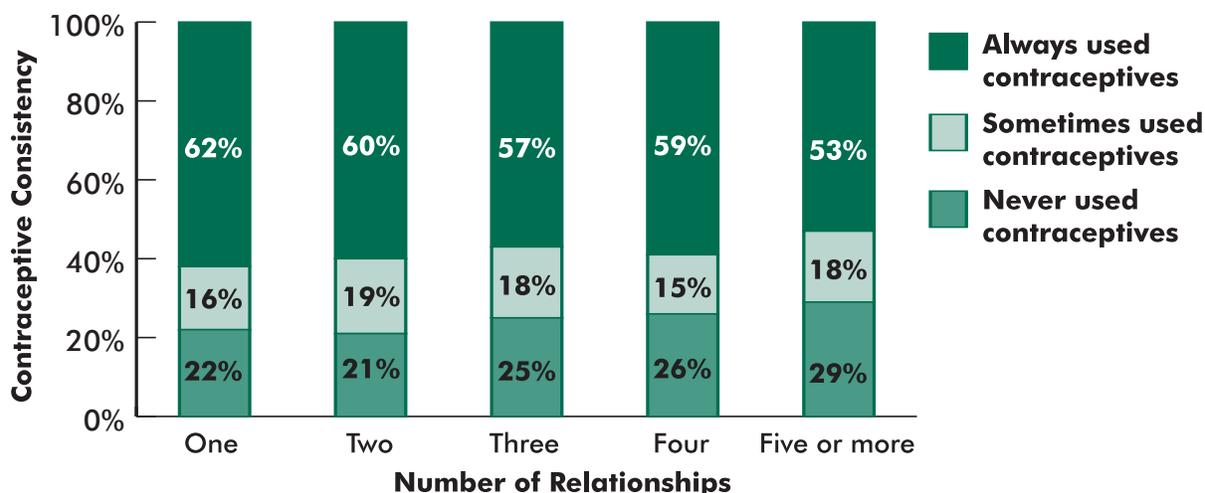


ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY FOR THIS *Fact Sheet*

This *Fact Sheet* is based on an article titled “Contraceptive Use Patterns Across Teens’ Sexual Relationships: The Role of Relationships, Partners, and Sexual Histories,” published in the August 2007 issue of *Demography* and authored by Jennifer Manlove, Suzanne Ryan, and Kerry Franzetta at Child Trends. In conducting the research on which the article is based, the authors followed a national sample of sexually experienced adolescents to examine whether and how contraceptive use patterns changed across their sexual relationships and how characteristics of sexual partners were linked to contraceptive use and consistency. They analyzed data from two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative survey of adolescents who were in grades seven through twelve in the United States in 1995. The sample analyzed consisted of 4,556 unmarried, sexually experienced male and female teens. Using multivariate analysis (that is, examining multiple variables at the same time), they tested a number of relationship characteristics to determine if they were associated with whether teens reported “always” or “ever” using contraception in their sexual relationships.

Figure 2

Contraceptive Use in Teens' Sexual Relationships by Number of Relationships



CURRENT RELATIONSHIP AND PARTNER CHARACTERISTICS ARE IMPORTANT TO DECISIONS ABOUT USING CONTRACEPTION

- Over and above teens’ own characteristics (such as their age or race/ethnicity), a number of partner and relationship characteristics were linked to contraceptive use and consistency. These latter characteristics include age at the first sexual experience in the relationship, relationship type (romantic versus casual), level of intimacy in the relationship, communication, and partner homogamy (that is, similarities between the teen and his or her partner).

AN OLDER AGE IS ASSOCIATED WITH CONTRACEPTIVE USE

- Teens in our study were, on average, 16 years old when they first had sex.

- Teens who were older when they first had sex with their partners were more likely to use contraception at least once, but were less likely to use contraception every time that they had sex.

- One explanation for this finding is that older teens may be more comfortable negotiating contraceptive use with their partners, which would increase their chances of using contraception. On the other hand, older teens may be involved in committed relationships in which they may be more willing to occasionally skip using contraceptives or they may want or be willing to have or father a child, thus decreasing their chances of using contraception consistently.

TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP IS LINKED TO CONSISTENCY OF CONTRACEPTIVE USE

- More than two-thirds of the teens in our study were involved in a relationship that they

described as “romantic,” whereas the other teens reported that they were involved in more casual relationships.

- Teens who were involved in romantic relationships were more likely to use contraception at least once, but were less likely to use contraception every time that they had sex.
- Similar to the finding about the protective effect of being older, results suggest that being involved in a more serious relationship may be beneficial because teens may be more comfortable negotiating—and therefore using—contraception with romantic partners than with casual partners. Yet teens in romantic relationships may also be less consistent users of contraceptives than those in casual relationships because romantically involved teens may be more willing to occasionally skip using contraceptives in these committed relationships or perhaps even because they may regard a pregnancy favorably.

TEENS WHO ENGAGED IN MORE DATING ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR PARTNERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE CONTRACEPTIVES

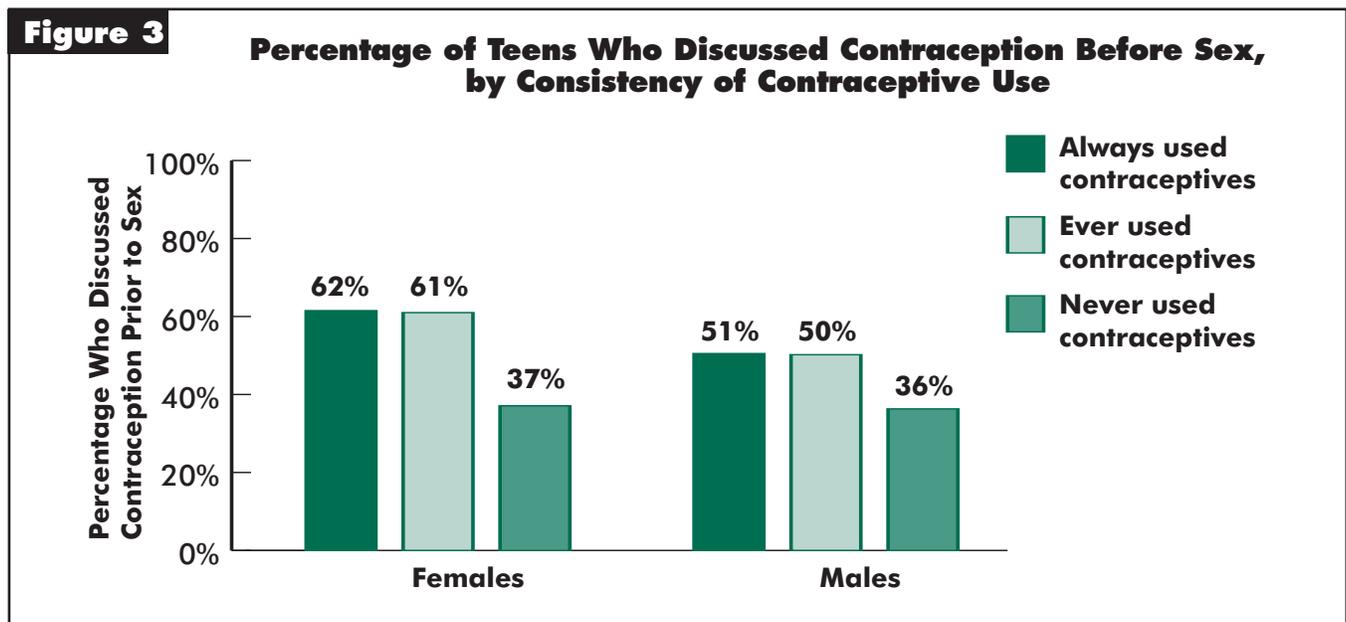
- This finding suggests that teens who spend more time with their partners in dating activities (such as going out together alone as a couple or meeting each other’s parents) may feel more comfortable with their partners and may be better able to communicate with their partners about contraception than are teens in less emotionally intimate relationships.

COMMUNICATION ABOUT CONTRACEPTION IS ASSOCIATED WITH MORE CONTRACEPTIVE USE

- Sixty-two percent of female teens and 51 percent of male teens who always used contraception reported that they discussed contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time, compared with only 37 percent of female teens and 36 percent of male teens who never used contraception (See Figure 3).
- Female teens who reported discussing contraception with their partners before having sex were twice as likely to actually use contraception as were those who did not have these discussions.

RELATIONSHIPS INVOLVING DISSIMILAR PARTNERS ARE LINKED TO REDUCED CONTRACEPTIVE USE

- Most teens reported having relationships with partners with whom they had a lot in common. Seventy-five percent of teens reported that they had sexual partners who were the same age as themselves, 79 percent reported that they had partners of the same race/ethnicity, and 63 percent reported meeting their partner through school, a place of worship, their neighborhood, or through friends.
- Female teens who selected partners who were more similar to themselves, especially when it came to age, were more likely to use contraception.



- These findings suggest that teens who have an older sexual partner, have a partner of a different race/ethnicity, or who do not know their partner through shared social networks (such as school or neighborhood) may feel less able or less comfortable negotiating sexual activity and contraceptive use.

TEENS CONTINUE HABITS (GOOD OR BAD) DEVELOPED IN PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

- Teens with experience using contraceptives consistently in an earlier relationship were better able to maintain a pattern of using contraception consistently in later relationships.
- Alternatively, teens with a history of inconsistent contraceptive use were more likely to continue their pattern of using contraception erratically, putting them at greater risk for unintended pregnancy in future relationships.

FEMALE TEENS WHO USE HORMONAL METHODS OF CONTRACEPTION ARE MORE CONSISTENT IN THEIR USE OF CONTRACEPTIVES

- Those who chose to use hormonal methods of contraception (e.g. birth control pills, Depo Provera) had a higher level of contraceptive consistency. Female teens who used a hormonal method in a previous sexual relationship were 74 percent more likely to always use contraceptives in their subsequent relationship than were female teens who used other contraceptive methods or no methods.
- Users of hormonal methods may be more consistent contraceptive users because they do not need to negotiate use of a condom or other contraceptive device every time that they engage in sexual intercourse. Alternatively, female teens who choose to use hormonal methods may be particularly motivated to avoid the risks associated with unprotected intercourse and, thus, more likely to be consistent users of contraception, regardless of method.
- Note that while hormonal methods protect against pregnancy, they do not protect against STIs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, teens do not use contraceptives consistently, which places them at risk of unintended

pregnancy and STIs. Moreover, teens vary their levels of contraceptive consistency across relationships. Thus, teens may use contraception every time that they have sex with one partner, but may use contraception only sometimes or never with a different partner.

Our analyses uncovered important factors that influence whether teens use contraceptives consistently. These factors include characteristics of their partners and relationships, their history of previous contraceptive consistency, and whether they used hormonal methods. Characteristics found to be associated with improved contraceptive use or consistency among teens include being older at the first sexual experience in the relationship, being involved in a romantic versus a casual relationship, experiencing a higher level of emotional intimacy in the relationship, discussing contraception before having sex for the first time, and having a partner with whom one has much in common. In addition, teens who used contraception consistently in past relationships were found to be more likely to continue to use contraception consistently in current and future relationships.

Pregnancy prevention programs should consider integrating awareness of the multiple dimensions of sexual relationships into role-playing exercises to help teens negotiate contraceptive use with their partners; they also should consider paying more attention to the importance of partners and relationships in teens' sexual decision making. Programs that focus only on individual characteristics ignore critical dimensions of teen relationships that influence reproductive health. Teens who have experience practicing how to say no to unprotected sex and negotiating contraceptive use in different relationships and with different types of partners may be better prepared to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy or STIs, benefiting not only themselves but society at large.

Child Trends is indebted to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for its support of this *Fact Sheet*.

The research on which the *Demography* article was based was funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development through Grant RO1 HD40830-01.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children from pregnancy to the transition to adulthood. Its mission is to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available *Research Briefs*, visit our Web site at www.childtrends.org. For the latest information on more than 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, visit the Child Trends DataBank at www.childtrendsdatabank.org.