

Improved communication could reduce STD epidemic among black teenagers

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(Medical Xpress)—Black urban teenagers from low-income families face a rate of sexually transmitted disease up to 10 times higher than their white counterparts, but recent studies at Oregon State University have identified approaches to prevention programs that might reduce this problem.

The research, based on interviews of black adolescents ages 15-17 in San Francisco and Chicago, found that information from parents, teachers and other caring adults is actually listened to, more than the adults might think. And the problem of youth getting "mixed messages" from different entities, ranging from schools to movies, churches, [peer groups](#) and medical clinics, may not be that large of an issue.

If teenagers get a wide range of medical, social, educational and personal support and information from multiple sources, they are fairly adept at separating the good sense from the nonsense, scientists said.

Unfortunately, that broad range of information and communication often doesn't exist.

And somewhat surprisingly, the research found that few youth use or trust the Internet for information on sexual health.

"The level of sexual activity at a young age and incidence of STDs, including HIV and AIDS, in low-income, urban black teenagers is high," said Margaret Dolcini, an associate professor in the OSU School of Social and [Behavioral Health](#) Sciences. "We have made strides in

prevention, but need to continue to deepen our understanding of the factors that contribute to unsafe sexual activity."

The OSU studies were published in *Research in Human Development*, a scientific journal, with support from the National Institutes of Health. They explored the influences and pressures this group of teenagers faced, including choices to have sex, where people get information, and how that affects behavior.

"We found that young black kids who got information from varied sources tended to do pretty well in making [smart choices](#)," Dolcini said.

The most important progress, the OSU researchers found, could be made if various educational, religious and social support organizations would make a more concerted effort to address issues collectively, within the constraints of their roles and belief systems.

"We need more collaboration between family, schools, [medical clinics](#), churches, and other entities that traditionally may not have worked together," Dolcini said.

"This is possible, and we should encourage more of it," she said. "We wouldn't necessarily expect a church to offer condom demonstrations, but a community clinic or school sex education program might do exactly that. And there's a place for both."

Among the findings of the studies:

- Stressing abstinence at young ages is appropriate, but could be made far more effective if youth were taught other forms of emotional interaction as an alternative to sexual intercourse.
- Sex education will be more effective if sex is treated as a healthy

- part of life at appropriate ages and circumstances.
- Young women benefitted strongly from families who had open lines of communication, talked about sex, monitored their activities and made it clear their health and safety was important.
 - Many teenagers have received surprisingly little accurate [information](#) about sex and [sexual health](#).
 - Sex education programs in schools are nearly universal and there is also strong participation in sex-related education from youth at community centers.

Provided by Oregon State University

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