

Where Latino teens learn about sex does matter

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The [U.S. teen pregnancy rate is at a historic low](#), with the number of teen births declining dramatically over the past decades.

But there are disparities among groups of teens. [Latina teens have the highest teen birth rate](#) of any racial or ethnic group. [Latino teens are also more affected by STIs](#) – particularly chlamydia, syphilis, and gonorrhea – than their white peers. Sexually active Latino teens are also [less likely to use condoms](#) and other forms of contraception.

Sexual exploration during adolescence is normal and healthy. These disparities are a sign that many Latino teens have unmet needs when it comes to information about sexual health and relationships.

Prior research has found that teens' source of sex information [is related to their beliefs about sex](#) and sexual behaviors. And today teens get information about sex from [a variety of sources](#), including their parents, peers, school and digital media.

Understanding where teens learn about sex and how that influences them can help us find ways to encourage healthy sexual behaviors, such as using condoms and birth control.

But despite these disparities, and the fact that Latinos are also the largest ethnic or racial minority in the U.S. (constituting [17 percent of the population](#) and [23 percent of all youth](#)), there is very little research about where Latino teens are getting information about sex.

Where Latino teens get information about sex

To find out more about which sources are most relevant to Latino teens, we surveyed nearly 1,200 Latino ninth graders at 10 different high schools in Los Angeles.

In the survey, teens had to select their "most important source of information about sex and relationships while growing up" from a list of 11 options. Rather than asking about the many sources of information

they have encountered, we wanted to know which one they felt was most important in their lives.

Parents were the most commonly listed source, with 38 percent saying their parents were their most important source of information about sex and relationships. These findings are similar to surveys of [teens from other racial and ethnic groups](#), who report that parents are the most important influence on their decisions about sex.

For some teens in our study, different sources – including other [family members](#) (17 percent), classes at school (13 percent) and friends (11 percent) – fill this important role.

Although [other studies](#) have found that teens often rely on media and the internet for sexual health information, teens in our study rarely mentioned them as their most important source. That doesn't mean they aren't accessing information about sex online or hearing about sex on TV, but that they do not necessarily see these as the most important source in their lives.

Where teens learn about sex matters

We also wanted to know if there was a connection between Latino teens' most important source of sex information and their intentions to use condoms in the future.

Overall, most teens in our study planned to use condoms the next time they had sex, with 71 percent of teens saying that they "definitely will" and 22 percent saying that they "probably will." But did their preferred source of information about sex matter in this decision?

We compared the influence of parents, other family members, friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, schools, [health care providers](#) and media on

teens' intentions to use condoms.

After controlling for other factors known to be linked to teens' sexual behaviors, such as age, gender and sexual experience, we found that these Latino teens' stated most important source of sex information [was significantly related to their intentions](#) to use condoms in the future. In other words, there is a connection between where teens get information about sex and their future sexual behaviors.

We then compared the influence of other sources of sex information to the influence of parents.

Teens who reported that their family members, classes at school, health care providers, boyfriends or girlfriends, or the media were their main source of information about sex reported similarly high intentions to use condoms to teens who listed their parents as most important.

However, the teens who turned to their friends for sex information were less likely to say they planned to use condoms than teens who turn to their parents. This is not too surprising. Teens who rely on friends as their primary source of sex information may be more vulnerable to peer pressure to avoid using condoms or may be getting misinformation about their effectiveness.

The primary source of sex information was particularly important for the boys' intentions to use condoms in the future. The boys who rely on friends or media and internet as their main sources for sex information were significantly less likely to report planning to use condoms than the boys who turned to their parents.

Boys who do not have a trusted adult who they can rely on for sex information may be seeking out sources that could also spread negative messages about [condoms](#), such as "locker room talk" with peers or

pornography online.

Encouraging positive conversations about sex

These findings highlight the importance of providing comprehensive sources of sex information for Latino teens at home, in their schools and in the community.

Unfortunately, we don't know how these results compare to other groups of teens. Not enough research has been done on how the various [sources](#) of sex information may influence teens' sexual behavior, and there is a need for more studies on this topic.

Given that [parents](#) are a popular and important source of information for many teens, [interventions that empower parents](#) to talk to their kids about sexuality, relationships and [sexual health](#) and provide them with accurate information could help.

It may be beneficial to include other family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings in these interventions so they too can provide accurate information when [teens](#) turn to them.

Encouraging positive family conversations about sex and relationships will help young people make healthier decisions and grow into sexually healthy adults.

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