

Why do teens have sex early? Family, neighborhood are big factors

June 4 2024, by Jess Berthold



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Teens who come from close-knit neighborhoods and families are less likely to have sex at a young age, while teens' schools have less influence on their sexual behavior, a new study led by UC San Francisco found.

The findings could help educators and [public health officials](#) direct resources more effectively to prevent [unplanned pregnancy](#), sexually

transmitted diseases and other negative outcomes from having sex at a young age.

For the study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, researchers asked 4,001 adolescents from 751 neighborhoods and 115 schools in Alabama, California and Texas whether they had had sex by 10th grade. They surveyed the students, as well as their families and teachers, about the quality of relationships at home and in their schools and neighborhoods. Questions included how likely families and neighbors were to spend time together and help one another, and how much students trusted one another and their teachers.

Children whose [parents](#) restricted their dating were 55% less likely to have sex by 10th grade, as were kids who spent less time alone when home (8% less likely) and whose families reported being cohesive (7% less likely). Children from close-knit neighborhoods were 10% less likely to have sex by 10th grade, while those in neighborhoods that were socioeconomically disadvantaged and with lower educational levels were 24% and 23%, respectively, more likely to have sex by 10th grade. There were no [school](#) factors associated with having sex by 10th grade.

"Our results echo other studies' findings on the importance of families and neighborhoods in protecting youth from risky behaviors, and show that feeling connected to one's [local community](#) can mitigate sexually [risky behaviors](#)," said Camila Cribb Fabersunne, MD, UCSF pediatrician and the study's lead author.

"Parents should not underestimate the impact they can have on their children," added Tracy Richmond, MD, professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and senior study author. "Simple parenting strategies like limiting dating can make a big difference on the timing of their child's first sexual encounter which in turn can influence on their child's overall health and well-being."

Like currency, 'social capital' pays off

Messages and education about sexual behavior often come from school, she added, but public health officials and educators may want to put more resources into family and neighborhood strategies. These would include establishing community-based health centers for youth and supporting parents to have conversations with young people.

"It's about investing in neighborhoods, such as adding greenspace, [safety features](#) and transit, so parents can be more available to their kids," said Cribb Fabersunne. "Isolation and premature independence lead children to risky behavior, and that happens when we disenfranchise low-income neighborhoods."

About 23% of U.S. children have sex by 10th grade, with early sexual debut more common among males and Black and Latinx youth. Having sex at a young age is associated with a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted illnesses, including HIV infections, having unplanned pregnancies and becoming depressed, research shows.

This is the first known study to look at how children's social connections at home, school and neighborhoods simultaneously affect their sexual behavior, said Cribb Fabersunne. Most research of this nature is focused on adults.

"We call these social connections [social capital](#); they are like a currency that is maintained through trust, reciprocity and cooperation. It shows up in [family members](#) that support you and neighbors that look out for you," Cribb Fabersunne said. "To encourage healthy [sexual behavior](#), we need to build up social capital for kids in the places where it will be most effective."

More information: Camila Cribb Fabersunne et al, *Journal of*

Adolescent Health (2024).

Provided by University of California, San Francisco

Citation: Why do teens have sex early? Family, neighborhood are big factors (2024, June 4)
retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-teens-sex-early-family-neighborhood.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.