



The National Campaign  
to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

# Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy

May 2013

The National Campaign wishes to thank the following members of the Personal Responsibility, Religion, and Values Advisory Group for their review of this resource:

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## OVERVIEW

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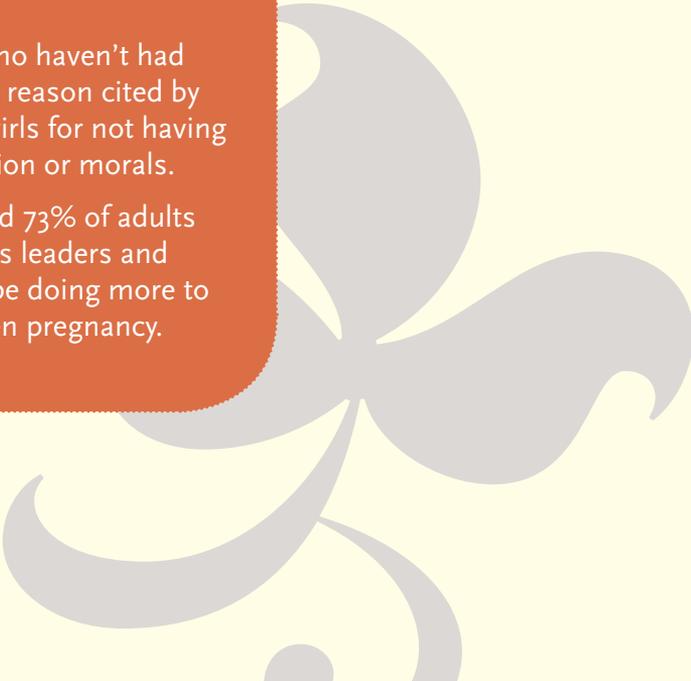
Research shows that religion, faith, and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teens from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, according to the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth, more than half of teen girls—57 percent—said that they had never had sex, and nearly one-half of these young women said that the main reason they had abstained from sex was that it was against their religion or morals. In addition, having a connection to a religious community is linked with decreased risk for teen pregnancy. Clearly, the role of faith in preventing teen pregnancy is a vital and important one. By teaching and preaching religious values, faith communities can help shape the character of our children and give them answers to their most heartfelt questions.

To support faith communities in this regard, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy’s Task Force on Religion and Public Values developed *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy* more than a decade ago. With input from respected faith leaders from around the country, the Campaign has updated this resource to reflect changes in society at large and youth culture in particular. The new resource, *Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy* draws from the original publication, but has been updated in order to remain useful and relevant. In particular, we are grateful for input and recommendations from Don Flowers, Jr., Pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Charleston, SC; Reverend Dr. Derrick Harkins, Senior Pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, DC; Reverend Leon Bell, Jr., in Mobile, AL; and Millicent E. West from the New Bethlehem Community Center in Augusta, GA. In addition, we are grateful to the review by our Personal Responsibility, Religion, and Values Advisory Group (see back page for names and affiliations). The Advisory Group, whose members are religious and secular leaders from a range of faith traditions, hope these tips encourage religious leaders of all faiths and denominations to take on the issue of teen pregnancy *in the context of their religious beliefs*.



Teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States have declined dramatically in the last two decades, although it remains true that our nation still has the highest rates in the industrialized world by far—with more than 700,000 teen pregnancies every year. Communities of faith know that teen pregnancy is a complicated issue. They also know that their work with young people must compete with messages from a wider culture often at odds with the ethics and morality of their religious traditions and beliefs. That's why it's so important for faith communities to engage their young members—and to talk with them throughout their teen years. As teenagers seek spiritual guidance, faith communities are uniquely positioned to minister to this need, and, accordingly, faith communities can place questions about sex firmly within the context of their religious values and moral traditions.

## Why Should Faith Leaders Get Involved in Preventing Teen Pregnancy?

- \* Research and survey data both show that religious faith and a strong moral sense play important roles in protecting young people from too-early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and other risky behavior.
  - \* Among teens who haven't had sex, the primary reason cited by both boys and girls for not having sex is their religion or morals.
  - \* 75% of teens and 73% of adults say that religious leaders and groups should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancy.
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## **Address the desire teens have for spiritual fulfillment and offer them answers to the challenges they face.**

**1.** It is during the teenage years that young people might first struggle with the enduring questions of human existence and the intensity and urgency of these questions can be very powerful to them. Many teens desire guidance to help them make decisions in everyday life from a values standpoint during these transitive years—faith leaders can help youth frame these important decisions as related to their faith traditions. Because faith communities are uniquely able to provide the spiritual guidance that many teenagers crave, they should embrace this responsibility with energy and commitment.

## **Encourage parents to talk with their children about sex and morality within the context of your faith tradition.**

**2.** Many parents are embarrassed and uncomfortable talking with their children about sex, especially if they didn't talk with their own parents about this topic. This is not unusual, particularly since parents often say they are worried about how to start conversations about these issues. But parents don't have to be technical experts on sex and reproduction—they are children's first and best teachers about values and moral expectations. A faith community is an ideal place for parents and children to learn how to talk with each other about these important topics. Consider sponsoring workshops for parents about how to talk with their children about sensitive subjects, such as human sexuality, within the context of your faith tradition. Workshops should provide examples for parents on how to have developmentally and age-appropriate conversations about these topics with their children in addition to strategies for setting proper boundaries for their children in accordance with their spiritual beliefs.



Nearly nine in 10 teens say that it would be much easier for teens to delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.

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## **Enlist adults in your faith community to help young people.**

**3.** Teenagers develop character and personal values by interacting with respected and empathetic adults. Sometimes faith leaders themselves are available to work directly with teenagers, but often they carry so many responsibilities that they need help from others. If this is the case, ask highly trusted and knowledgeable adults in your faith community to assist in the important work with teenagers. Whether the adults create an organized mentoring program or something more informal, be sure they understand teenagers and can talk about values and relationships within the context of your faith's principles. You can also consider providing these adults with support, training, and resources that may help them better relay this information to teens.

## **Make sure children and teenagers in your faith community understand what your faith tradition says about sex, love, and marriage in general and teen pregnancy in particular. Use clear and unambiguous language.**

**4.** Young people need to know and understand where your faith tradition stands on matters of sexuality. Faith traditions can have a strong influence on helping teens avoid too-early sexual activity and pregnancy, but messages need to be clear, direct, and precise. Consider explaining to young people why your faith tradition holds the values that it does. Encourage open, honest, and frank discussions about the challenges—and choices—that young people face in their daily lives. Age-appropriate discussions about sex, love, relationships, and marriage within the context of religious faith should begin when children are young, rather than waiting until they're teens.



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## Learn about contemporary youth culture—what your young people are reading, listening to, watching, and doing.

5. Understanding the world of teens makes it easier for parents to communicate with and care for them. The influence of the entertainment media, in particular, on youth culture is important and may affect the way teens see the world. Know the music that young people enjoy. Watch the television shows they watch. Know the websites that they visit. Take a look at the magazines they are reading. Understand how teens communicate with each other in the ever-changing age of social media and digital devices. With such information in hand, you can have a fuller picture of their lives, and better explore with teens how the messages they receive agree with or differ from what is expected of them as members of your faith community. Reach out and engage youth in discussions about youth culture as well—providing them an opportunity to share their expertise and you an opportunity to serve as a guidepost for them in a culture that may sometimes seem misaligned with the values of your faith community.

Three-quarters of teens say that what they see in the media about sex, love, and relationships can be a good way to start conversations with adults about these topics.



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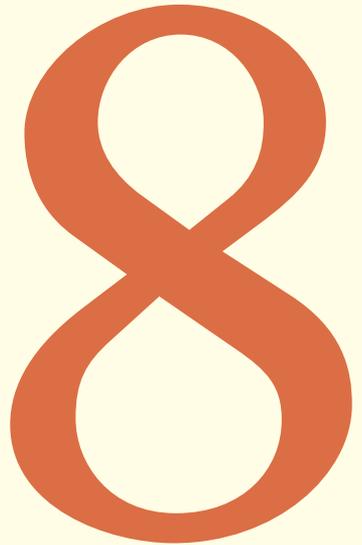
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## **Reach out to other faith communities, neighborhood organizations, and institutions that work with young people.**

**6.** You don't have to go it alone. Working together, faith leaders can make a real difference in preventing teen pregnancy, and there are a wide array of resources and services available that you can easily access. Consider coordinating with fellow leaders to preach on the topic of teen pregnancy during the same week. Or develop a particular prayer for all young people facing choices about sex and relationships. Look to clergy associations, ecumenical councils, and other local faith networks for support and collegiality in addressing this and other issues important to young people. And remember that other public and private institutions can be valuable partners in the helping young people in your faith community—including schools, public health departments and organizations, local gyms, YMCAs and YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, and recreation centers.

## **Reach out to teenagers who are not involved in any faith community.**

**7.** Though young people seek answers to spiritual questions, some are reluctant to find them in institutions of organized religion. And it is often the teens who are outside of faith communities—and perhaps unattached to any positive group—who are particularly likely to benefit from your support. One dynamic youth minister in California reached out to neighborhood teens by encouraging them to structure their own youth program and creating a program based on those suggestions. He also moved his youth activities into a storefront center just a half-block from his church. A youth group of 30 teens that once met in the church basement now numbers in the hundreds.



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## Celebrate achievement and excellence.

**8.** Let the young people in your community know that they matter. By specifically supporting excellence and achievements by young people, faith communities can help to create an environment that reduces the risk of early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, research has shown that early school failure and dropping out of school are closely associated with becoming a teen parent. By encouraging educational achievement, for example, faith communities may be able to help persuade teenagers to stay in school. Encourage or offer scholarships for college and vocational training, and consider publicly recognizing those young people who achieve such prizes. Organize tutoring, homework assistance, and opportunities for community service.

Celebrate spiritual and non-academic activities as well, like volunteer work or achievement in the arts. Consider recognition ceremonies during regular worship services or designate specific days each year to honor teenagers for their accomplishments in a wide range of areas. Give the teenagers in your faith community a place to shine no matter what their abilities or interests. Remember to continue to provide this affirmation and support as teens move into young adulthood. They will continue to need your support navigating their life decisions, both big and small.



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## Organize supervised group activities for teenagers in your faith community.

9. Teenagers need things to say “yes” to especially when we are asking them to say “no” to pregnancy. Encourage the parents and other adults in your faith community to organize and lead group activities with teens—a picnic at the park, an evening at the local bowling alley or ice skating rink, or even a simple pizza party. Also, ask youth themselves what activities they would enjoy so that what you’re planning is relevant and interesting to them. Activities that give youth learning experiences and access to caring adults, like community service or day trips to museums or historic and religious sites, are another option. All the activities that you sponsor for young people—from prayer circles to field trips—are excellent opportunities for fostering fellowship, developing supportive friendships, and strengthening relationships between adults and teens in the community. By creating a positive and spiritually-oriented peer culture, you can help teens make the right decisions about sex.



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## Resources for Faith Communities

To help faith communities and faith-based groups in the important work they are already doing for young people, to convince community-based leaders focused on preventing teen pregnancy to see religious institutions as allies, and to bring together local religious leaders and experts in the field of sexual health to do more to reduce teen pregnancy, The National Campaign is pleased to offer additional resources and materials on our website. Specifically, The National Campaign website now includes a Faith Resource Center with materials and tools for how faith leaders can address teen pregnancy prevention in a faith setting. More information is available at: [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/religion/resource\\_center.aspx](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/religion/resource_center.aspx).

National Campaign publications for faith leaders are available at [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/religion/resources.aspx](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/religion/resources.aspx).

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This resource was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is supported by grant number 1U58DP002916-03. Information presented in this resource is solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC. The National Campaign wishes to thank the CDC for its support of this resource.

