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Strong messages get girls to wait on motherhood

Several factors pushing down pregnancy rate

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By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

A mastery of words landed 13-year-old Ashley White a spot at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 1999 and a role in a documentary about the bee, *Spellbound*.

Four years later, the teen from a working-class home in Washington, D.C., got pregnant.

"I was so crushed," she says. She knew she had disappointed her mother, who was 17 when Ashley was born. Now 21, White attends Howard University full time while raising her 3-year-old daughter, Dashayla, and working 20 hours a week at a program that urges teenage girls to delay childbearing.

"I tell them my life story and how hard it's been for me," says White, who has been on welfare, lived in homeless shelters and lugged a baby onto buses in snow. "I want them to be incredibly aware of the consequences." As a teen mom, she says, "you have to grow up fast."

Girls are listening to that message. The teen birth rate fell 30% between 1991 and 2002, and the teen pregnancy rate even more, 36%, according to figures from the U.S. government and the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization.

Black teens have seen the most dramatic change. A decade ago, they had the highest birth rate. It fell by 45% from 115 births per 1,000 in 1991 to 63 in 2004.

"It's a combination of many factors," says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. She says welfare reform reduced benefits, and more schools, churches and community groups offer abstinence- and sex-education programs.

"Teenagers are having less sex," she says. The percentage of high school students who said in surveys that they had had intercourse fell from 54% in 1991 to 47% in 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

Sexually active teens are more inclined to use birth control, spurred by fear of AIDS and expanded contraceptive options, says Robert Blum, professor of family and reproductive health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

A focus on abstinence has had an effect, Brown says: "It's no longer embarrassing to be a virgin."

Monessa Samuels, 15, a 10th-grader in New York City, says she sometimes feels pressure about sex when other students say, "Oh, you haven't done that yet." But she says if she tells them she's not ready, "They don't make fun of you."

Monessa participates in the Children's Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, a privately funded program in New York City and several states, including Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Texas and Florida.

"What works is not to separate sex messages from everything else that makes a person whole," founder Michael Carrera says.

Children starting in fifth grade are exposed to sports, the arts, job training, academic tutoring and sex education. To avoid pregnancy, he says, teens need to have goals and opportunity.

HIV- and sex-education programs nationwide are helping reduce teen pregnancy, says Douglas Kirby of ETR Associates, a health education organization. He says the biggest decreases tend to be in states where programs cover both abstinence and contraception.

The evidence for abstinence-only education is "very weak," he says.

Wade Horn disagrees. Abstinence programs are "a lot more than just saying no," says Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services. He says most incorporate activities such as choir and dance with peer support. Pregnancy prevention should start with abstinence and move to contraception later, when teens are sexually active, he says.

Despite the decline in teen birth rates, Horn sees reason for concern. He says Americans have become "complacent" about out-of-wedlock births to teens and women in their 20s. Most teen mothers, 82%, are unmarried, according to 2004 CDC data. For black teens, it's 96%.

The birth rate for Hispanic teens is the highest of any major ethnic and racial group and double the overall rate. It dipped between 1991 and 2003 but rose slightly in 2004. "In many Latina communities, teen childbearing is not seen as a bad thing," Rebecca Wind of the Guttmacher Institute says.

Consequences of teen motherhood can be dire. Only 63% of those 17 and younger finish high school or obtain a GED, and only 2% complete college by age 30, according to the report out today. Older teen mothers do slightly better, but only 3% finish college.

Ashley White, now a college junior studying communications and TV production, knows she's an exception. She wants to get a bachelor's degree and attend graduate school. She's thankful for scholarships, loans and government-subsidized housing and child care.

"It's a struggle," says White, whose one-bedroom apartment is a jumble of books and toys. "You have all these books to read, and they're not skinny little ones." After cooking dinner and putting her daughter to bed, she says, she's tired every night at 9 p.m., but she's pushing toward a goal.

"It was bad enough to be a teen mom," she says. "I didn't want to be an impoverished one."

Besides, she says, "I have to be a good role model for my daughter."

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