


 Science Says

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## Evaluating the Impact of MTV's *16 and Pregnant* on Teen Viewers' Attitudes About Teen Pregnancy

### Introduction

Concerns exist about the sexual content in popular media and the influence these images and messages might have on young people's sexual behavior. Sexual content in the media has increased over the past several decades, and research has found that the sexual content in media can influence teens' *attitudes* about sex and contraception and may also influence their sexual *behavior*.<sup>1-3</sup> In fact, research has documented an association between exposure to sexual content on television and teen pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>

Little research, however, has been conducted to better understand how media might also have *positive* effects by, for example, decreasing risky sexual behavior and promoting healthier decisions among teens. Given that teens' use of media has increased over the past decade, and that the amount of sexual content in the media has also increased, it is reasonable to explore whether media might be used to help prevent teen pregnancy.

This *Science Says* presents results from an evaluation study designed to learn more about how watching and discussing episodes of the popular MTV documentary-style reality show *16 and Pregnant* influences teens' perceptions of getting pregnant and becoming a parent at a young age. The document also includes new public opinion data that shed light on teens' perceptions of *16 and Pregnant*, in particular, and their views about how media might influence teens' decisions about sex more generally. Complete results from this new public opinion survey of both teens and adults will be available soon in a Campaign report entitled *With One Voice 2010*.

### MEDIA USE<sup>5</sup>

- American children ages 11-14 spend approximately 8 hours and 40 minutes with media every day—more than 5 hours are spent watching television.
- Teens age 15-18 spend nearly 8 hours with media every day—4 hours and 22 minutes are spent watching television.

### TEENS' PERSPECTIVES

New polling data, from a nationally representative survey commissioned by The National Campaign, asked teens their opinions on media and teen pregnancy and their views about *16 and Pregnant*.<sup>6</sup> Findings from young people ages 12-19 include:

- Six in ten teens have watched at least some of *16 and Pregnant*.
- Among those teens who have watched the show, 82% think that the show helps teens better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood, compared to 15% who believe that it glamorizes teen pregnancy.
- In addition, the clear majority of teen boys (67%) and girls (79%) agree with the statement, "when a TV show or character I like deals with teen pregnancy, it makes me think more about my own risk (of becoming pregnant/causing a pregnancy) and how to avoid it."

## About the Evaluation

The National Campaign worked with innovation, Research, and Training, Inc. (iRT) to learn more about teens' perceptions of the show *16 and Pregnant*, and whether or not watching and discussing the show affected their attitudes about teen pregnancy. In partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (see more information below), 18 clubs in one southern state participated in this research study. The clubs were randomly assigned to either see the episodes (treatment = nine clubs) or not (control = nine clubs). All participants obtained parental consent and completed questionnaires at baseline and again a week later. Teens in the treatment groups viewed three episodes of the first-season of *16 and Pregnant* (the Maci, Amber, and Ebony episodes). Boys and Girls Club members watched one episode per day and the episodes were shown in different orders at different clubs. A group leader led a discussion of the shows with the teens each day. Control group teens did not view or discuss the episodes at the clubs, but did complete the pre- and post-test questionnaires.

A total of 162 teens participated and completed both the pre- and post-test questionnaires (78 from the control group and 84 from the treatment group). The average age of the participants was 13.5 years, ranging from 10- to 19-years old. Most participants were female (62%), and three-quarters (75%) were African American. Nearly three-quarters of all participants (73%) received reduced or free lunch at school. About one-third (34%) of the participants reported having had sex.

## Television Shows vs. Prevention Programs

Television and other media alone do not cause—and cannot prevent—teen pregnancy. However, entertainment media can reach millions of teens with important messages about teen pregnancy. It is important to note that there is a critical distinction between this evaluation—which attempts to understand teens' views about teen pregnancy as a result of watching and discussing MTV's *16 and Pregnant*—versus an impact evaluation of a prevention program whose sole purpose is to reduce teen pregnancy. While evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs are guided by specific behavioral theories and have the explicit goal of changing behavior to reduce risk of teen pregnancy, television shows such as *16 and Pregnant* are created for entertainment with the goal of attracting viewers and keeping them engaged.

## Key Findings

- *16 and Pregnant* got teens talking and thinking about teen pregnancy. The majority of teens who watched and discussed the show in a group also later talked to a friend about

**TABLE 1. Who teens talked to about *16 and Pregnant* after watching and discussing episodes of it in an after school setting**

| Discussed with:             | N  | %    |
|-----------------------------|----|------|
| Friend                      | 53 | 63.1 |
| Parent                      | 34 | 40.5 |
| Sibling                     | 31 | 36.9 |
| Girlfriend/boyfriend        | 26 | 31.0 |
| Other family member         | 22 | 26.2 |
| Teacher/counselor           | 15 | 17.9 |
| Health professional         | 7  | 8.3  |
| Religious leader            | 5  | 6.0  |
| Did not discuss with anyone | 15 | 17.9 |

**Note:** Only teens who viewed and discussed the episodes (N=84) were asked if they discussed the episodes with others afterward.

**TABLE 2. Teens' agreement with the following statements by whether or not they discussed *16 and Pregnant* with a friend**

| Perceptions:                                       | Talked with a friend (N=53) | Did not talk with a friend (N=31) |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Not many teens want to get pregnant.               | 3.10                        | 2.77                              |
| Most teen girls do not want to get pregnant.       | 3.26                        | 2.94                              |
| Most teen boys do not want to get a girl pregnant. | 3.38                        | 3.06                              |

**Note:** Cell entries are average (mean) scores on a scale that ranged from 1= "strongly disagree" to 4= "strongly agree."

the show. More than one-third—40%—talked to a *parent* afterward and about one-third spoke to a sibling or girl-friend/boyfriend (Table 1). Clearly, this show is an excellent conversation-starter for teens.

- The more teens talked about the show, the less likely they were to think that teen pregnancy and teen parenthood are commonplace, or to agree with the statement, “most teens want to get pregnant” (Table 2). Parents and practitioners should be encouraged to talk about this show (and others like it) to the teens in their lives to help ensure that these young people know what the adults in their lives think about these shows and their messages.
- The teens in this study enjoyed watching and discussing the *16 and Pregnant* episodes and thought that the show was realistic. Neither the boys nor girls who watched the episodes wanted to imitate the teens in the episodes they watched. In fact, nearly all teens (93%) who watched the show agreed (53% *strongly* agreed) with the statement: “I learned that teen parenthood is harder than I imagined from these episodes.” Although some have claimed that the show “glamorizes” teen pregnancy, the findings from this evaluation and the polling data noted above show that teens do not share that view.

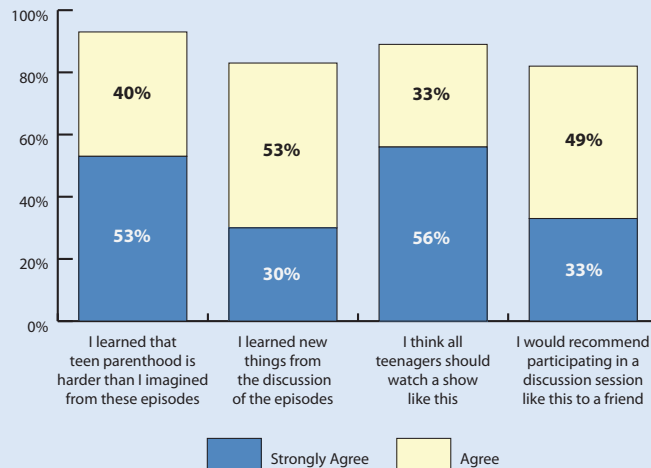
### Other Findings

A number of other findings emerged from this study. Analysis of the pre- and post-test questionnaires determined that regardless of whether or not they watched the episodes, girls had more realistic expectations than boys did about teen parenthood. In particular, many girls felt that becoming a teen parent would make it hard for them to finish high school, to attend college, and to achieve future career goals. Research shows that fewer than four in ten mothers who have a child before they turn 18 earn a high school diploma by age 22.<sup>7</sup> Overall, girls disagreed more strongly than boys with the notion that becoming a teen parent would help to get their lives on track. Teen boys were less likely than the girls to believe that teen parenthood would have a negative impact on their educational or career goals.

In addition, teens who saw and discussed the episodes reported that they enjoyed watching and talking about the show and that they learned something new from doing so (Figure 1). The more they liked it, the more likely they were to have negative views about teen pregnancy.

Teens were eager to recommend the show to others; 89% of participants agreed (56% of those strongly agreed) with the statement:

**FIGURE 1. Proportion of Teens Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed with the Following Statements**



“I think all teenagers should watch a show like this.” Many said they would recommend that friends participate in the discussion, too.

### Cautionary Note

A few findings from the evaluation suggest that viewing *16 and Pregnant* could have an undesirable effect on some viewers. More specifically, teens who watched and discussed the episodes were more likely to believe that teens do want to get pregnant compared to those in the group who did not watch or discuss the episodes.<sup>8</sup> Note that discussing the episodes later with a friend seemed to moderate this finding somewhat (Table 2). Also, among teens who had never had sex, those who viewed and discussed the episodes were more likely than those who had not to believe that most teens want to get pregnant, and that if they were to get pregnant or cause a pregnancy, that they “will be with the baby’s mother/father forever.”

In addition, regardless of whether they watched and discussed the episodes or not, sexually experienced teens were more likely than those teens who had not had sex to think that if they became a teen parent, their parents would help them raise the baby. Sexually experienced teens were also more likely to believe that people would view them as more mature if they had a child as a teen.

### What It All Means

**These types of shows reach a large number of teens and can be used in a positive way.** The results of this project clearly support the idea that teens are interested in watching and discussing

reality television shows about teen pregnancy, and that messages about the realities of teen pregnancy and parenting in these shows can influence teens' attitudes about the challenges of teen parenthood. Given the popularity of these shows, their messages clearly reach a large number of teens. For all these reasons, adults who work with teens should consider viewing and discussing episodes of such shows in their activities or programs that are designed to help reduce teen pregnancy and/or foster positive youth development more broadly.

**Parents should use these shows to help them talk to their teens about sex, love, and relationships.** According to the new polling data noted above, three-quarters of teens and adults agree that stories and events in TV shows and other media can be a good way to start conversations about sex, love, and relationships. This project provides further evidence to suggest that documentary-style shows, presented in ways that are appealing and interesting to teens, can be a useful way to start these conversations. Parents should be encouraged to watch these shows with their teens and use the story lines to openly discuss the challenges typically brought on by too-early pregnancy and parenthood.

**If teens express positive views about teen pregnancy, talk to them about the benefits of waiting to start a family.** Some teens might see pregnancy and parenthood as something that would make them seem more mature, would help them get their life on track, or would be a way to keep a boyfriend/girlfriend. It is crucial for parents and other adults to acknowledge that parenthood can be positive and rewarding, but that babies need and deserve adult parents, and that getting an education and having a stable, long-term partner can help them become good parents.

**Groups such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) can play a valuable role in efforts to reduce teen pregnancy.** The evaluation study summarized here shows that groups like the BGCA can be valuable leaders in preventing teen pregnancy because they work with many young people who are at high risk of teen pregnancy. Many of the BGCA facilitators enjoyed the sessions described here, although it is also true that some felt unprepared to lead the discussions. Training group discussion leaders could help to ensure that they feel comfortable in discussing the risks and problems associated with teen pregnancy and parenthood, and in dispelling the idea that teen pregnancy happens to most teen girls (it does not) or that early parenthood is a good way to get a teen's life on track. There is value in enlisting the help of health educators and experts in health communications who are well versed in adolescent development and youth culture particularly for community partners who may not be familiar with current media or with the topic of teen pregnancy.

## Notes:

- a. Unfortunately, we are not able to assess viewers' own sense of whether or not teen pregnancy is desirable in their own lives, or whether or not the teen viewers think that wanting to get pregnant is acceptable.

## References:

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## About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation.

## About Innovation, Training, and Research (iRT)

iRT, located in Durham, NC, is committed to conducting high quality, innovative basic and applied research as well as creating products and services that better society with a focus on enhancing the mental health, health, and quality of life of children, adolescents, families, communities, and organizations. iRT staff apply clinical and technical knowledge and skills to developing and evaluat-

ing, and helping others to develop and evaluate, evidence-based programs and services.

### **About Boys & Girls Clubs of America**

For more than 100 years, Boys & Girls Clubs of America ([www.bgca.org](http://www.bgca.org)) has enabled young people, especially those who need Clubs most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. Today, some 4,000 Boys & Girls Clubs serve more than 4 million young people through Club membership and community outreach. Clubs can be found throughout the country and on U.S. military installations worldwide, providing young people 6-18 years old with guidance-oriented character development programs conducted by trained, professional staff.

### **About *16 and Pregnant***

MTV's documentary reality series, *16 and Pregnant*, premiered in 2009 and was an immediate hit with teens and young adults. Each hour-long episode follows a teen girl through her pregnancy and during her first few months of parenthood. Viewers get a realistic look at the wide variety of challenges young mothers can face: tumultuous relationships, family involvement (or lack thereof), financial struggles, school and work stress, gossip, and more—all while learning how to care for themselves and their children. For more information about *16 and Pregnant*, The National Campaign creates discussion guides for viewers, which are posted on [www.MTV.com](http://www.MTV.com) and on [www.StayTeen.org](http://www.StayTeen.org).