

# Getting in the Game

## Valentine Virgins and Rising Teen Pregnancy Rates

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Many young people report feeling pressure to have sex (or to start “getting in the game” as some of them call it), especially on certain occasions, such as an anniversary or Valentine’s Day. Sixteen-year-old Mark started dating Marci in seventh grade. By the start of eighth grade they were having oral sex, and on Valentine’s Day in the ninth grade they had intercourse for the first time.

That the onset of puberty brings with it a heightened awareness of sexual feelings and increased likelihood of sexual contact is nothing new. But with puberty beginning earlier, sexual behavior with consequences may begin younger.

According to *Teens Today* research from SADD, while older teens are more likely to report being sexually active than are younger teens, nearly one quarter (24 percent) of sixth graders report some type of sexual activity other than kissing (compared with 73 percent of eleventh graders and 78 percent of twelfth graders).

In her book, *You’re Teaching My Child What?*, psychiatrist Miriam Grossman states that 34 percent of girls are sexually active by age 15 and by ninth grade 20 percent of teens have had oral sex.

In our society, sex, in all its forms, is hard to escape, even for young people. And all that exposure creates a sense of pressure among many of them to become sexually active, often before they want to be.

Eighteen-year-old John says he felt that pressure because “My friend kept saying, ‘Come on, man, get in the game!’”

Fourteen-year-old Alex felt pressure earlier, after his dorm mates at prep school taunted him for being a virgin in ninth grade. So he, too, sought a remedy in bed.

Ellen said, “I turned seventeen and it was like, ‘Well, I have to have sex now.’ So I did.”

Peter, fifteen, had sex with a girl at a party because she handed him a condom and told him they were going to. Feeling he couldn’t return to his friends with the deed undone and risk ridicule, he complied – and he wasn’t happy he did.

In fact, the majority of teens who have had sex say they wish they had waited, reports the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (“The Campaign”).

This sense of urgency to get in the game – much of it engendered by movies, television, and the Internet – makes sex *more* likely and often *less* meaningful.

Indeed, for many kids, sex – or virginity – has become like a commodity ... something to get or to get rid of.

Perhaps nowhere is that more obvious than in the popular teen activity of “sexting” - the texting of naked

photographs, often of oneself (“See what you can get?”).

The results of a survey commissioned by The Campaign reveal that of those who sent such content, 51 percent of teen girls cited “pressure from a guy,” while 18 percent of teen boys blamed pressure from girls.

Predictably, the high rate of sexual contact between teens has spawned a surge in pregnancies. According to a new report by the Guttmacher Institute, the U.S. teen pregnancy rate rose in 2006 for the first time in more than a decade, following many years of decline.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that the U.S. teen pregnancy and birth, STDs, and abortion rates are considerably higher than most other developed countries. The CDC’s staggering estimate is that one in four teenage girls ages 14-19 has an STD.

For parents to believe that young teens are not sexually aware, even sexually active, and potentially at risk, is to miss important opportunities to help them learn about sexuality, relationships, sexual behavior, and health. After all, The Campaign notes that parents are by far the most influential when it comes to teen decision-making about sex, with friends running a distant second.

One proven-effective strategy in reducing teen sexual behavior and its unwanted outcomes begins with parents who are willing to tackle this (still) most difficult of subjects. SADD’s research points to the efficacy of such dialogue: more than half of teens whose parents provide a strong level of guidance say they avoid sexual activity (52 percent), compared

with those whose parents do not (27 percent).

Because early intimate sexual behavior among teens has been linked to unwanted pregnancies and increasingly high rates of disease – not to mention anxiety, depression, and loss of self-esteem – parents have an important role to play by using Valentine’s Day to talk about pressure to have sex ... opening dialogue, answering questions, and conveying expectations.

In that sense, *they* can be the game changers.

---

*Stephen Wallace, author of Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don’t Know and Teens Aren’t Telling, serves as national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, visit [sadd.org](http://sadd.org). For more information about Stephen, visit [stephengraywallace.com](http://stephengraywallace.com).*

© Summit Communications Management Corporation  
2010 All Rights Reserved