Reality Television Shows Reveal the Risks of Teen Pregnancy


"Adults who work with teens should consider viewing and discussing episodes of [reality television shows about teen pregnancy] in their activities or programs that are designed to help reduce teen pregnancy."

A study from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reveals that reality television shows about teen pregnancy can influence teens' perceptions, claim the authors of the following viewpoint. Although teen pregnancy reality shows paint a glamorous picture of teen pregnancy for some, these shows create an opportunity to talk to teens about the risks of sex. Katherine Suellentrop conducts research at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Jane Brown is a communications professor at the University of North Carolina, and Rebecca Ortiz is a graduate student there.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why are Suellentrop, Brown, and Ortiz interested in exploring whether media might help prevent teen pregnancy?
2. What do the authors believe is the critical distinction between television shows such as *16 and Pregnant* and teen pregnancy prevention programs?
3. In the authors' view, what were some of the differences between boys' and girls' opinions found in the study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy?

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*. In fact, research has documented an association between exposure to sexual content on television and teen pregnancy.

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 [National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy] report entitled With One Voice 2010.

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 and Girls Clubs of America, 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.

- 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 the show. More than one-third—40%—talked to a parent afterward and about one-third spoke to a sibling or girlfriend/boyfriend. 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." 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.

**Teens' Opinions Differ by Gender**

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

**A 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. Note that discussing the episodes later with a friend seemed to moderate this finding somewhat. Also, among teens who had never had sex, those who viewed and discussed the episodes were more likely than those who had [had sex] 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.

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.