Chapter 10

Preventing Teen Pregnancy at Pre-Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Much attention is given to preventing teen pregnancy in the adolescent years, but primary prevention can and should start at a much younger age. Prevention strategies should be targeted at pre-adolescents with parents as leaders in the effort; however, healthcare providers, school systems, trusted adults, and the media are also critical components of this prevention team. This chapter discusses pediatric brain maturation, emphasizes the importance of adult-youth relationships, briefly reviews the risk factors associated with teen pregnancy, and explores methods of prevention that can be applied throughout the pre-adolescent stage of development.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing pregnancy prevention, little consideration goes towards pre-adolescent youth; however, there is potential for huge impact if prevention can begin prior to the age of adolescence. While pregnancy is conclusively linked to sexual intercourse, there are multiple opportunities preceding sexual initiation to discuss prevention; and by doing so, prevent early sexual debut – generally defined as sexual intercourse prior to the age of 14 years. Unlike many other developmental milestones, pre-adolescence is instead classified by stage of development rather than linear age. However, for ease of implication, this chapter considers pre-adolescence to generally include ages 9 to 12 years.

During this stage of life, the brain is developing in ways that formalize thought processes and decision-making for the rest of the child’s life. Adults close to the child can have a significant impact on their development during this time. This chapter will briefly overview the development of the pre-adolescent and adolescent brain to contextualize how positive influences can impact risk-taking behaviors and decision-making even into adulthood. The chapter will then focus on modifiable risks associated with
the pre-adolescent population. This is followed by a discussion regarding media use and its effects on the pre-adolescent and adolescent youth. The chapter concludes with information regarding how adult interactions with youth can positively impact their development and mitigate risks otherwise associated with increased sexual risk and potential unplanned pregnancy in this age group. As there is limited research regarding pregnancy prevention in the pre-adolescent youth, this chapter explores potential risks and preventive measures as extrapolated from known risks in the adolescent population and risks associated with early sexual debut.

General search terms regarding pre-adolescent development, adolescent pregnancy and its associated risk factors, and media consumption were used within the pubmed database to develop a reference list of literature. The citations included within those publications were then further utilized in this writing. The chapter addresses predominately populations within the United States. However, as the overarching theme of this chapter is positive adult involvement in the lives of youth to promote healthy development, the authors feel that much of this information could be generalized to other populations of pre-adolescents. The objective of this chapter is to discuss important aspects of potential risks and protective factors contributing to unplanned teen pregnancy and its prevention in the context of development, media, parenting, and education.

**BACKGROUND**

The pre-adolescent child experiences a plethora of changes. Most notable are the physical changes associated with puberty. In addition to these changes, comes curiosity about sex and reproduction. Children at this age want to learn this information from their parents; but when a parent is unavailable or unwilling to teach, pre-adolescents seek out their answers from alternate sources. The pre-adolescent has multiple – often unfiltered, unsupervised, and incorrect – media modalities available to them to satiate their curiosity on topics including puberty, anatomy, sex, and reproduction. Research on adolescents show that teens prefer to receive advice on sexuality from their parents; but few parents feel prepared to have meaningful discussions regarding sex – especially regarding complex topics (Eastman, Corona, & Schuster, 2006; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2017b; Weissbourd, Anderson, Cashin, & McIntyre, 2017). This is an important issue, as unhealthy media consumption can lead to risks associated with teen pregnancy, and family connectedness and parental awareness are protective factors against teen pregnancy. Family connectedness refers to the quality of relationships between family members and involvement in activities together; while parental awareness is the level of knowledge a parent has of their child’s activities and relationships (Eastman et al., 2006; Markham, Tortolero, Escobar-Chaves, Parcel, Harrist, & Addy, 2003). In addition to parents’ roles in the development of adolescents, other trusted adults also positively impact adolescents with regards to sexual development (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2017a). Teachers have been shown to be influential in sexual decision-making framework even from elementary aged interventions (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). Health care providers can also play an important role in risk prevention throughout childhood, but the potential for impact is particularly appreciable in the pre-adolescent stage. Health care providers benefit from a unique awareness of the risk behaviors that can promote unplanned pregnancy. They can advise parents to discuss prevention strategies. Working together, health care providers, teachers, and parents can encourage protective factors in pre-adolescent youth that extend to adulthood (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005; Eastman et al., 2006).