

Forum cites risks of teen pregnancy

RACCAP training session focuses on teen-pregnancy prevention

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The younger teens are when they first have sexual intercourse, the more risks they are exposed to, including unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

That's the message Brianna Magnusson, former grant manager for the Rappahannock Teen Abstinence Program, or RappTap, delivered yesterday at the annual training session for the Rappahannock Area Council for Children and Parents.

There's no single factor that causes some teens to have sex at a young age, said Magnusson, a tobacco cessation educator at Mary Washington Hospital. But she said there are factors that strongly indicate a teen is more likely to have sex before the age of 18.

Magnusson recently completed a study on adolescent sexuality that she hopes to have published.

Teens who are black, whose sexual partners are older, who were raised in a single-parent household and whose mothers gave birth before the age of 18 are more likely to first have sex at a young age--and thus more likely to become pregnant or contract an STD.

Magnusson's findings are based on state Health Department data and the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics.

About 7,643 women between the ages of 15 and 44 and 4,928 men between the ages of 15 and 44 participated in the national survey.

Blacks were more likely to have sex before the age of 18. Of the respondents, 67.9 percent of the women and 73.2 percent of the men were black.

Among the male respondents of all races, the average reported age of first sexual intercourse was 16.7, while the average age of their first partners was 17.41.

Women, on the other hand, reported they first had sex with a partner who was an average of two years older than they were. Women first had sex at an average of 17.26 with a partner who was an average of 20.1 years old.

Roughly 70 percent to 80 percent of both women and men who had sex before the age of 18 reported growing up in a single-parent household.

About 67.3 percent of women and 73.2 percent of men who had sex before the age of 18 had mothers who first gave birth younger than 18.

"Why is this important?" Magnusson asked the audience of about 20 representatives of various children and family-oriented nonprofit agencies. "The U.S. has the highest adolescent pregnancy rate among all industrialized countries. What's going on in our own backyard?"



The city of Fredericksburg has the fifth-highest adolescent pregnancy rate in Virginia, Magnusson said.

In 2004, 64.5 out of every 1,000 girls in Fredericksburg between the ages of 10 and 19 became pregnant, according to the most recent statistics from the Virginia Department of Health Web site.

The 2004 pregnancy rate in Planning District 16, which includes the city and Stafford, Spotsylvania, King George and Caroline counties, was 24.4 out of every 1,000 girls. The state's 2004 pregnancy rate was 26.5 out of every 1,000 girls.

Last Sunday, Stafford deputies were led to an infant's dead body by a 15-year-old Stafford teenager whose parents said they were unaware she had been pregnant. No charges have been filed, but an investigation is continuing.

Magnusson didn't discuss the case, but she did focus on prevention methods for teens, parents, educators, faith leaders and other community members.

For parents and other adults in leadership positions, Magnusson stressed the importance of involvement in a teen's life.

"I think parents aren't paying enough attention," she said.

Abstinence, Magnusson said, is the only 100 percent effective way to protect oneself against pregnancy and STDs.

Contraceptives, when used correctly and consistently, can protect against some, but not all STDs.

The Human Papillomavirus, or HPV, is the most common STD among teens, and is spread through skin-to-skin contact that condoms cannot prevent, Magnusson said.

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Area pregnancy rates

For every 1,000 girls, ages 10-19

Fredericksburg: 64.5

Caroline: 32.2

King George: 28.8

Spotsylvania: 22.6

Stafford: 16.6

Virginia: 26.5

--Virginia Department of Health

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