

Info can combat Mississippi's teen pregnancy problem

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Mississippi has the fourth highest teen birth rate in the nation.

This high rate of teen pregnancy impacts every tax payer with costs including rising rates of foster care, social services and incarceration for young people born to teen parents, according to the MS Economic Policy Center.

[Teens say that parents \(not their peers\) most influence](#)

their decisions about sex, love, and relationships.

Unfortunately, many parents don't talk with their teens because they are uncomfortable or don't have enough information themselves. Mississippians need to address teen pregnancy with honest and effective educational programs. It is clear that our teens need comprehensive, fact-based sex education coupled with strong parental support.

I was disappointed in the January 21st column by Dr. Matthias, [We Need to Discuss the Unwed Motherhood Problem](#). While I agree there are a multitude of issues which lead to our state's high levels of poverty, teen parenthood foremost among them, Dr. Matthias's use of the term "unwed mother" unfairly places the sole responsibility and burden on the female parent, leaving out fatherhood. It takes two people to create a baby. When we discuss solutions for decreasing our state's rates of teen parenthood, those solutions must include both parents and their larger support structure.

I am the director of the Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention. My organization works to diminish teen pregnancy in our state by engaging middle school young women and men and their parents or guardians in real conversations about sexual health. We partner with community and faith-based organizations to host four nights of education in safe, trusting environments to arm the participants with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about sexuality. Our evidence based curriculum strengthens family communication about responsible sexual behavior and focuses on:

- reproduction and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) facts
- consequences of risky sexual behavior

- pregnancy prevention (including abstinence and contraception)
- assertive effective communication skills
- problem-solving, decision-making, and resisting peer pressure

MCTPP follows leading teen pregnancy prevention research by starting pregnancy prevention education early. Through building a teen's support network and engaging parents or guardians in the education process, we are more likely to succeed in building a population of informed successful citizens.

We believe that teens should grow up knowing the facts about sexual health and communicate with their parents or guardians to guide them through the difficult years of adolescence. Facilitating honest conversations between teens and their parents builds a foundation of trust and confidence to ensure healthier life decisions.

After participating in our program, one young man reported, "I liked being able to speak out and ask questions. They treated us equally – like the adults we'll be someday. I feel more confident than before because I now have the real facts." Another young teen reported to us, "I'm much closer to my mom and dad now. We've learned we can trust each other." A parent who also participated in the training told us, "It's easier to talk about sex with my child...now that I have the know-how and the right information."

MCTPP is the only sex education program in Mississippi that works across multiple generations. Over the two years that we have implemented our grass-roots program, we have collected anecdotal and statistical data proving that participating young teens and their parents are more knowledgeable and know how to talk to each other about sex.

Each time we host a program it changes the lives of just a few, but these participants impact many within their sphere of influence. With all of us working together, young people can grow up knowing the facts about sexual health, which will prepare them to make responsible choices to build better futures for themselves and our communities.

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