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Parents: Talk to Middle-Schoolers About Sex to Break Pregnancy Cycle



Dana Larkin, executive director of the Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention, said middle-school aged children are the best age to intercede with sex education.

By [Arielle DreherFriday](#), February 12, 2016 3:54 p.m. CST

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Parents should talk to their children about sex when they are between age 11 and 15 years old, the executive director of the [Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention](#) said today.

Middle-school youth are still at an age when they are receptive to parents' values and opinions, Dana Larkin said this morning at a public forum at Koinonia Coffeehouse in Jackson. Research, she said, shows this is the right age to teach young people about sex in order to prevent risky sexual behavior in the future.

"Research shows that working within two generations makes it more likely to break the cycle of teen pregnancy within families," Larkin told the audience. "Our main goal is to open up the communication between the children and their parents—and the staff at their after-school program."

In a state that requires abstinence-plus sex education in public schools, though, robust conversations about sex with young teens rarely happen in schools and in families.

Mississippi still has one of the [highest teen birth rates](#), at 38 births per 1,000 girls in 2014.

The Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention, a year-old nonprofit organization, partners with after-school programs to put on a month-long class that meets once a week for parents and their children who are anywhere between 11 and 15 years old. The program focuses on communication between parents and their young teens, which research shows helps stymie "risky behavior" by the time teens get to high school. The campaign's curriculum is called "Parent-Adolescent Relationship Education" and is an evidence-based program. The campaign's program takes 10 to 12 families for, whom meet in one class a week for a month. The campaign has partnered with Stewpot Community Services and local Boys and Girls Clubs in Jackson, and they are looking to expand to work with other after-school or group programs throughout the state.

During the classes, students learn in a "non-judgmental" environment, Larkin said. Children and their parents learn about reproduction, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy prevention (from abstinence to contraception). Larkin and her staff train the program's staff in the curriculum before the classes start so that even after the Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention leaves, the after-school program staff can answer questions and continue conversations with parents and students alike. The campaign's dedication to a respectful environment means that they do not push any values on participants.

"We do not tell them to stay pure until marriage because a lot of the families that are participating maybe were teenage parents, and they're doing their best to try to break the cycle," Larkin said. "We don't need to close the door on them."

The program does not discriminate against the LGBT community and leaves a lot of value decisions up to the parents, or often the culture of the organization that they are teaching the class in. The program teaches that abstinence is the best way to avoid pregnancy. Larkin said the campaign is looking to expand and serve more families in more after-school programs, but the group needs funding to make that happen. The campaign has held classes in collaboration with programs in Madison and Hinds counties and is about to do a class in Forrest County. It is looking to expand and eventually serve the rest of the state.

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