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JERSEY VIEWS ON TEEN PREGNANCY AND SEX ED

Teenage celebrity parents seen as negative influence

Teenage pregnancy has certainly received a lot of media attention lately. The star of *Zoey 101* has a baby. The movie *Juno* is a box office hit. A Massachusetts school principal claims a group of students had a “pregnancy pact.” The latest *Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll* found that most New Jerseyans consider teen pregnancy to be a major problem which is not being helped by this recent publicity.

The poll found that 61% of Garden State adults consider teen pregnancy to be a major problem in the state, while 27% say it is a minor problem, 3% not a problem, and 9% have no opinion. A similar number – 65% – say that teens getting sexually transmitted diseases is a major problem in New Jersey, with 23% saying it is a minor problem, 1% not a problem, and 10% with no opinion.

New Jersey adults worry that media attention to celebrity pregnancy is sending the wrong message to teenagers. More than half (56%) say that publicity surrounding young celebrities who become pregnant makes being a parent seem more acceptable to teenagers today. Only 11% say that such publicity makes teen parenthood seem less attractive and 25% say it has no impact.

“Some may view recent news about Britney Spears and her sister Jamie Lynn as cautionary tales for young people and parenthood. However, New Jersey adults worry that media coverage of celebrity pregnancy may be having the opposite effect on the average teenager,” said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

While media buzz around teen celebrity parents may be seen as encouraging sexual behavior, few New Jerseyans feel the same is true about sex education. Only 29% of Garden State residents feel that giving teenagers information about contraception encourages them to have sex earlier than they would otherwise. A majority of 56% say that providing this type of information does not encourage sexual activity.

Nearly all New Jerseyans (93%) support teaching about birth control in high school, and 77% say that starting this type of sex education at the middle school level is appropriate. Only 16% favor starting sex education at the elementary school level, and another 5% say that birth control should not be part of the education curriculum at all.

Appropriate Level for Sex Education in School				
	New Jersey adults	Parents of girls age 12 to 17	Other parents	Non-parents
High School	93%	94%	93%	93%
Middle School	77%	69%	82%	77%
Elementary School	16%	5%	15%	17%
Never	5%	2%	5%	6%

About half of New Jerseyans feel that schools should also teach that sexual activity is right only within the confines of either marriage (31%) or a committed relationship (18%). Another 39% feel that it is alright to teach teens that sexual activity is a matter of personal choice.

Overall, 43% of New Jerseyans feel that young people today are given information about sex and birth control at generally the right age. Another 28% feel that this information is provided too late and 19% worry that it is provided too soon.

“The poll revealed some surprising differences in opinion among parents of teenage daughters. They appear to be less worried than other parents about teenage pregnancy and slightly less supportive of sex education,” said Murray.

Specifically, among parents with daughters age 12 to 17, 50% see teenage pregnancy as a major problem and 57% say the same about sexually transmitted diseases among teenagers. These numbers represent a majority opinion, but are slightly lower than the percentages found among other parents (59% pregnancy and 65% STDs) and non-parents (63% pregnancy and 66% STDs).

Furthermore, just 52% of parents with teen daughters feel media publicity around celebrity pregnancies sends a message that teenage pregnancy is acceptable, compared to 63% of other parents who feel that way. At the same time, parents of teenage daughters (40%) are

nearly twice as likely as other parents (21%) to feel that education about contraception encourages early sexual activity. They are also somewhat more likely to feel that sex education starts too soon – an opinion held by 27% of parents with teen girls compared to 18% of other parents.

The *Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll* was conducted by telephone with 1,004 New Jersey adults from July 17 to 21, 2008. This sample has a margin of error of ± 3.1 percent. The poll was conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute and originally published by the Gannett New Jersey newspaper group (Asbury Park Press, Courier-Post, Courier News, Daily Journal, Daily Record, and Home News Tribune).

DATA TABLES

The questions referred to in this release are as follows:

(* Some columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.)

[QUESTIONS 1 AND 2 WERE ROTATED]

1. Do you think teen pregnancy is a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem in New Jersey?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
Major problem	61%	50%	59%	63%	61%	62%	64%	60%	59%
Minor problem	27%	41%	28%	26%	27%	27%	28%	27%	28%
Not a problem	3%	4%	2%	2%	3%	2%	3%	3%	1%
(VOL) Don't know	9%	5%	11%	8%	9%	9%	5%	10%	11%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

2. Do you think teens getting sexually transmitted diseases is a major problem, minor problem, or not a problem in New Jersey?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
Major problem	65%	57%	65%	66%	63%	67%	69%	66%	63%
Minor problem	23%	36%	24%	21%	25%	20%	23%	24%	21%
Not a problem	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%
(VOL) Don't know	10%	6%	10%	11%	9%	12%	6%	9%	15%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

3. In general would you say that young people today are given information about sex and birth control too soon, too late, or at about the right time?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
Too soon	19%	27%	18%	19%	22%	16%	18%	20%	18%
Too late	28%	29%	27%	28%	23%	32%	29%	26%	29%
About the right time	43%	40%	48%	42%	43%	42%	46%	46%	35%
(VOL) Don't know	11%	5%	7%	12%	11%	10%	6%	7%	18%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

4. What is the most appropriate level to start teaching about birth control methods – high school, middle school, elementary school, or it should not be taught in school at all?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
High school	16%	25%	11%	16%	20%	12%	16%	16%	16%
Middle school	61%	64%	67%	60%	58%	64%	72%	58%	55%
Elementary school	16%	5%	15%	17%	15%	17%	10%	18%	19%
Not in school at all (VOL)	2%	3%	3%	2%	3%	2%	0%	3%	3%
Don't know (VOL)	2%	3%	3%	2%	3%	2%	0%	3%	3%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

5. Should teens be taught in school that sex is right only in marriage, only in a committed relationship, or that it is their own choice?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
Only in marriage	31%	33%	32%	31%	30%	33%	24%	33%	36%
Only in a committed relationship	18%	25%	17%	17%	16%	20%	18%	21%	15%
Their own choice (VOL)	39%	28%	40%	40%	43%	35%	48%	36%	34%
Should not be mentioned in school (VOL)	4%	3%	7%	4%	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Don't know (VOL)	8%	11%	4%	8%	7%	9%	6%	6%	11%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

6. In general, do you think giving teenagers information about contraception does or does not encourage them to have sex earlier than they would otherwise?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
Does encourage	29%	40%	21%	30%	34%	24%	30%	27%	30%
Does not encourage (VOL)	56%	54%	68%	54%	51%	61%	58%	59%	52%
Depends (VOL)	7%	2%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	6%
Don't know (VOL)	8%	4%	5%	9%	9%	8%	5%	7%	12%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

7. Does recent publicity about young celebrities becoming pregnant make being a teenage parent seem more acceptable to teenagers today, less acceptable, or does it really have no impact?

	TOTAL	PARENT			GENDER		AGE		
		Girl 12-17	Other	No kids	Male	Female	18 to 34	35 to 54	55 or over
More acceptable	56%	52%	63%	55%	53%	59%	47%	61%	60%
Less acceptable	11%	13%	5%	12%	11%	11%	17%	9%	7%
No impact (VOL)	25%	29%	21%	26%	28%	22%	30%	23%	23%
Depends (VOL)	2%	0%	3%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Don't know (VOL)	7%	5%	8%	6%	6%	7%	5%	5%	9%
Unwtd N	1004	79	171	745	486	518	180	454	351

The Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Poll was conducted and analyzed by the Monmouth University Polling Institute research staff. The telephone interviews were collected by Braun Research on July 17-21, 2008 with a statewide random sample of 1,004 adult residents. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling has a maximum margin of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. Sampling error increases as the sample size decreases, so statements based on various population subgroups, such as separate figures reported by gender or party identification, are subject to more error than are statements based on the total sample. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

It is the Monmouth University Polling Institute's policy to conduct surveys of all adult New Jersey residents, including voters and non-voters, on issues which affect the state. Specific voter surveys are conducted when appropriate during election cycles.

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