

# What's the Matter With Kids Today?

## Study Prompts Discussion

by Philip S. Moore

WASHINGTON - Sexual activity among teens leads to depression, lower self-esteem and, in some cases, suicide. That was the conclusion reached in a report issued June 2 by the Heritage Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy research and analysis institute. The report also appears to reaffirm the positive effects of abstinence education among teens. Drawn from data published in the 1996 *National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, Wave II*, the report asserts that in addition to about 3 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases each year, as well as an estimated 120,000 teen abortions and 240,000 births to single teen mothers, teen-age mental health is also suffering from the effects of early sexual activity.

Based on the Wave II survey of 6,500 boys and girls between ages 14-18, the report concludes that sexually active teen-age girls are more than three times as likely than abstinent teen-age girls to be depressed - 25.3% compared with 7.7%. They are also almost three times as likely to attempt suicide, 14.3% compared with 5.1%. For teen-age boys, according to the report, the numbers are worse. While only 8.3% of teen-age boys report feeling depressed most or all of the time, it is still far higher than the 3.4% of virgin boys who reported the same feelings. When it comes to attempted suicide, 6% of sexually active boys reported an attempt within the previous 12 months, a number more than six times higher than the 0.7% reported by boys still sexually innocent. The Heritage Foundation report, by researchers Robert Rector, Lauren Noyes and Kirk Johnson, also notes that 63% of sexually active teens regret beginning sexual activity, with 55% of boys and 72% of girls in agreement. Overall, 48% of those surveyed reported being sexually active before the legal age of consent.

While psychologists agree with the Wave II data, they disagree on their relationship, describing early sexual activity as a characteristic of depression among youth. "Teen-agers who are depressed engage in impulsive behavior," said Dr. Jim Thomas, a counselor and spokesman for Catholic Community Services in the Archdiocese of Seattle. "I see the behavior as a result rather than a cause." Thomas said increased attention to depression among teen-agers is demonstrating that risky or inappropriate behavior is caused by depression's impact on judgment and critical thinking. "It affects how you react to things," he said. "There's a whole series of faulty beliefs that people will have more often than they would when they are not depressed. Teen-agers are being told that sex is something they should experience, and they are less able to think about the consequences."

Dr. Susan Bettis, director of counseling for William Temple House, an independent social service and counseling agency based in Portland, Ore., agrees with that assessment only to an extent. "You have to differentiate clinical depression, which is a medical condition, from adolescent anxiety and 'blue funk,'" she said. "I would guess that only about 7% of teens are clinically depressed. However, the number who say, 'I'm down because of life' is out of control, accounting for about 20% of teens." She describes her experience with the teen-age clients of William Temple House as demonstrating a widespread problem with depression and anxiety, with sexual activity as well as drug use as leading symptoms. "I think being a teen-ager right now is a living hell," she said. "They are being pressured toward drugs and sex, and at the same time, they lack anything to challenge them to build a sense of real competence," Bettis said. "We have a celebrity culture and it's especially rough on the kids. Expectations are so high, and they know in their hearts that they can't keep up." She said teens who don't believe they are capable of dealing with life or adversity won't believe they can restrain themselves. "When kids are not asked to inhibit anything, it all goes," she said. "If they aren't expected to inhibit sex, they won't inhibit anything else and you see anger management and other behavior problems."

For youth ministers, the causes and effects of teen depression and sexual activity are immediate and highly visible. Dario Mobini, director of youth ministry for the parish of St. Joseph in the Portland suburb of Vancouver, Wash., agrees in part with both the Heritage Foundation report and the psychologists. "More kids are likely to become sexually active because they're depressed," she said, "but it isn't just depressed

teens who are sexually active." All of them are worse off for the experience, Mobini said. "Early sexual activity outside the committed relationship of marriage destroys for them the true meaning of love and the true purpose of sexuality." Meanwhile, Jim Mains, director of the Extreme Youth Ministry at nearby Our Lady of Lourdes parish, points to the deterioration of family life as the underlying cause of both teen-age depression and early sexual activity. "There was a study that showed that kids who have dinner with their family have a higher rate of staying sexually abstinent than those who don't," he said.

Mains said media and peers have an increasing influence on teen-agers because parents have less, and the media's influence is self-serving and causes depression and anxiety. "They feel their parents either don't care or their parents aren't there," he said, "such as in the case of divorce. Overall, kids feel unworthy and that brings on depression," he added. "Girls especially are depressed, and when they are giving sexual gratification they feel for a moment that they are in control. But the next day, they are as bad off, or worse, than they were before."

"Popular culture keeps kids busy with an ideal that can be achieved buying new clothes or new cars or whatever," Mains said. "It raises them up by destroying a true sense of self-esteem. The first step toward making these kids again feel worthy is for their parents to let them know that somebody loves and cares for them." By setting standards and providing challenges, he said, parents build a real sense of self-worth that overcomes the despair that fuels the depression. "Yet in too many cases, this isn't going to happen because so many parents also feel unworthy," Mains said. "They are dealing with their own depression and they are not able to help their kids."

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