

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Adopting a Sexual Health Paradigm

Strengthening Support for Parents and Guardians is Needed to Address Sexually Transmitted Infections Among Youth

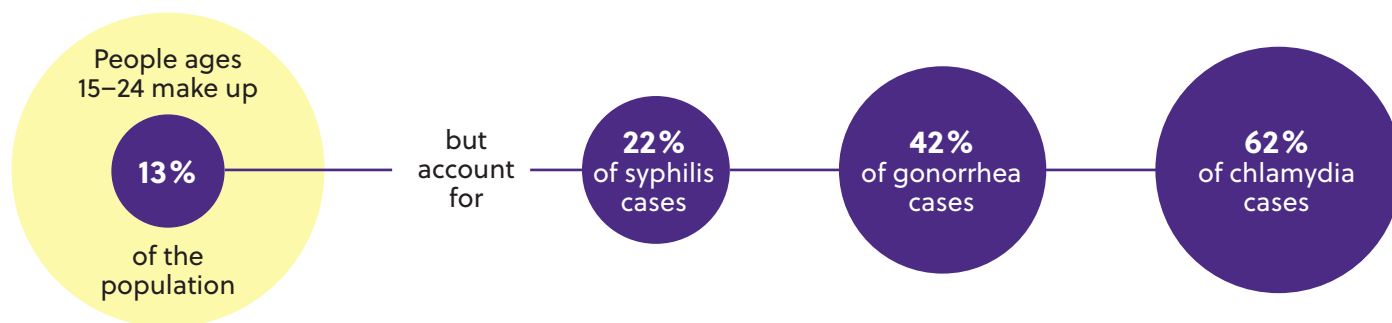
Federal agencies and professional organizations should equip parents with evidence-based guidance to help them engage in effective dialogue with their children about sexual health.

Parents and guardians (“parents”) play a central role in supporting adolescent and young adult sexual and reproductive health and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. They need evidence-based guidance and specific strategies to successfully reduce adolescent and young adult STIs and support sexual health. STI cases are at an all-time high, with youth (ages 15 to 24 years) accounting for approximately half of all new cases in a given year, while representing one-quarter of the sexually active population.

Parents are influential in shaping a wide range of adolescent sexual behaviors, including timing of first intercourse, frequency of sex, contraception use, and STI and HIV testing. Several efficacious parenting practices include age-appropriate monitoring and supervision, parent-adolescent communication about sex and sexual health, and strengthening parent-adolescent relationship satisfaction. Adolescents have reported consistently wanting parental guidance on preventing negative sexual health outcomes, such as STIs. Several parent-based interventions designed to reduce adolescent STI exposure have shown efficacy in delaying sexual debut and promoting use of condoms and accessing sexual and reproductive health services. Among these are Families Talking Together and Familias Unidas.

The report *Sexually Transmitted Infections: Adopting a Sexual Health Paradigm* explores how parents can be partners to accelerate national progress in reducing STIs.

Young people are disproportionately burdened by STIs



An estimated **26 million new STI infections** – almost half among people aged 15 to 24 – totaled approximately **\$16 billion in direct medical costs** in the United States in 2018.

Did you know?

Co-occurring health conditions and psychosocial stressors (e.g., homelessness, chronic stress, anxiety, depression, childhood exposure to trauma, or experiences with intimate partner violence or teen dating violence) are prevalent among adolescents and **are linked to factors that increase risk of exposure to STIs** (e.g., premature sex, condomless sex, and sex while using alcohol or illicit substances).

Adolescents' **risk for and protection against STI exposure depend on interpersonal, social, and contextual factors** (e.g., parental, peer, and sexual network influences; sexual partner influences; community and other environmental factors; media; and access to and use of health care).

Youth-friendly community-based STI screening and treatment in settings where adolescents live and socialize, particularly in areas with high STI prevalence, **can help STI prevention and control.**

Parent-level factors, such as **acceptance of vaccination safety, costs, and effectiveness, are associated with adolescents receiving the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.**

SPOTLIGHT ON

HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Health care providers in the primary care workforce (beyond STI specialists) are well positioned to engage parents in adolescent sexual health promotion and STI prevention. Physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants can diagnose and treat STIs and provide prevention counseling, and are often seen as trusted resources in matters of sexual health by both parents and adolescents.

Parental willingness for adolescents to have time alone with their health care providers encourages adolescents' emerging autonomy, allows adolescents to build skills to manage and advocate for their own health, and enhances provider-adolescent trust and communication, including on topics such as sexual behavior, contraception, and STI prevention.

“As a parent of three teenagers, it is not easy talking to them, but we have to. We can’t take a hands-off approach because, unfortunately, they will make mistakes. As a parent, we need to help them not make mistakes that could hurt them for the rest of their lives if they are not careful.”

– Participant, lived experience panel

Recommended Actions

Federal agencies and relevant professional organizations should equip parents with evidence-based guidance to help them engage in developmentally appropriate, comprehensive sexual health education and dialogue and to identify actionable steps for their adolescent children. Specifically, they should:

- ➔ Develop a national, parent-focused communication campaign to promote and guide parental communication with adolescents regarding sexual health and STI prevention.
- ➔ Develop a compendium of existing evidence-based resources and programs for parental education and skills training on adolescent and young adult sexual health and STI prevention and support existing resources through continued research investments.
- ➔ Develop guidelines for pediatric and adolescent health care providers to effectively educate parents in promoting adolescent and young adult sexual health. Parental education and skills training programs should be co-located as an extension of routine health care. Training resources for providers should facilitate direct communication with parents and support parents in their communication with their adolescent children.

SPOTLIGHT ON

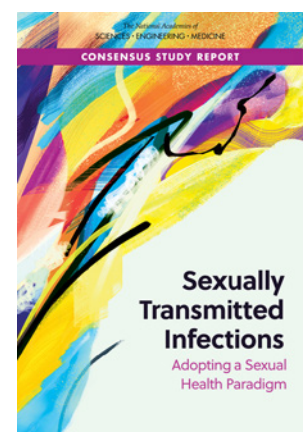
SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Adolescents who participate in comprehensive sexual education programs delay initiating sexual behavior, have increased knowledge of STI risks and consequences, and report increased contraceptive use. There is a need for comprehensive sexual education programs that meaningfully involve parents as well as funding these programs' ongoing development, implementation, and broad uptake. Involving parents in designing and delivering sexual education programs takes into account the perspectives and specific needs of families, tailoring of program content to diverse families and local epidemiological contexts, and represents flexible and sustainable program delivery. Having school nurses deliver comprehensive sexual education to parents represents a novel approach in school-based settings. The vast majority of individuals in the United States, including parents, support comprehensive sexual education delivery in school settings.

Conclusion

Parents have the primary responsibility for teaching their children how to build and sustain healthy relationships. Adolescents consistently indicate that they want specific guidance from their parents on sex and sexual health. Evidence-based educational resources, tools, and programs can assist parents to articulate and model what sexual health means for their adolescent children. Social marketing campaigns have been shown to be effective in increasing the frequency of parent-adolescent communication about sex by promoting social norms regarding sexual debut and providing guidance and tools for effective parent-adolescent communication about sexual health.

To learn more about how parents can advance sexual health, [see Chapter 12 of the report.](#)



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