

MOAPPP Monitor

www.moapp.org

Spring 2008

MOAPPP's mission is to develop and strengthen policies and programs that promote adolescent sexual health, prevent adolescent pregnancy and support adolescent parents.

Defending the Adolescent Brain

Glynis Shea, Healthy Youth Development–Prevention Research Center, University of Minnesota

Remarkable neuroscientific progress over the past five years has revealed that the human brain does not complete its physical growth—in fact, dramatic changes still occur—until after the age of 24. These findings indicate that adolescence is a critical time period for brain development.

During adolescence, the pre-frontal cortex (sometimes called the “CEO of the brain,” because it controls decision-making, as well as other higher-order functions) goes through a period of growth, where synaptic connections (when one nerve cell influences or connects with the activity of an adjacent nerve cell) are rapidly created. Next the brain goes through a “pruning” process, where the connections that are most frequently used remain, but less well-established connections are pruned away. Brain researchers say that the adolescent brain is in a “use it or lose it” state.

BRAIN RESEARCH INFLUENCES POLICY

What does this mean for youth in our society? In the late 1990s, the U.S. Supreme Court—with testimony from brain researchers—ruled that youth were not eligible for the death penalty. They argued that decision-making capacity, the domain of the pre-frontal cortex, was still forming during adolescence, meaning that young people should not be legally held to the same level of accountability as adults, where presumably, brain architecture has completed development. The suit was

successful; adolescents are no longer eligible for death penalty sentences.

Of concern to many in the youth community is how this new brain research could be used to restrict or change the rights of youth. The logic used to protect youth from the death penalty also has profound implications for:

- Their access to reproductive health services and information
- Educational requirements
- Military enlistment
- Driving licensures
- Voting
- Employment

EVERYDAY IMPLICATIONS

Knowing that adolescent brain development continues into the mid-20s, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, offers numerous insights on adolescent behavior: “That’s why they do that!” More importantly, this information can guide how parents, policy makers and the youth-serving community support the healthy development of young people, through:

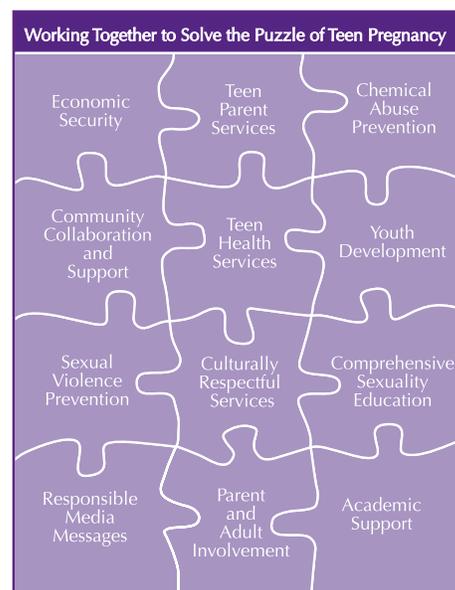
- encouraging everyone who works with or supports youth to better understand and appreciate adolescent brain development.
- discussing brain architecture and development, focusing on ways to support healthy adolescent development.
- being answer-ready. If someone asks, “Is it true adolescents can’t make decisions?” be prepared to offer context and direction.

Remember that many factors affect our ability to make decisions—moods, knowledge and environmental concerns, to name a few. For adolescents, the brain’s exuberant development is one of those factors.

Let’s all try to also support adolescents’ developing decision-making ability by:

- Making available all the information adolescents need to make good decisions.
- Being present and available to help young people work through the pros, cons and implications of their decisions.
- Providing adolescents with safe, positive ways to practice and experience decision-making.

Adolescent brain research is an emerging field with more questions than answers. Happily, it’s been shown that once people understand how the adolescent brain develops, they are more receptive to the need for youth development approaches and opportunities.



MOAPPP's Teen Pregnancy Puzzle illustrates the complexity of the issue and the need for comprehensive solutions based on research.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES



Dear Friends,

Our 17th Annual Conference is just around the corner—the culmination of nine months of planning and coordination on the part of MOAPPP's volunteer Conference Committee and dedicated staff members. It is our signature training event of the year, and an important time for youth-serving professionals from across the state to reconnect and recharge, as well as learn from national, state and local experts.

This issue of the *Monitor* gives you a preview of Conference content:

Barbara Flis, a keynote presenter from Michigan's Parent Action for Healthy Kids, writes about the critical role parents can play in advocating for quality sex education in schools;

Michael Obsatz, Professor Emeritus of Macalester College, and expert on issues of men and boys discusses the important role of mentoring in young men's lives;

Glynis Shea of the University of Minnesota's Prevention Research Center, shares new perspectives about the adolescent brain; and

I write about an important project to reframe how we think and talk about young families.

The 2008 MOAPPP Conference, and this issue of the *Monitor*, are focused on the themes of *Broadening Our Perspectives and Refining Our Approaches*. I hope you find both thought-provoking.

On a more somber note, we have also included data about the rise in teen pregnancies and births in Minnesota. We were startled to find that our state's teen birth rate rose by 7%, outpacing the national teen birth rate rise of 3%. We were even more startled to learn that the rise was steeper for 15-17-year-olds (10%) than for 18-19-year-olds (7%).

Think about this: The rates are for 2006, which means many of the pregnancies started in 2005. Because pregnancy doesn't typically occur the first time a girl has intercourse, we believe sexual activity likely started earlier in 2005, 2004, even 2003. So, what headlines have dominated the news over the last five years? What choices have we as a state made regarding sex education, sexual health services, high-quality youth development programming?

If you want to discuss these questions, or anything else, call or write.

In health,

Brigid Riley, MPH
Executive Director

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Protect Your Sex Ed Program with Parents!

Barbara Flis

Parent Action for Healthy Kids

If your reaction to this title is one of disbelief, then I implore you to please keep reading.

Often when the words “parent” and “sex education” are used in the same sentence, there is a gasp as we recall an ugly incident that escalated to the national press. Often we talk about that parent problem so much that it takes on a life of its own, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But we have a choice in how we look at things. Challenging ourselves to look at things in a different way just might open up some options that we may not have considered, but we will, however, have to leave our comfort zones.

SEX ED AND PARENTS IN MICHIGAN

Almost 10 years ago, I served as a parent representative on a Sex Ed Curriculum Committee at the Michigan Department of Education. I had the opportunity to see what really happens in a sex ed class, and felt certain that if other parents had the same opportunity, not only would they support sex ed, they would be great advocates.

When I asked if I could take what I’d learned to other parents, the Michigan Department of Education not only said “yes,” they gave me a little grant money to design a parent program. Since then, I have reached hundreds of Michigan parents and found that my instincts were right: Parents are not only interested and appreciative of the information, they also support sex education in schools.

There have been bumps in the road. When 2004 Michigan legislation mandated that school district sex education curricula be approved by advisory boards that were half parents, my theory was challenged. I have to admit I second-guessed myself for just a moment and wondered if we could get parents to serve on the committee, let alone approve quality curriculum. Thankfully my moment of panic was short-lived. The first local district advisory committee approved not only a comprehensive program for middle school, but at the parents’ urging, insisted that a sex ed curricula be approved for high school. Still skeptical?

SEX ED SUPPORT AROUND THE COUNTRY

A 2004 EPIC/MRA survey of Michigan parents indicated that 70% support abstinence-based programs that also include *discussion of strategies* (e.g. condoms, birth control) to reduce risks for HIV, other



Talk Early & Talk Often is a parent education initiative that is part of Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholms’ Blueprint for Preventing Unintended Pregnancies.

*STDs and unintended pregnancy*³. In North Carolina, a state with mandated abstinence education, parents surveyed *overwhelmingly supported sexuality education in public schools (91%)*.⁵ Similar findings were recently released about Minnesota parents by the University there.² Survey data showing parent support for sex education continues to grow, yet many people continue to doubt that parents can be champions for quality sex education.

The success we’ve had working with parents in Michigan is the parent-to-parent approach that includes open and honest discussion, as well as the modeling of effective teaching strategies.

Consider listening as the first step in your work with parents. We parents come together to make a difference. We don’t always agree. But by *listening*, we will discover that we are more alike than we are different—that connectedness empowers beyond belief.

Mentoring Young Men toward Healthier Decisions

Michael Obsatz, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Macalester College and Producer of *Journeyman*

An emotional and social crisis in American boys is finally emerging into our cultural consciousness due to their ever-increasing problems of violent behavior and academic failure. Too many young men are making choices that ultimately hurt themselves and/or the lives of others. Through media, role models and peers,

Boys are taught to....	These messages can lead to...
Be emotionally disconnected and stoic	Isolation
Suffer in private	Depression and loneliness
Act impulsively	Violence toward others
Attempt to dominate and control others	Violence toward oneself
Domination of females	Inappropriate sexual choices and sexual acting out

SEXUAL HEALTH CAN BE AFFECTED

Some young men are taught to believe that sex is their only way to demonstrate and receive affection. Some males use sexual activity to prove manhood and masculinity. Male impulsivity may lead to unprotected sexual intercourse—which can result in an unplanned pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

When sexual behaviors lead to pregnancy and adolescent fatherhood, males often feel overwhelmed by the responsibility and alienated from their new role. Since they are frequently emotionally disconnected from themselves and others, they have difficulty nurturing and connecting to their children. If they are impulsive and self-absorbed,

There is evidence of a movement underway to redefine male roles and to promote new models of emotional wholeness and personal integrity for men.



they may not have the maturity to handle the complexities of being a nurturing dad. And for some, infants can bring up issues of past abandonment that are difficult to face.

As we move away from shame-based and fear-based masculinity, we will discover that boys who don't have to prove themselves can relax more.

MENTORS CAN TEACH NEW MESSAGES

If we want young men to experience healthy relationships and ultimately to be loving, supportive partners and fathers, we need to create ways for them to move beyond the stereotypes, misconceptions and pain that often drive their attitudes and behavior. Connecting boys to male mentors is one powerful tool for bringing a consistent guiding force into young men's lives.

Mentoring by healthy, mature males can help boys and young men in numerous ways:

- Mentors can serve as role models of mature, consistent and responsible behavior.
- They can teach young men interpersonal skills, including nurturing, collaboration and listening.
- Mentors can provide a source of support, guidance and encouragement when young men face new challenges and uncertainties, and can encourage them to think carefully before they act.
- If a young man becomes an adolescent father, a mentor can serve as a nurturing role model to help him stay connected to his child and his child's mother.

A new one-hour documentary film, entitled *Journeyman*, examines the power of mentoring through the lives of two adolescent males who represent millions of young men today. Mike has experienced depression, intense anger and loneliness, and has attempted suicide. Joe has been in a gang, has demonstrated violent behavior and is now a father. Both of these young men lack involved, nurturing fathers in their lives. The film follows Mike and Joe over a two-year period as they work with male mentors, face challenging rites of passage, discover their inner strength and learn to engage with a community of supportive men. *Journeyman* will be highlighted at the MOAPPP Conference and is available through Mirrorman Films at mirrormanfilms.org.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

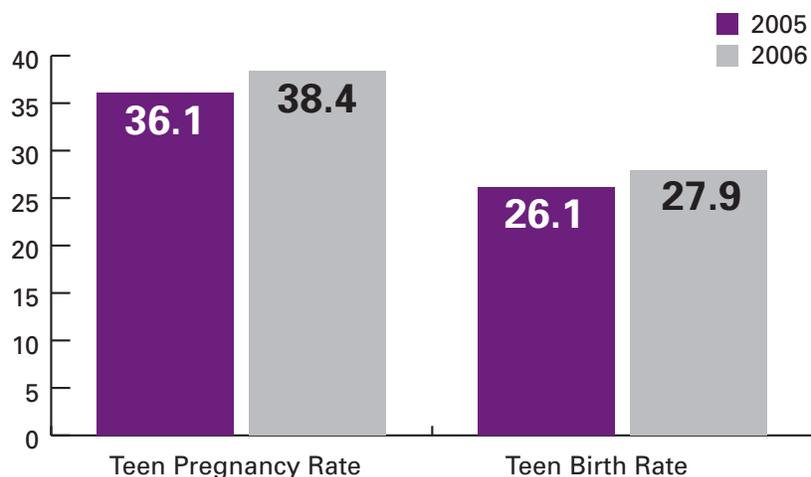
Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates Rise

Minnesota experienced a 6% increase in the teen pregnancy rate, and a 7% increase in the teen birth rate in 2006. This is the first time the rates have risen since MOAPPP started tracking them 17 years ago. While the national teen birth rate also increased in 2006 (3%), Minnesota's teen birth rate increased more than twice as much (7%).

For more information, visit the **Data and Statistics Section** of our website, www.moapp.org/resources.html#data_stats.

2005-2006 Minnesota Teen Pregnancy and Teen Birth Rates

Ages 15-19 per 1,000
Population



BROADENING OUR PERSPECTIVE

refining our approach

**Many thanks for the generous support of our
Conference sponsors.**

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- Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department
- Metropolitan Health Plan
- Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support
- Sexual Violence Prevention Program, Minnesota Department of Health

MOAPPP's 17th Annual Conference

May 1-2, 2008

**Earle Brown
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Brooklyn Center,
Minnesota**

For more information visit
[www.moapp.org/training/
conference.html](http://www.moapp.org/training/conference.html).

Reframing Teen Parents

Brigid Riley, MPH, MOAPPP

For those of us working to support young families, some of our most consistent challenges are the public's perceptions of "teen moms," and the political scapegoating they endure.

While we know—better than most—the potential for negative outcomes facing these young mothers and children, we also know how transforming the birth of a child can be for them and how dedicated they are to making a better life for themselves and their child.

Instead of recognizing the potential for growth at this critical crossroads, our society tends to marginalize young families. Stereotypes emerge: "*She'll never make anything of herself now.*" Negative messages abound: "*She got what she deserved, now she has to live with it.*"

If we want young parents to succeed in our culture, they need to finish high school, and have the opportunity to pursue a post-secondary degree as school success is a critical stepping stone to self-sufficiency. But in Minnesota, state support for school-based teen parent programs was eliminated in 2003. Many programs are still in operation, but continually face complex barriers to meet the needs of the young families they serve.

Guidelines for School-based Services for Teen Parents

1. Flexible, quality schooling to help young parents complete high school or obtain their GED
2. Case management and family support services
3. Prenatal care and reproductive health services
4. Quality child care for children with links to basic preventive health care
5. Parenting and life skills education and support services
6. Father involvement services and supports

Twelve years ago, the Center for Assessment and Policy Development identified the core services that showed promise for promoting school success for adolescent parents and their children.¹ While these recommendations were promising, **there has been virtually no investment in research or development to assess or change these recommendations since then.**

Raising funds for initiatives that support adolescent parents is particularly challenging given that so many public and private funders worry that they are "condoning," even "encouraging" teen pregnancy if they support teen parents.

While we are more fortunate than many states in having progress-focused foundations—St. Paul, Mardag, Bigelow and Bush currently support MOAPPP's work in this area—the larger field of teen parent providers continues to wrestle with how to describe this population of teens in ways that move funders and policy makers toward better defined goals.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

No one has been successful in communicating the realities of teen parent families in a compelling way. Several youth-serving organizations from across the country, including MOAPPP, have decided to change that. Led by Healthy Teen Network, a workgroup is working with the Frameworks Institute to answer the following questions:

- How does the public think about teen families, the societal conditions that contribute to teen parenting, and the available solutions?
- What dominant "frames" are applied to teen families, and how do these "frames" constrain public solutions?
- How do practitioners and the media inadvertently reinforce these "frames?"
- How can the issues and the proposed solutions be "reframed" to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative policy choices?

"Frames" are the internalized concepts and values that allow us to make sense of new events and information.⁴

The workgroup has developed a three-phase workplan, and over the next few years intends to:

- identify, test and deploy new messages that have the potential to change the public conversation about support for teen families;
- develop and disseminate new resources for those working at the state and local levels to support teen parents;
- identify and fill research gaps regarding successful teen parent support programs.

The Minnesota Women's Foundation, the Rhode Island Foundation and a network of individual donors are financially supporting the first phase of this project.

If changing the conversation about teen parents is a priority for you, we hope you will join our efforts. Contact Brigid at 651-644-1447 or brigid@moappp.org to learn more.

RESOURCES

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

This organization is committed to supporting the good health of children and adolescents by working with parents, teachers, health professionals and school administrators to strengthen successful school-based health programs in all communities in the U.S.

www.healthinschools.org

Parent Action for Healthy Kids®

Parent Action for Healthy Kids® is designed to help connect parents, communities and schools to improve the health and well-being of children and youth. This organization aims to provide parents with the best resources available so they can advocate for improved health initiatives in communities and schools.

www.parentactionforhealthykids.org

Advocates for Youth—for Parents

Research shows that positive communication between parents and their children can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions. This website gives parents tools to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.

www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents/index.htm

Parent Attitudes about Sex Education

The Healthy Youth Development Prevention Research Center at the University of Minnesota recently released their 2007 survey of Minnesota parents regarding their attitudes about sex education in schools. Regardless of income, education, ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, Minnesota parents overwhelmingly support sex education in schools.

www.med.umn.edu/peds/ahm/programs/hyd/home.html

Campaign for Youth Justice

This national campaign is dedicated to ending the practice of trying, sentencing and incarcerating children under the age of 18 in the adult criminal justice system by empowering those moved to act for youth justice. The Campaign for Youth Justice highlights the issue of adolescent brain development and questions its implications for the juvenile justice system.

www.campaign4youthjustice.org

National Institute on Media & the Family

This organization aims to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm of media on the health and development of children and families. Their president, Dr. David Walsh, is a national expert on the powerful impact of the media on adolescent brain development.

www.mediafamily.org

Boys to Men Mentoring Network

Boys to Men Mentoring Network guides boys 12-17 years of age through their passage to manhood by providing mentoring and modeling so that they learn integrity, accountability, compassion and respect. They help boys develop responsibility and guide them toward healthy manhood.

www.boystomen.org

Dads Make A Difference

Promoting the positive involvement of fathers and educating middle school-age youth, older teens, young adults, and the teachers and other professionals who work with them about responsible parenting.

www.dadsmakeadifference.org

Minnesota Network of Fathers and Families

Building the profession of fatherhood practitioners and other family support service providers, increasing public awareness of fatherhood involvement, and strengthening Minnesota's families through the increased involvement of fathers in the lives of children.

www.mnfathers.org

The ManKind Project

The ManKind Project offers trainings which support men in developing lives of integrity, accountability, and authentic connection to feeling. MKP's trainings challenge men to develop their abilities as leaders, partners, fathers, and elders in order to offer their deepest gifts in service to the world.

www.mkp.org

RESEARCH

Citations are included from this *Monitor's* articles.

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3. Educational, Political, Industrial and Consumer Market Research Analysis, Michigan Researches Associates.
4. Frameworks Institute. (2002). *Framing public issues*. Retrieved March 22, 2008, from www.frameworksinstitute.org.
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MOAPPP Monitor

Newsletter of the Minnesota
Organization on Adolescent
Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting

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Wind and Fire by Nachito Herrera
and Fred Steele

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for more information or to purchase tickets.