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## Devoted dad key to reducing risky teen sex

Moms help, but an involved father has twice the influence, new study finds



By Linda Carroll

msnbc.com contributor

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When it comes to preventing risky teen sex, there may be no better deterrent than a doting dad.

Teenagers whose fathers are more involved in their lives are less likely to engage in risky sexual activities such as unprotected intercourse, according to a new study.

The more attentive the dad — and the more he knows about his teenage child's friends — the bigger the impact on the teen's sexual behavior, the researchers found. While an involved mother can also help stave off a teen's sexual activity, dads have twice the influence.

"Maybe there's something different about the way fathers and adolescents interact," said the study's lead author Rebekah Levine Coley, an associate professor at Boston College. "It could be because it's less expected for fathers to be so involved, so it packs more punch

when they are."

Understanding a father's influence in teen sexual behavior is important, experts say. One in four American adolescents under the age of 15 has had sexual intercourse and, by age 18, two-thirds have had sex, according to research. The concern is, many sexually active young people aren't using protection, a contributing factor in rising teen birth rates. Approximately 750,000 teenagers become pregnant each year and about 3 in 10 teenage girls become pregnant at least once before age 20, according to government statistics.

For the new study, which was published in the journal *Child Development*, Coley and her colleagues surveyed 3,206 teens, ages 13 to 18, once a year for four years. The teens, who all came from two-parent homes, were asked

about their sexual behaviors and about

their relationships with their parents.

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Researchers posed a series of questions about both mothers and fathers, such as “how much does s/he know about whom you are with when you are not at home?” The teens were also asked how often they interacted with their parents in activities such as eating dinner, playing games or attending religious activities.

#### Dad's positive effect

Parental knowledge of a teen's friends and activities was rated on a five point scale. When it came to the dads, each point higher in parental knowledge translated into a 7 percent lower rate of sexual activity in the teen. For the moms, one point higher in knowledge translated to a 3 percent lower rate of teen sexual activity.

The impact of family time overall was even more striking. One additional family activity per week predicted a 9 percent drop in sexual activity.

Child development experts said the study was carefully done and important. “It's praiseworthy by any measure,” said Alan E. Kazdin, a professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University. “The strength of this study is that it helps us identify the

children who might be engaging in risky sexual behavior.”

Why would dads have a more powerful influence?

“Dads vary markedly in their roles as caretakers from not there at all to really helping moms,” Kazdin said. “The greater impact of dads might be that moms are more of a constant and when dads are there their impact is magnified.”

Also, Kazdin said “when dads are involved with families, the stress on the mom is usually reduced because of the diffusion of child-rearing or the support for the mom.”

In other words, dad's positive effect on mom makes life better for the child, Kazdin explains.

The study underscores the importance of parental engagement overall, said Patrick Tolan, a professor of psychiatry and director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois in Chicago.

“For one thing, the more time you spend with them, the less time they're going to be on their own in places where they can get into risky behavior,” Tolan explained. “Also, if you're spending time talking to them, they're going to get your values and they're more likely to think things through rather than acting impulsively.”

But simply requiring more family dinners won't necessarily reduce the risk that a teen will engage in unprotected sex. The families that are spending more time together may be different in some way from those that are

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spending less; they may simply be warmer and have closer ties, Kazdin said. If the kids are avoiding their parents because the atmosphere in the home is tense, adding more together time isn't going to help, Kazdin said.

Coley hopes that the study will encourage both moms and dads to keep trying to connect with their teenage children, even as their kids are pushing them away.

"While it's normal for teens to want to pull away from the family, that doesn't mean they don't want to engage at all," Coley said. "It's extremely important to continue to do things together. And it's up to parents to set the expectations and standards when it comes to spending time together. It doesn't have to be anything fancy or expensive."

*Linda Carroll is a health and science writer living in New Jersey. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Newsday, Health magazine and SmartMoney.*

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