

Teen Pregnancy is Expensive!

By

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The results are in!!! Out of 67 counties in the state of Florida, Hardee County is number two (2) in births to teens under the age of eighteen (18). These statistics are nothing to be proud of. Worse yet, if our teen birth rate is this high, then our rates for sexually transmitted diseases is also high. You can't have one without the other! A recent study shows more than 1 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS in the US alone, and more than a tenth of them are Floridians. Since the epidemic began in 1981, more than 9,000 Americans under the age of 13 have been diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. These are sad statistics to try and comprehend and understand. In addition, the rates for Chlamydia and Syphilis, two highly contagious venereal diseases, have skyrocketed.

May is National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, and in this month's column I hope to show you the importance of keeping our teens free of too-early pregnancy, as well as disease. Why should we be concerned about teen pregnancy you may ask? Actually, the crisis of teen pregnancy affects all of us where it hurts the most—our pocketbooks!!! Nationwide, the cost of teen parenting is \$112 billion dollars. In Hardee County alone, taxpayers pay over \$500,000 to support the programs for teen mothers such as WIC, Medicaid, and food stamps. Teen pregnancy and child births have not only significant economic impact, but take a toll on social and emotional health, as well.

Consequences for the **Teen Mom** are:

- 50% more likely to drop out of high school and will never complete requirements for a high school diploma, thus greatly limiting job possibilities and being able to provide for themselves and their families;
- 50% more likely to depend on welfare for daily living;
- 25% will have another child before the age of 20; and
- More likely to be a single parent.

Consequences for the **Teen Dad** are:

- More likely to drop out of school entirely and never complete either high school or college, and;
- Earn \$5,000 less annually.

Consequences for the **Baby** are no more encouraging either, such as:

- More likely to be born at a low or very low birth weight;

- More likely to die within the first month; and
- Are at a higher risk for disabilities which will further drain financial reserves.

So, what is the answer? Abstinence is the only 100 percent effective method of preventing teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. If you need some suggestions on how to talk to your teen about risky behaviors, here are some tips from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy website that may help you have the talk with your kids. Here they are:

- Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes;
- Talk with your children often about sex, and be specific;
- Supervise and monitor your children; have them involved in organized after-school activities;
- Know your children's friends and their families;
- Take a strong stand against your daughter spending time with a boy significantly older than she. Don't allow your son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger or older than he;
- Help your teenagers have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood;
- Let your kids know that you value education highly; and
- Know what your kids are reading, watching, learning, and listening to.

There is a Hardee County Teen Pregnancy Prevention Alliance and Drug Prevention Coalition that meets monthly to educate the citizens of Hardee County about the hazards of early parenting. These coalitions are working diligently to help teens understand abstaining from sex is the only guaranteed way to avoid pregnancy, as well as sexually transmitted infections. Come and be a part of the solution to this crisis by getting involved in these two coalitions that meet the second Tuesday of every month at the Hardee County Extension Office at 9 a.m. Call 863-773-2164 for more information on how you can get involved. You may also want to visit the website www.teenpregnancy.org, a helpful resource for both teens and parents.