
CHAPTER 5

Sexuality

One of the biggest fears for many parents is that their children will become sexually active before they are ready. This fear includes concern about an unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), emotional harm and sexual abuse. Most parents feel that early sexual experiences will, in some way, harm their children. Early sexual experiences have been found to lead to greater risk for multiple partners, STDs, and pregnancy (Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999).

This chapter presents the findings of the Teen Assessment Project survey in the area of sexuality. It is divided into sections which include the Overview of Findings, a summary of key points; Presentation of Data, analysis of the data presented in graphic form; and Presentation of Comparable Data, comparisons of TAP with Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Sexual Activity

The United States has the highest teen childbirth rates of any industrialized Western nation, despite the fact that teenage pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion rates have all declined in the 1990's (Ventura, Mosher, Curtin, Abma, & Henshaw, 2000). One out of four (25%) U.S. women have had a pregnancy by age 18 (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). The TAP survey found that most (70%) of New Hampshire teens surveyed have not had sexual intercourse. As teens get older they are more likely to have sex. More high school students (39%) have had sexual intercourse than middle school students (14%) and the numbers rise with each grade level. In the earlier grades (7 through 10) males were more likely to report they have had sexual intercourse than females. Some teens report having sex as early as 11 years of age or younger. The average age of first intercourse is 14. Sexually active teens report having intercourse anywhere from several times a year to nearly every day. High school students tend to have sexual intercourse more frequently than middle school students. Frequency rates of sexual activity are similar for males and females. The TAP survey found that 38% of youth surveyed worry to some degree about being pressured into having sex. More females (46%) than males (30%) had concerns about this issue.

Contraception

According to *Healthier People in Wisconsin* (Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, 1990), after teens become sexually active, they usually wait on average twelve months before they begin to use contraception. Recent national statistics indicate teen contraceptive use does not vary by age (Adams, Schoenborn, Moss, Warren & Kann, 1995). This is troubling since the health risks associated with a pregnancy are much greater for younger teens. The TAP survey found that only 49% of sexually active New Hampshire teens surveyed reported always using birth control, while 19% reported never using it. The number of sexually active teens who always use birth control increases each year from the seventh to twelfth grades. High school students (51%) are more likely than middle school students (38%) to always use birth control.

Parents' Role in Level of Teen Sexual Activity

Parental monitoring is an important factor in preventing adolescent sexual activity. Parental monitoring means parents supervise children or know where they are and what they are doing. Higher levels of parental monitoring are related to lower levels of sexual activity. Teens who report low parental monitoring are more than three times as likely to have had sexual intercourse than teens who report high parental monitoring (52% vs. 16%). There is also evidence suggesting children who talk with their parents about sexuality and their values regarding it are less likely to be sexually active, if the values parents convey discourage early sexual activity. The TAP survey found this to be the case. Teens who did *not* believe that their parents thought it was wrong for teens their age to have sex were more than three times as likely to report being sexually active than teens who believe their parents think it *is* wrong (52% vs. 17%). Another strong parental influence on levels of teen sexual activity is whether or not teens think they will get in trouble if their parents knew they were sexually active. Teens who think they would *not* get in trouble if their parents knew they were having sex were over five times more likely to report being sexually active than teens who believed they *would* get in trouble (76% vs. 14%).

The TAP survey questioned teens about how often they talked with their parents about sex and other related issues such as birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including AIDS. A high percentage of New Hampshire teens surveyed do not have good talks with their parents about these sexuality issues. The subject least discussed between parents and teens was birth control followed by STDs and AIDs, then whether it is okay to have sexual intercourse. More teens talked with their mothers about all of these issues than their fathers. The findings indicate the majority of local teens and parents simply do not talk with one another about sexuality issues. Some people believe if you talk to teens about sex, you will encourage it by planting ideas in their heads. Contrary to this belief, a study based on TAP data found teens who are sexually active are more likely to be so because they perceive fewer costs, not because they perceive more benefits

(Small et al., 1993). In other words, sexually active teens may not be perceiving the consequences realistically. This would suggest that teens need help (information) in seeing the responsibilities and costs that come with sexual intercourse.

Sexual Abuse

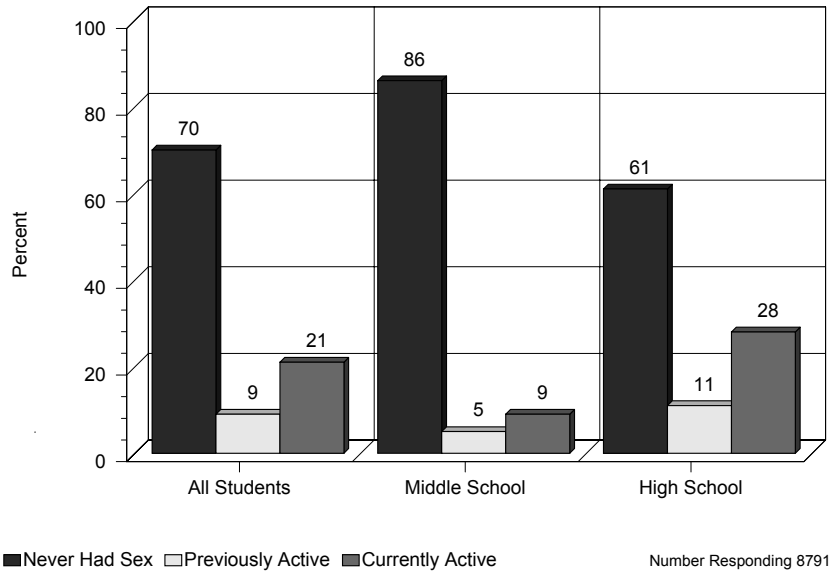
Child sexual abuse refers to the use of a child by an adult for sexual purposes whether or not consent is alleged to have been given. Sexual abuse is defined in the TAP survey as when someone in a youth's family or another person does sexual things to the youth or makes the youth do sexual things to them. According to researchers in the field, child sexual abuse is a problem which occurs across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans & Herbison, 1993; Berenson, San Miguel & Wilkinson, 1992; Cosentino, 1989; Priest, 1992; Roosa & Tein, 1997). The actual prevalence of sexual abuse nationwide is unknown. Nonetheless, it is generally assumed the problem is far greater than one would expect and far greater than statistics presently reveal. There were 1,319 allegations of child sexual abuse in New Hampshire in 1997 (B. Bloom, Department of Children, Youth and Families, personal communication, January 1, 2000).

Youth who are victims of prolonged sexual abuse usually develop low self esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and an unhealthy perspective on sexuality. They may become withdrawn and potentially suicidal (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997). Studies show a link between sexual abuse and early onset of voluntary intercourse among females (Butler & Burton, 1990; Roosa & Tein, 1997). However, high levels of parental monitoring and support from at least one parent decreases the risk sexually abused adolescents will develop problem behaviors (Luster & Small, 1997).

The vast majority of New Hampshire youth surveyed reported they have not been sexually abused by an adult (94%). Of those who have been abused, more reported that the abuse was in the past and is no longer occurring. Females were more likely to report sexual abuse than males (8% vs. 4%). Two percent (2%) or 173 of the 8,665 youth who responded to this question reported current sexual abuse.

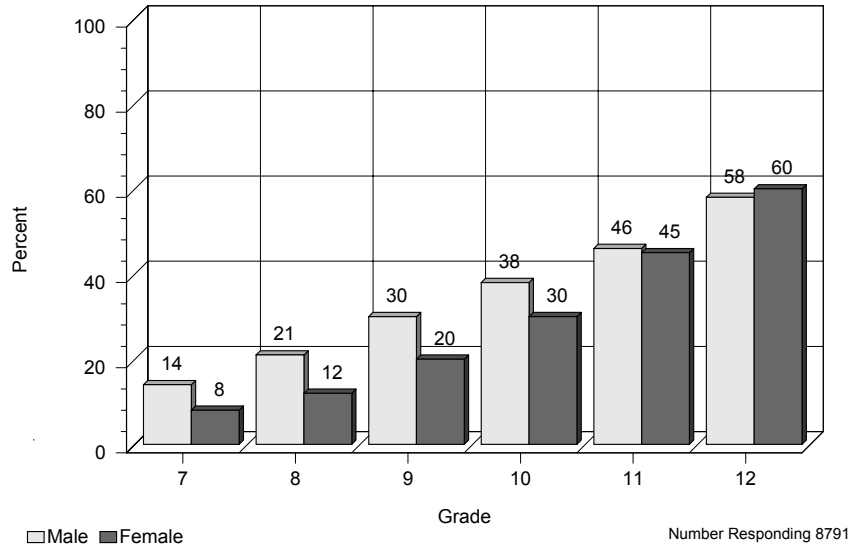
PRESENTATION OF DATA (Due to rounding, some graphs may not total 100%.)

Figure 5-1: Sexual Activity of Teens
(By School Level)



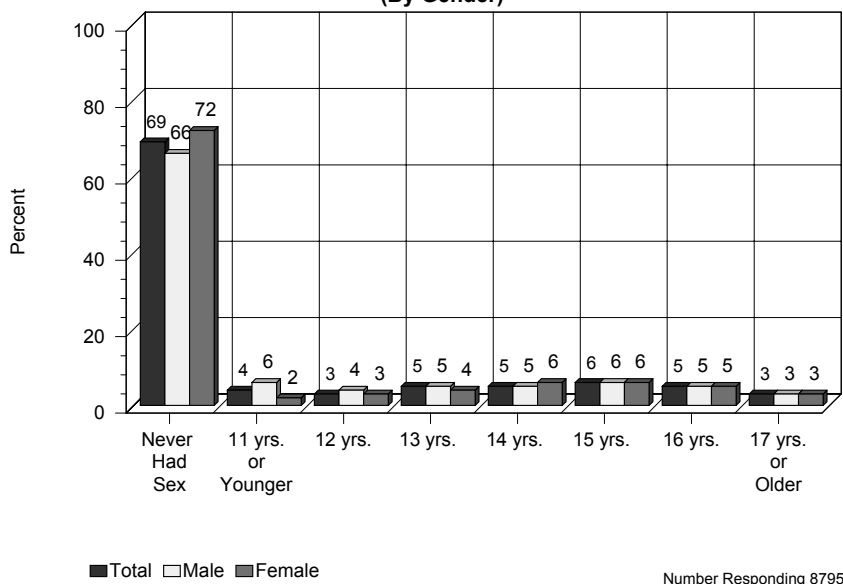
- Overall, 30% of youth surveyed have had sexual intercourse at some time.
- High school youth were more likely to report having sexual intercourse than middle school youth (39% vs. 14%).

Figure 5-2: Teens Who Have Ever Had Sexual Intercourse
(By Grade and Gender)



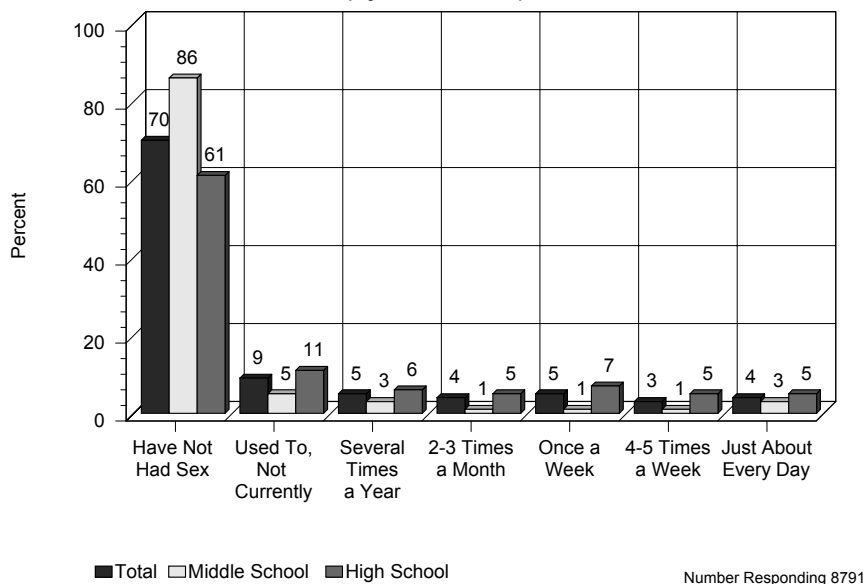
- More males than females reported having sexual intercourse in grades 7 through 11.

**Figure 5-3: Age Teens First Had Sex
(By Gender)**



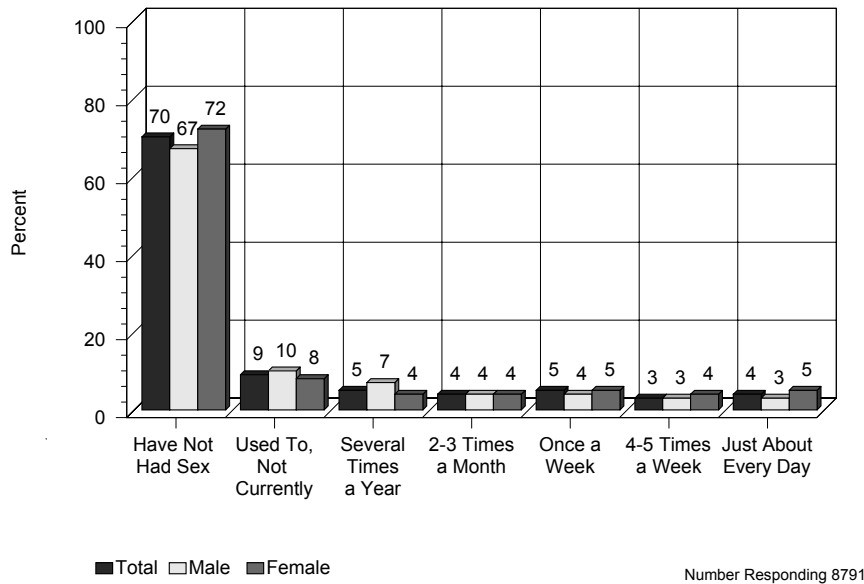
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) of teens surveyed reported they first had sex by the age of 16 or earlier.
- The average age teens first had sex is 14 years old.

**Figure 5-4: Frequency of Sexual Activity
(By School Level)**



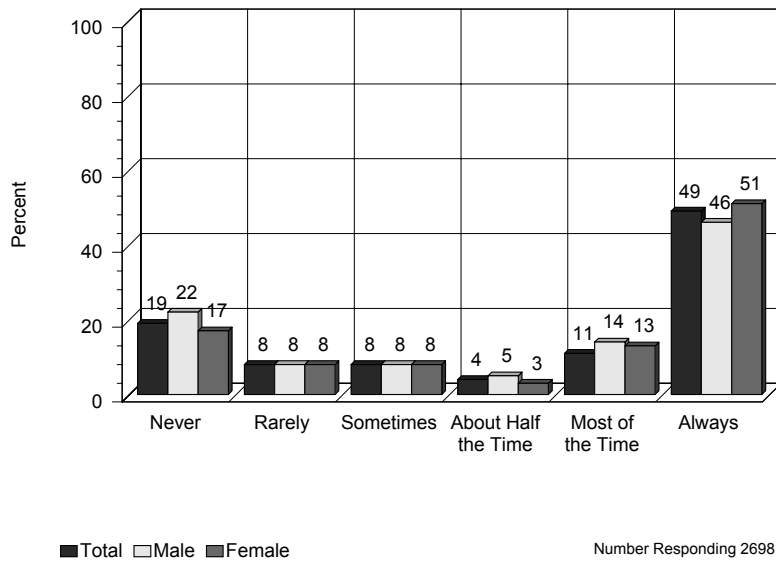
- High school teens have sex more often than middle school youth.

**Figure 5-5: Frequency of Sexual Activity
(By Gender)**



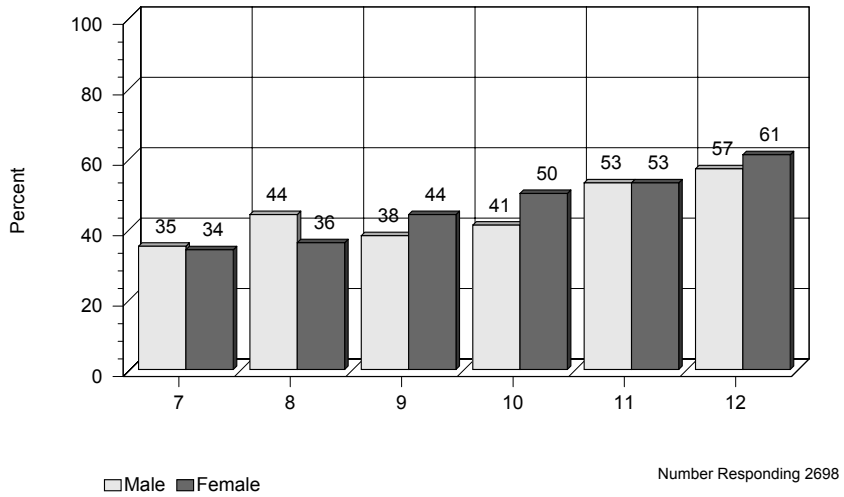
- Frequency rates of sexual activity are similar for males and females.

**Figure 5-6: Birth Control Use by Sexually Active Teens
(By Gender)**



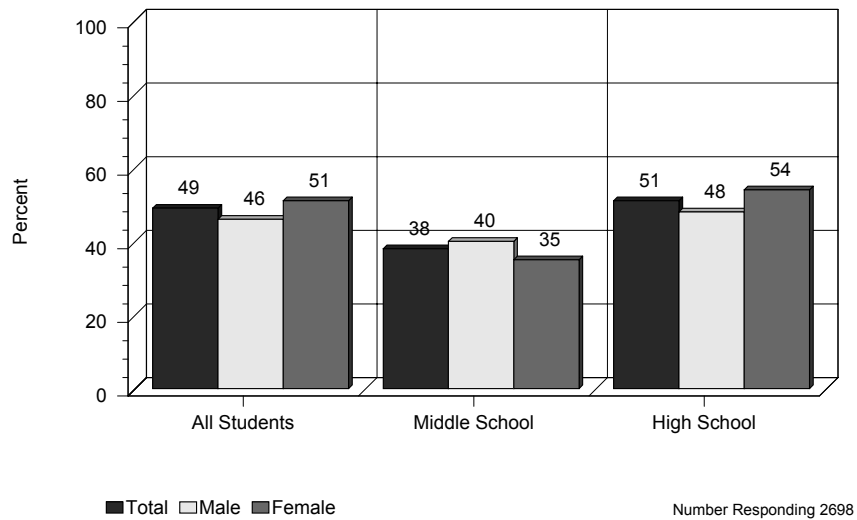
- Fifty-one percent (51%) of sexually active youth do not always use birth control.

Figure 5-7: Sexually Active Teens Who Always Use Birth Control (By Grade and Gender)



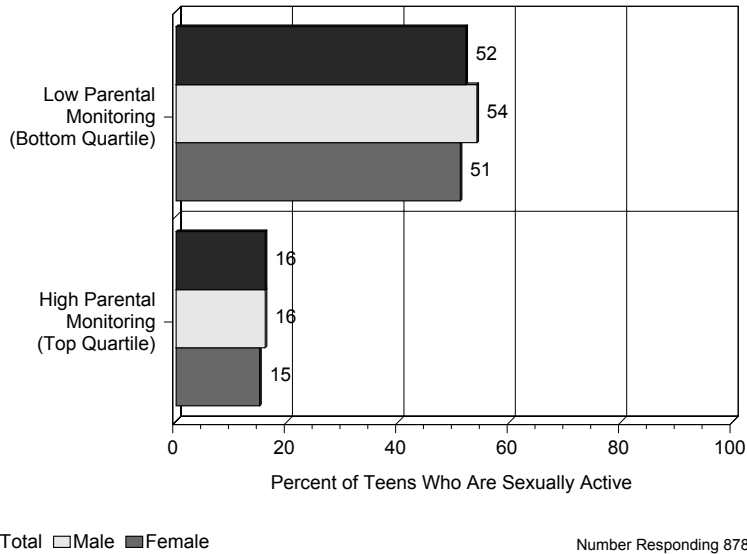
- The number of sexually active teens who always use birth control increases consistently from the 9th to 12th grade.

Figure 5-8: Sexually Active Teens Who Always Use Birth Control (By School Level and Gender)



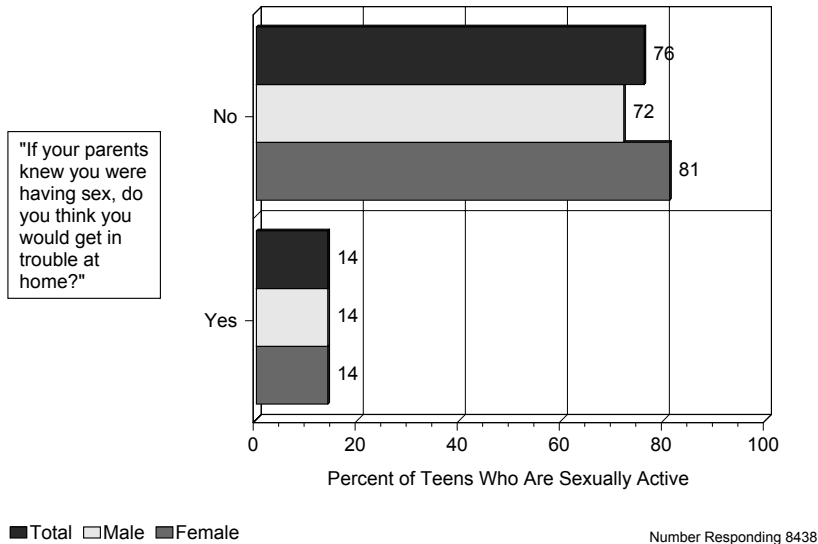
- High school youth were more likely to say they always use birth control than middle school youth.

Figure 5-9: Parental Monitoring vs. Level of Teen Sexual Activity (By Gender)



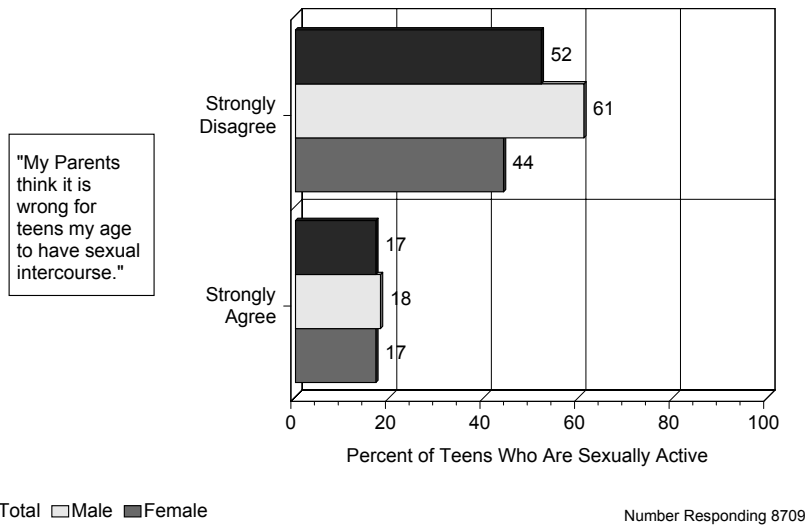
- A greater percentage of teens in the low parental monitoring than in the high parental monitoring group reported being sexually active.

Figure 5-10: Thinking They Will Get in Trouble at Home vs. Level of Sexual Activity (By Gender)



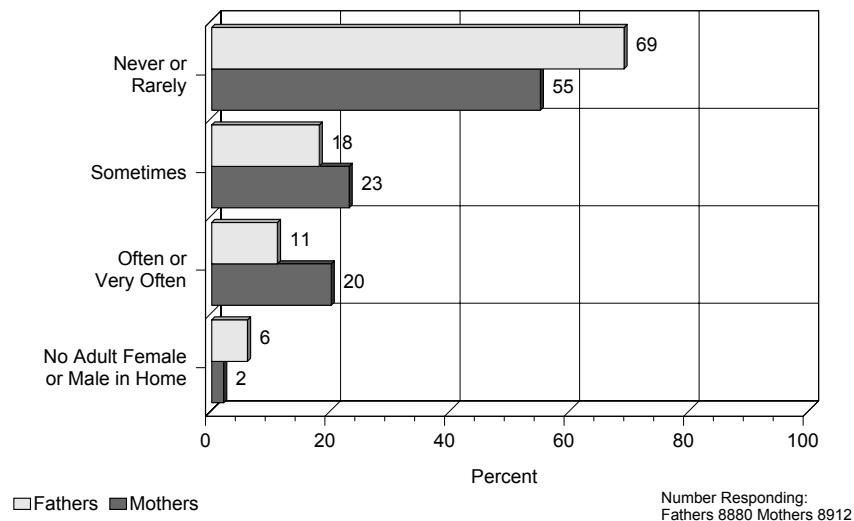
- Teens who do not feel they will get in trouble are much more likely to be sexually active.

Figure 5-11: Teens' Perceptions of Parental Values vs. Level of Teen Sexual Activity
(By Gender)



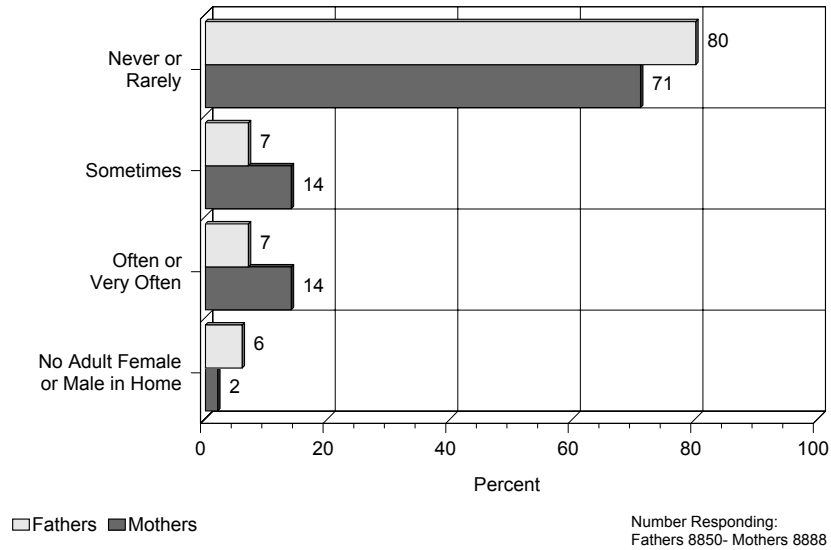
- Teens who *don't* believe their parents think it is wrong for them to have sex are three times more likely to engage in sex than teens who *do* believe their parents think it is wrong for them to have sex.

Figure 5-12: Talks with Father or Mother About Whether or Not It's Okay to Have Sex
(In the Past Year)



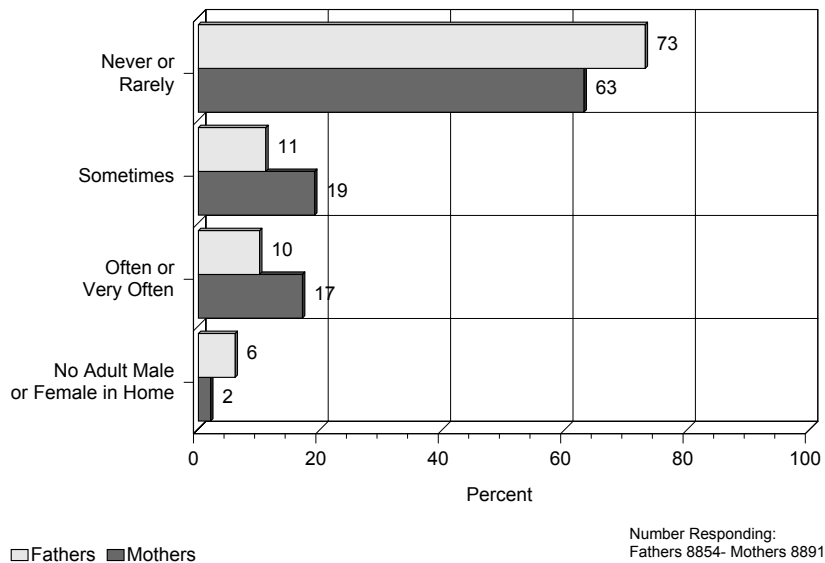
- Sixty-nine percent (69%) of teens never or rarely talk with their fathers about if it is okay to have sex, and 55% never or rarely talk with their mothers about the subject.
- Teens were more likely to talk with their mothers about this issue than their fathers.

**Figure 5-13: Talks with Father or Mother About Birth Control
(In the Past Year)**



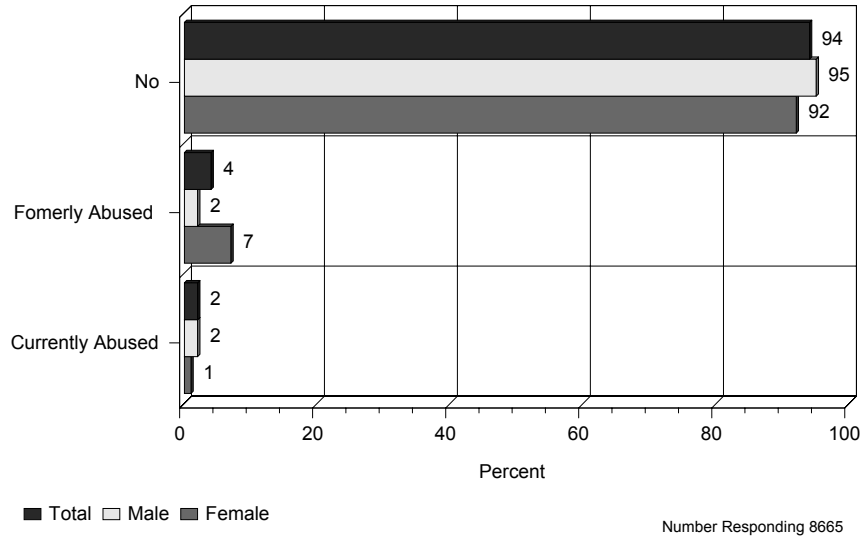
- Most teens never or rarely talk with their mothers and fathers about birth control (fathers, 80%; mothers, 71%).
- Teens were more likely to talk with their mothers about this issue than their fathers.

**Figure 5-14: Talks with Father or Mother About AIDS or STDs
(In the Past Year)**



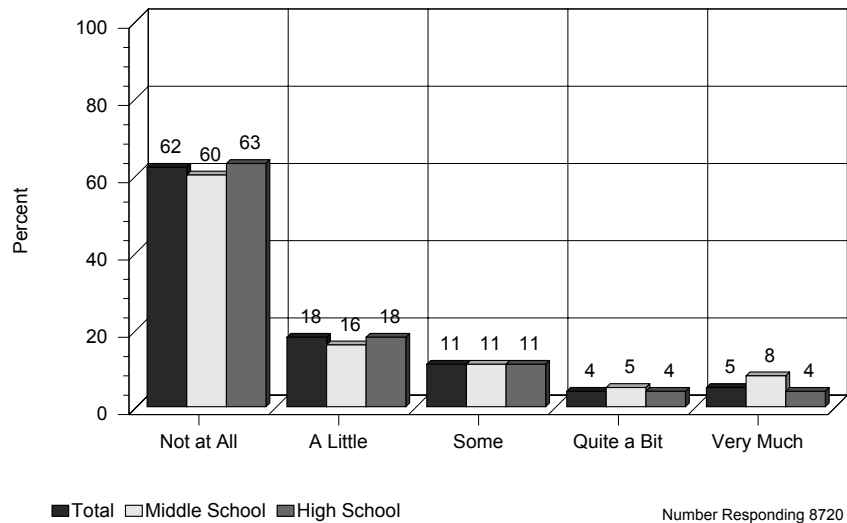
- Well over half of teens surveyed never or rarely talk with their mothers and father about STDs and AIDs (fathers, 73%; mothers, 63%).

Figure 5-15: Teens Who Have Been Sexually Abused by an Adult (By Gender)



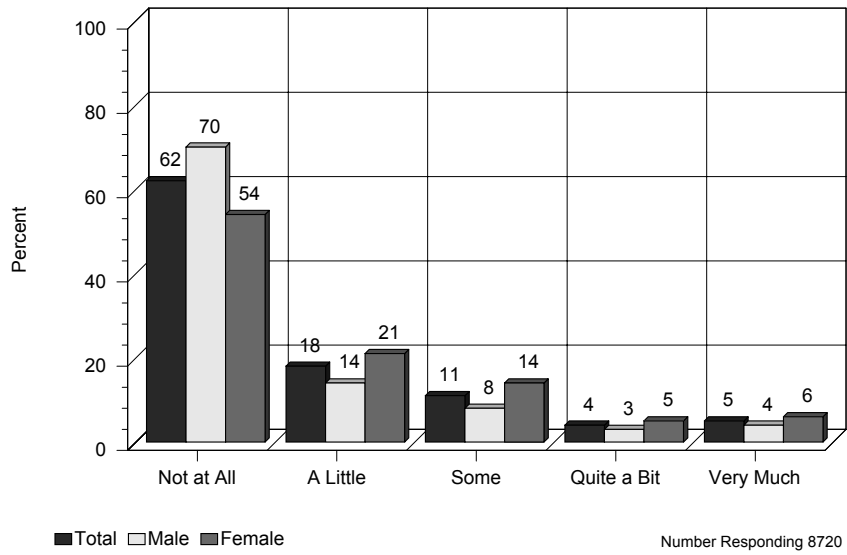
- Teens were more likely to talk with their mothers about sexual abuse than their fathers.
- Six percent (6%) of teens surveyed reported being sexually abused by an adult at some time.
- A greater percentage of females than males reported being sexually abused (8% vs. 4%).

Figure 5-16: Teen Worries About Being Pressured into Having Sex (By School Level)



- Thirty-eight percent (38%) of teens surveyed reported worrying at least “a little” about being pressured into having sex.

Figure 5-17: Teen Worries About Being Pressured into Having Sex (By Gender)



- Females are more likely to be worried about being pressured into sex than males (middle school males, 34%; middle school females, 47%; high school males, 28%; high school females, 45%).

PRESENTATION OF COMPARABLE DATA

In this section, TAP data are compared with national and New Hampshire statistics from the *1999 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS)*. This survey is published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2000). It monitors six categories of priority health-risk behaviors among youth and adults—behaviors that contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries; tobacco use; alcohol and other drug use; sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); unhealthy dietary behaviors; and physical inactivity. It is administered every other year and includes a national school-based survey conducted by the CDC as well as state, territorial, and local school-based surveys conducted by education and health agencies. Although the goal is to obtain representative samples, due to a lower than expected response rate, the results from the 1999 survey for New Hampshire should not be generalized to other students in the state.

**Table 5-1: Sexuality Comparison
(grades 9-12 only)**

Question	YRBS National %	YRBS¹ N.H. % (ranking)	TAP² %
Ever had sexual intercourse YRBS: Have you ever had sexual intercourse? TAP: Have you ever voluntarily had sexual intercourse?	49.9 -	42.9 (20 th of 28) -	- 39
First sexual intercourse before age 13 YRBS: How old were you when you had sexual intercourse for the first time? TAP: If you have had sexual intercourse, how old were you the first time you had sexual intercourse?	8.3 -	5.0 (25 th of 30) -	- 6.0

¹(Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey-CDC, 2000. Ranking is based on weighted and unweighted data combined.)

²(Teen Assessment Project, 2000.)

Note: Because of question wording differences, the results of the YRBS and TAP are not directly comparable.