

Auburn Coalition on Teen Age Pregnancy Prevention (ACTAPP)

FINAL REPORT – November 1999

The Auburn Community and Teen Pregnancy: Changing Attitudes

[Editor's Note: Quotes throughout this report will be identified with either an "A" or a "T" to indicate whether the participant was an adult or teen. Additionally, teens will be distinguished by gender: "M" for male, and "F" for female".]

The issue of teen pregnancy affects many communities, and Auburn is no exception. Over ten years ago, Auburn was in the spotlight because it had the highest teen pregnancy rate of all cities in King County outside Seattle. Some even referred to Auburn as the "teen pregnancy capital" of the state. While teen pregnancy rates have declined in Auburn, as well as nationally, many respondents referred to a "legacy" of teen pregnancy in Auburn. How a community is affected by such an issue, and how it responds to the issue, depends in large part upon community attitudes towards teen pregnancy.

As part of the assessment, ACTAPP attempted to get a sense of these attitudes, both past and current. Two strands of common observations emerged as a result. The first was a perception that Auburn carries a "legacy" of teen pregnancy – both due to the high rates of the past, and the "cycles" of teen pregnancy observed in families in Auburn. The second was that Auburn as a community is divided in its attitudes towards teen pregnancy, which creates some challenges for effective responses to the issue.

The Legacy of Teen Pregnancy

A number of key leaders, and some teens, spoke of a legacy of teen pregnancy in Auburn. For some, this had more to do with Auburn's past notoriety as a city with high teen pregnancy rates. They noted that because of this notoriety, Auburn is often associated or identified with the issue of teen pregnancy.

- *I think that the community as a whole...has seen the issue of teen pregnancy as an Auburn issue – kinda like Auburn has the highest indicators of teen pregnancy, the most pregnant teens, etc., etc. (A)*

For many, the legacy of teen pregnancy had to do with cycles of teen pregnancy and socio-economic conditions in Auburn. Respondents – adult and teen –

described families in which the grandmother, mother, and teen have all been teen parents.

- *We have a thing in our family. Young pregnancy. All the girls in my family got pregnant by age 16, 17...I know that my Dad can't really get mad at me for getting pregnant, because he got my mom pregnant at 15. (T, female)*
- *I see a high incidence of ... teens coming to me and saying "my mom was a teen parent". I feel in Auburn specifically, a larger portion of the population [of parents of teens] were teen parents themselves. [Teen pregnancy] tends to repeat itself. (A)*

A few respondents made it clear that while these conditions exist in Auburn, and do contribute to a legacy of teen pregnancy, they are not unique to Auburn. One respondent acknowledged the cycles of teen pregnancy in Auburn, but also wondered why Auburn had garnered a "stigma" for it over other similar communities.

- *I think, and this may just be an observation of mine, but [with] people that I know it becomes a family system sometimes. People...that had kids as teen moms say "this isn't going to happen to my kid, I'm going to make sure it doesn't happen to my kid", but it does happen. Why does it happen, I don't know. I don't know why can't people break out of the family system [cycle]. The welfare thing is a stereotype and I hate to use it, but sometimes that really happens...like the welfare family system, the pregnancy family system, the alcohol family system.... There are all kinds of family systems that just cycle. I don't know why Auburn has had that stigma - I don't think Auburn is any different than any other town with the same problems. (A)*

Socio-economics were also mentioned in relation to Auburn's "legacy" of teen pregnancy. Many leaders noted that a greater portion of the Auburn community is low-income, and of a lower educational level than families in some other King County communities. They expressed that the combination of family cycles of teen pregnancy, and limited economic and educational opportunities, created too many situations where teens had little vision about their futures.

- *A lot of girls don't really have any vision. They don't think beyond "boyfriend, party", or they think, "it's just so hopeless" – their mom is 30, they're 15, and their grandmother is 45. (A)*

Some key leaders felt that the legacy of teen pregnancy in Auburn created a level of acceptance that bordered on complacency, and even apathy. They alluded that people had begun to see teen pregnancy in Auburn as a sort of "norm" or "fact of life" – something that can't be changed – and so were less apt to work actively to change or address it.

- *People feel it's a fact of life, it's never going away...I think, for the most part, it's an abysmal problem. (A)*

- *The attitude is one of apathy. (A)*

A few took the opposite viewpoint, however. They, too, acknowledged the legacy of teen pregnancy in Auburn, and the increased acceptance of teen pregnancy in general. But they felt that the community saw this legacy as a challenge, and was actively working to address the issue.

- *The community attitude is one of acceptance of pregnancy and [therefore] let's do something [about it]. (A)*

Divided Attitudes

In speaking of Auburn as a community, key leaders were quick to note the strides Auburn has made in the past decade to deal with the issue of teen pregnancy. Programs such as Healthy Families, Project Empower and the Young Families Improvement Program (YFIP) were mentioned as models of successful collaborations among Auburn agencies and coalitions. Yet despite these unifying efforts, key leaders persistently spoke, whether directly or indirectly, of a division in Auburn.

This division was described in different ways, and often came up when key leaders were comparing and contrasting Auburn community attitudes towards teen sex and teen pregnancy. In a sense, key leaders described two different “camps”, with opposing attitudes. They described one camp as more “tolerant” of teen pregnancy, for example, and one as less so. Other terms used to describe this division of attitudes included: “judgmental” vs. “accepting” and “heads in the sand” vs. “realistic”.

Many key leaders described the conservative or “old-fashioned” nature of the Auburn community as one of that factors that informs this division. Some saw this conservatism as a positive influence on the community, and on teen pregnancy-related issues; others saw it as an obstacle or challenge to providing prevention education

- *I look at Auburn and I feel pretty good because I think we're a pretty conservative community. You know, compared to some of the other communities.... You know, there's not strip clubs in Auburn, which is good, there's not adult bookstores, which is really good. It's a very conservative area. (A)*
- *Auburn is pretty old-fashioned and conservative. The feeling that if we don't talk about it, it won't exist. And if we open it up and talk about it, like have too much education in our schools, then there will be more of a practice – then you'll have a higher rate of pregnancy, instead of the other way around. I think there's a lot of that attitude still. (A)*

But not all key leaders attributed the division in attitudes to Auburn's conservatism. Some felt that while Auburn is conservative, it is also realistic. The dividing line they described had more to do with who is “realistic” about the issue, and less to do with who is “conservative”.

- *And then I also think that we're realistic. There's other communities that are conservative that don't think kids are having sex. Auburn realizes there are kids having sex. (A)*

Several key leaders either directly or indirectly spoke to age as another probable factor in determining people's attitudes towards teen pregnancy.

- *There's a younger segment...that has a much more accepting attitude [about teen pregnancy.] That a mistake was probably made, or it was an unfortunate situation, and let's try to support this teen. Then there is an older segment...who have less tolerance [and a] more judgmental attitude. [This segment feels that] expressing their sexuality is not something teenagers ought to be doing...it's just not appropriate. (A)*

This division was perhaps most obvious when respondents shared their observations about the level of community *acceptance* regarding teen pregnancy. A number of key leaders felt that though acceptance of teen pregnancy has increased in the past decade (and denial has decreased), there are still those who do not want to talk about the issue, and while they're aware of the problem, would prefer it didn't exist. Conversely, key leaders also noted that there are people in the community who are more accepting and proactive about teen pregnancy.

- I have a sense that there's a part of the population that would just like to deny the fact that there's teenage sex, or teenage pregnancy resulting, and if we don't address it then it doesn't...occur. I [also] have a sense that there are some really caring people that want to look at the topic and really put into practice programs that help teens make decisions. (A)

One key leader went so far as to characterize these differing attitudes as coming from "different worlds". When describing these "different worlds", the majority of respondents did not see much communication, understanding, or collaboration between the two.

- I keep seeing that Auburn is kind of divided. And I don't see a whole lot of understanding of each other. There's separation, in terms of attitudes, so I don't see a whole lot of progress...I think what exemplifies [this division] is there's Auburn [Senior] High School, which seems to set these high standards, and gives the impression of a certain population of kids, and then their tolerance doesn't go very far; or the reverse type of population, [which] is seen at West Auburn High. There's such different worlds going on there. (A)

According to several key leaders, lack of understanding between these "different worlds" of differing attitudes creates obstacles to more effective collaborations in the community. It also leaves some key leaders feeling frustrated or isolated in their efforts.

- *[Our agency] is available as a...less judgmental, more personal, more 'what is and what can you do' viewpoint, and we're sort of this kind of island...you don't feel a lot of connection...if you do connect with other agencies, you can run into more conservative viewpoints, and then you can't progress the way you...could here. (A)*

- *I have worked in other communities where there has been a lot more tolerance and proactive support. Auburn has not been the least tolerant. I have found that rural communities are less tolerant. (A)*

Working Together: Bridging the Gap

The divisions in attitude highlighted by respondents speak to challenges and obstacles, but also to potential for new and innovative collaborations. Auburn has already produced some successful collaborations among city, county, and community interests, as mentioned above. A number of key leaders implied that more work could be done, with greater success, if more understanding could be reached between those on opposite sides of these divisions.

- *We cannot do it alone. You have to bring different groups, agencies, professionals, volunteers, parents...you have to bring people collectively together. (A)*

The Age of Acceptance: Growing Up in a Sexualized Society

- [I]t's just how society has changed from like 1950's all the way to the 1990's. We're like, we're almost to 2000, and now we have like, schools that have like, um, day cares and other stuff, you know? And it's like, you can see out of fifty years how society has changed, all around the world. (T, male)

As part of the assessment, ACTAPP asked people to reflect on the changes that had occurred in the decade since ACTAPP's formation. In particular, ACTAPP was interested to see if respondents had observed any changes in community attitudes towards teen pregnancy, teen parents and in the lives of teens.

Adults and teens alike observed a number of changes in the past decade, some more alarming to respondents, and some more welcome. In general, many respondents felt that society had become more accepting of and more open about sex and sexuality. With mixed feelings, key leaders described a climate in which teens are more graphic in their discussion about sex, but also more knowledgeable. They also described a climate in which teens are exposed to the "shock value" of media images and information about sex, without adequate adult supervision to guide them. Even the teens expressed an awareness that society had become more accepting, and that sex was now, in their words, "ok".

Acceptance

Key leaders described the current Auburn community as more accepting about sexuality in general, and teen sex and teen pregnancy in particular, than it was a decade earlier. When speaking of this change, several key leaders remembered ACTAPP's early days, when community acceptance was low, and issues such as teen sex and teen pregnancy were "taboo" topics. While many key leaders see this growing acceptance as a positive change in Auburn, they also qualified their observations with a key concern. This concern involved what many termed the "glamorization" of teen pregnancy.

Teen Pregnancy – Acceptance or Approval?

A number of key leaders expressed concern about the dilemma they felt came part in parcel with acceptance of teen pregnancy. On the one hand, they felt it was extremely important to support the teens who are pregnant and parenting, but on the other hand, they wondered aloud if this type of support actually sent a message of "too much" acceptance – and somehow created an atmosphere of tacit approval.

- *I think the community is more accepting . . . There is a double bind thing: "I don't want you doing that, but now that you've done it, it's OK because we don't want you to feel bad and you're not a bad person and here [are] a lot of services that we are going to offer you". It's a double bind thing that didn't used to be there when we were that age. We can all remember that when a girl got pregnant, somehow they got shipped off to her aunt's house in a different state and then reappeared the next school year. That doesn't really go on anymore because of the community and societal acceptance. (A)*

Key leaders expressed significant concern regarding what they called a "glamorization" of teen pregnancy – instances where acceptance had actually turned into excitement and anticipation. In interviews, respondents described mothers of teen mothers who were excited about the pregnancies.

- *Amongst the kids, teen mothers are elevated to a position that it is being glorified....I have also found that parents – mothers – of teenage girls who are pregnant seem to be glorifying their teen daughters. They seem to be glorifying their daughter's pregnancy and that she is having a child. I hope that they are supportive and that they have a realistic picture of what the ramifications are of the issue around the teen, her pregnancy...It is almost in combination with the teen, [that] the mothers seem to be delighted. (A)*

Other respondents related a story about middle school-age girls who came into a family planning clinic "wanting to be pregnant", because a pregnant peer was carrying her ultrasound photo taped to the front of her school notebook. While these might be isolated cases, the concerns expressed by care providers, educators, counselors, and others do point to a level of acceptance that may be seductive to youth most at risk for getting pregnant.

- *When I was at Off Campus [now West Auburn High School] the pregnant girls were treated like 'queen bees'. Other guys treated them well. It may not be true in other places. It concerned us as educators. (A)*

Influence of Pregnant Teens on Non-Pregnant Peers

One of the central issues related to increased acceptance of teen pregnancy is that of the *perceived influence* of pregnant teens on their non-pregnant peers. The majority of key leaders observed that pregnant teens do influence their peers either positively or negatively, and many felt that glamorization of teen pregnancy was a significant contributing factor towards a negative influence. Additionally, key leaders noted two other factors which they felt affected the direction – positive or negative – of this influence.

The first factor had to do with how vulnerable or "at risk" a non-pregnant teen was to the glamorization of teen pregnancy. Teens with goals and high self-esteem, for example, were cited as being less prone to the glamorization of teen pregnancy than their counterparts who did not have goals, or well-developed self-esteem. The second factor had to do with the degree to which pregnant teens and teen parents were able to convey the reality of their situations to their non-pregnant peers – namely, the difficulties and challenges that they face on a daily basis.

- *If teens know someone, like a sister or a good friend who is a teen mom, it causes them to look at it in a real sense...to see how tough it is. (A)*
- *It works both ways. The ones who have a relative happiness with their life, and have an idea of what their future might be before they are married with children, they would be more influenced to remember not to, to be careful, to be responsible. I think it works the other way for kids who have no one that they really can call their own, and feel very alienated from close relationships - they don't really have parents that care or whatever – I think they can be influenced to go in that direction, because at least this person [pregnant girl] has someone to hang on to. (A)*

Openness

In addition to increased acceptance of teen pregnancy and teen parenting, respondents also noted changes in the level of openness regarding sex and sexuality. The majority of respondents observed that society as a whole, and Auburn in particular, have become more relaxed and open in conversations about sex, including teen sex. They also felt that teens have more opportunities to discuss it.

- *There is more openness in conversation, not only among teens, but among adults as well. (A)*
- *Ten years ago, when I started teaching, you still could hardly say “condom” in the classroom. They were “rubbers”, and you could hardly say that. (A)*

Just as with increased acceptance, respondents – especially the adults – had mixed feelings about the increased openness. They were glad that teens had more places to discuss sex openly, with less embarrassment or sense of “taboo”. Several also mentioned that in this environment of openness, teens were more able to influence policy as peer leaders, for example. However, many key leaders were concerned with the ubiquitous presence of sexual images and references – most especially from the media – in our society, and the sheer amount of it that is available to teens now, as compared to ten years ago.

- *It’s not just a small amount -- there’s a huge selection. I think if I were 17 and watching [programs on tv], as opposed to being 53 and watching them, it’s tough without somebody there to guide you. (A)*

Several key leaders mentioned that the omnipresence of sexual images and references introduces children to sex at earlier ages than in the past, and in more graphic ways. One key leader stated, “[Sex] is in their faces”. Hence, they perceived today’s teens to be more sophisticated regarding the “mechanics” of sex than teens ten years ago. However, they also felt that despite this sophistication, teens were *no more mature* about sex now than ten years ago. This perceived gap between knowledge and maturity concerned a number of key leaders.

- *Our whole society is so sexually-based that I think kids learn about it earlier, and I think they know a whole lot more about it. [They are] much more sophisticated about mechanics of sexuality. I don’t think they look at it with any more maturity than they did 10 years ago. [Teens] don’t really truly understand the depth of what a sexual relationship is. (A)*
- *They’ve been exposed to different kinds of sexual acts, and that sort of thing, so that it isn’t left to their imagination... and being teens, they’re not mature enough to take in the whole picture, so I think that they, they’re probably experimenting in ways they wouldn’t have before, and maybe younger kids are experimenting, not having a clue about relationships. That is very distressing. (A)*

Teen Sex

While adult and teen respondents observed an increase in acceptance of teen pregnancy, and openness about sex in general, they also observed an increase in acceptance of teen sex. Several adults and teens stated that teen sex is now treated as a “common practice”. Teens in the focus groups seemed very much aware of this shift in the societal climate, most especially as compared to the one their parents grew up in. They alluded to the fact that society in general, and even their own parents, had become more permissive regarding teen sex, teen dating and teen pregnancy.

- *...I’ve talked about sex and school and girls getting pregnant with my mom, and she kinda said – we’re from California – that where she went to school, if a girl got pregnant, the school kicked her out...back in the day, you know? I mean, it went from very, very strict, all the way to now. (T, male)*

- Female Teen #1: Usually back then girls weren't even allowed to go out and spend all this time with guys.
Female Teen #2: It was like a date every now and then. Now it's just like, you can spend all the time you want [with boys], depending on your parents.

This climate of increased permissiveness and acceptance of teen sex can create cultural pressures that are challenging for youth. Respondents observed that teens today live in a society that is much more open about sex and sexuality than that of their parents' generation. Teens are also, by and large, better-educated about sex and sexuality than generations before them. Yet this increased openness also brings with it some confusing messages. Both male and female teens relayed that because sex is no longer "hush hush" in conversations, they get the message that sex is "OK". For some, their conclusion seemed to be "why not do it?"

- **Teen, female:** [The topic of sex] was a lot more closed back then, something people didn't talk about...So we're a lot more educated nowadays, more in society.
Interviewer: I'm just curious...how do you think that has affected teens, that sex is just more in society, or it's just more open?
Teen, female: That it's ok. That it's not such a hush-hush thing now. It's more accepted, so "why not" kind of thing.
- It's kinda, sex and everything [has] kinda been put to where it's OK, you know? "Go have fun." But, they don't tell you about the responsibilities. [agreement from several others] (T, male)

One of the more surprising themes that emerged from the assessment was that the majority of girls felt that once they lost their virginity, sex became an obligation.

- [Sex] makes things more complicated. You feel like if you do it once, you're obligated [to do it again]. (T)
- If you give them sex, and then after that don't give them anything, then they'll be complaining all the time. (T)

A number of girls in the focus groups expressed regret that they had initiated intercourse as early as they did, and a sense of hopelessness about their ability to retrieve the "specialness" of sex that had existed prior to loss of virginity. In a sense, these girls felt that the loss of virginity equaled a loss of significance around sex. Sex just becomes something you "do".

- If [a new boyfriend] is a virgin, then you could go back to [not having sex], but usually, the guys...I mean, you don't find virgins that much, and also, once you lose your virginity – 'cause you know how it's supposed to be all special and stuff – after that, you get a boyfriend and [sex] doesn't seem like a big deal because you're not a

virgin anymore. So you have sex with them after like 2 weeks of dating them, and...it's not anything special. It's just sex.

Of girls who wait, several respondents had these opinions:

- They're smart and they have good will power.
- I seriously wish I would have waited.

It's important to state that there were some girls in the focus groups that had lost their virginity and felt it was a positive experience. However, they were the exception.

Boys, too, expressed their own brand of response to increased permissiveness and acceptance around teen sex. In a sense, they felt let down by society. On the one hand, they felt they were being told that sex is "ok" – go have it – and on the other hand, they felt that no one was telling them about the consequences of sexual activity, and the responsibilities of a sexual relationship.

Knowledge

The majority of key leaders, with a few exceptions, felt that teens today are also more savvy about sex than they were ten years ago. But they qualified their statements in terms of the type of knowledge. As stated above, teens seem to be more sophisticated about the "mechanics" of sex. For example, their knowledge base regarding sexually transmitted diseases, and especially HIV/AIDS, has increased significantly in the past decade, due mainly to mandatory education in the public school system. However, many key leaders wondered if teens were actually utilizing this new knowledge in their daily lives. And while they acknowledged the benefits of an increase in information-based knowledge, they also spoke to what they felt was equally important: knowledge regarding the emotional and spiritual aspects of sex, values and decision-making.

- *Sex is coming from the heart, not the head. The information is out there, but is it used is the question. (A)*
- *I think teens are more knowledgeable about plumbing and STD's, but not about decision-making. They are no more knowledgeable than they ever were 40 years ago...Teens are still being sexually active for the same reasons that they always have been. That hasn't changed. I think it can change, but that's the part that never gets addressed. (A)*
- *It's kinda like, when you're thinking about [sex], [STD's] are the last thing on your mind. You're thinking about getting some.(T, male)*

Acceptance + Openness = Increased Cultural Pressures

In an environment where sexual images and references are commonplace, and cultural pressures are strong, it becomes even more important for youth to spend time with trusted adults and to participate in safe, meaningful activities. A persistent theme among both adult and teen respondents was the need for more adult supervision of youth in Auburn, more constructive activities for teens, and the role that drug/alcohol use can play when neither adults nor meaningful activities are present.

Adult Supervision

Even with the best intentions, many families struggle to find time to share meals, let alone initiate more intimate discussions about such topics as sex and relationships. In Auburn, where 35% of families are single-parent households (the King County average proportion is 22% of single parent families), parents may face even greater challenges to finding quality time to spend with their children, or finding others to watch their children. Even two-parent households may work a number of jobs to support the family, which translates to less time at home. More and more, youth are left alone in unsupervised situations. Many key leaders, and even some teens, expressed concern about this lack of supervision, and felt it was a contributing factor towards teen pregnancy in Auburn.

- *Children go everywhere unsupervised...Children [are] raising themselves. (A)*
- *In an area where the parents are really struggling, they're going to have far less time to really monitor their children. And we do also have a lot of single parent homes here, and that makes it even worse. Because, you know, if you have one parent who is struggling to keep things together, and obviously most of them are working maybe one or two jobs, how in the world can they monitor their children?(A)*
- *That Johnny and Susie can go home, and no one is going to be there, to at all question what they are doing. And maybe for hours. We've got kids here whose parents work swing shift...they never see each other. The kid's in bed when [the parent] gets home. The kid goes to school, [the parent] is asleep, so they never even talk. (A)*
- *It's like, you know, parents are away, you go over to the house, I mean it's just one thing leads to another, and it can just happen without even wanting it to at the beginning. (T, male)*

Boredom

In tandem with lack of supervision, both adults and teens felt that too much “empty time” or boredom was a possible contributing factor to teen pregnancy in Auburn, as well as drug/alcohol use. The majority of teens felt that, while there were adequate activities in Auburn for younger kids, there were very few activities specifically directed to teens. According to these teens, the major activities available to them were “hanging out” and “partying”. Adults tended to mirror this perspective. In addition, both adults and teens expressed that many low-income teens are limited in terms of their options for things to do. For example, activities such as skiing or golfing are more expensive, and often feel “out of reach” for teens from poor families.

- *During the summer you just sit there and sit there, waiting for nighttime to come so you can go party.(T, female)*
- *So many people are poor in Auburn, we can't afford to do the fun stuff. (T, female)*
- *There's not anything to do, and yet there's all kinds of things going on [in Auburn]....The older they get, the fewer things are available for them to do. [There are] quite a few things for younger kids, but as they get older, there is less and less to do. (A)*

Drug/Alcohol Use

The combination of lack of supervision and lack of things to do can create a ripe climate for experimentation with sex and drugs/alcohol. In addition, even teens with the best intentions, decision-making skills, and “knowledge” about sex, can make poor sexual choices when under

the influence of drugs or alcohol. A number of key leaders expressed concern about the connection between drug/alcohol use and poor sexual decisions, as well as surprise that Auburn as a community had not looked more closely at this connection.

- *When kids have been suspended for drug/alcohol at school, what I have found that as kids drink on their own, and this could be 7th or 8th graders, many of the girls who are there are also sexually active. (A)*
- *Well, I often ask the question of teenage girls, whether in group format or individually, and the question is, "If we could remove all drugs and alcohol from the city of Auburn, would the teen pregnancy [rate] in Auburn go up or down or stay the same?" And 98% will say, after they think a minute, "we are easier when we have been drinking." Guys will admit it, too. (A)*
- *All of the education and all of the training, all of the support to make good decisions that teenagers have, when you put them under the influence of alcohol or drugs, none of that makes a difference. I feel that if we made a difference in terms of drug use and the use of alcohol, we [could] make a tremendous difference in the sexual decisions of our teenagers...I think we would have a dramatic...decrease in the rate of pregnancy, the rate of sexual assault, and sexual harassment...I haven't really heard somebody really make the tie, you know, 'you booze, you lose, because of the sexual decisions you're going to make' – I haven't really seen those issues very much addressed. (A)*

What Can Help

Teens and adults were clear that relationships with trusted adults, and constructive and meaningful activities, all help youth to navigate the changing cultural and social terrain with greater success. There are already a number of programs in the Auburn community whose goal is to provide meaningful activities, guidance, and support to youth. Some of these, such as the City's Parks and Recreation program (especially Late Night), Auburn Youth Resource's Project Empower program, Young Life, and church youth groups, were mentioned during interviews as important supports for youth.

A Trusted Adult

In addition to programs and groups, teens in the focus groups mentioned the importance of having individual adults to talk to and seek guidance from. While parents were mentioned, many teens felt they could not talk openly with them. They feared "getting in trouble" if they disclosed that they were sexually active, or considering having sex. Some also felt that their parents, and even other adults were "out of touch" with the '90's and all the pressures and social expectations which confront today's teens.

- *My dad knows nothing about my life. He thought I was just like him, when he was a teenager, so he thought I was going around doin' cocaine, and all that crazy stuff that he used to do, and thought that I was just this bad kid, just because he was like "I know what it's like to be a teenager". But adults don't know what it's like to be a teenager nowadays. Because they were teenagers 20 - 30 years ago. It was completely different back then than it is now. There are totally different situations that they couldn't even...understand what we have to face. (T, female)*

Teens tended to seek out adults who they viewed as "nonjudgmental" and in whom they could confide with confidence. They also sought out adults whom they perceived to be "in tune" with the daily lives of teens. Often, these were adults who were unrelated to the teen, though older

relatives such as aunts, uncles, and even siblings, were also mentioned as possible sources of support and guidance.

Other adults mentioned included teachers, coaches, school counselors, youth group leaders, clinic staff at the Auburn Public Health Center, and facilitators for Project Empower, among others. Teens clearly valued these relationships, and saw them as an important support.

- *I think it's good to have at least one adult to help you along the way...that you can talk to. If that adult is a family member, it's even better. (T, female)*
- *[My teacher] has kind of been like a mentor towards me, because I've had his class for every single year, for all year, you know? And he, he makes me push myself to the limit, you know, even when I want to give up. And, I would talk to him. (T, male)*

Opportunities for Discussion

Teens in the focus groups, especially girls, wanted more opportunities to discuss issues related to sex, sexuality, dating and relationships in a structured, group setting. They wanted adults to be present, but to act mainly as silent observers. Many of the female participants enjoyed the “focus group” format and asked when they could “do it again.” Boys also wanted more open forums, and they were interested in mixed gender groups.

It is important to note that all these teens **wanted** adults to be present during discussions and forums about sex and sexuality. Clearly, the presence of trusted, respected adults is important to these teens, as is the idea that teens would be “heard” by adults, rather than “talked to” by them.

Open Communication with Parents

Finally, teens were clear that they wanted their parents to be approachable or “askable” regarding topics such as sex, dating, and relationships. They also said that they wanted their parents to share more personal stories from their own experiences as teens. In addition, they wanted parents to know that some teens are able to have “responsible sex”. And they wanted their parents to “get educated” about the issues that teens face today, so they could better understand them. As one teen said, “A lot of parents are really clueless.”

In an era of increasing sexual messages and references, and strong cultural pressures, teens seem to be saying, now more than ever, that they need their parents to be there for them.

- *Let your teen talk to you. Don't judge them. Don't give them your opinion on it....Just listen to them, and they'll be more willing the next time you talk to them, and they won't go to a friend, who knows no more than they do. (T, female)*

The Role of Sex Education: School, Church, and Family

Sex education was seen as an important, if not controversial, aspect of the Auburn community's response to teen pregnancy. Respondents described sex education in different ways, but the majority of them expressed a belief in the value of educating children and youth about sexuality. They differed in their views of what type of education to provide (i.e. abstinence, or comprehensive sex education), what was the best venue for this particular type of education, and who were the most appropriate people to provide this education. Respondents tended to speak about three main "venues" where sex education was provided, to varying degrees of success: the schools, the church or other religious institutions, and the family. These venues will be addressed in that order.

The Schools

The Auburn Public School District is the 23rd largest school district in the state. 12,434 students attended this district during the school year of '98-'99, and that enrollment is projected to increase. The district includes 12 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and three high schools (one of which is alternative). "Sex education" is not labeled as such, but a Human Growth and Development Curriculum is introduced at grade 4, and continues each year through grade 12. The curriculum includes discussion of abstinence, refusal skills, anatomy and physiology, and a comprehensive, state-mandated AIDS curriculum.

Views on the Curriculum – Adults and Teens

Adults and teens had many views on the current Auburn School District curriculum, but several main themes, or areas of agreement, did surface during the interviews. For adults, these areas involved the value of sex education, and its effect on the students, and the importance of decision-making skills vs. "plumbing". Teens also felt that decision-making was important, and in addition, they spoke to the importance of individual teachers as resources for sex education, information, and guidance.

The Effect of Sex Education

*The majority of key leaders felt that sex education in the schools would **not** influence teens to go out and have sex.*

- *There has been a lot of controversy over the years about teaching behaviors about sexuality - there were some real issues that if you talked about it that it would increase the activity of teens' sexual behavior - The exact opposite has been shown to be true....It hasn't gone the other way by teaching healthy behavior about sexual issues. (A)*
- *As adults and as leaders, I strongly feel we can't close our eyes and pretend it's [sex] not happening. So I think that having the information in the schools is imperative, and I know that there are folks that think what happens when you put information out there [is] it gets people thinking that they ought to do that very thing. I do not believe that, I think that is hog- wash, I think that if they are having sex, they are having sex.*

The fact that you put some materials out that tell them about the use of condoms, or whatever to prevent STD's, or pregnancy or whatever, it is not going to make them have sex. It just shows them that there is an option out there to protect myself and protect this person I am with and maybe, you know, not have a baby because I am going to have sex anyway. (A)

However, respondents did feel that sex education in the schools could be more effective in providing teens with the necessary skills and information to make healthy decisions – whether those decisions involved abstinence or safer sex.

“Plumbing” vs. “Decision-Making Skills”

The majority of respondents perceived that the school district’s primary sex education focus was on the “plumbing” or “mechanics” of sex. Though they felt this information was valuable, these same respondents also felt that there was too much emphasis placed on “plumbing” and not enough placed upon what they called decision-making or refusal skills. Adults expressed a strong desire for the inclusion of decision-making skills in the curriculum, regardless of their stance of the end goal of those skills (i.e. abstinence or safer sex).

- *What’s important is in terms of teens, to me, is not--I don’t care if you know what a Fallopian tube is -- what’s important is that when you get one thing leading to another, if you really don’t want to [have sex], will you not have sex? (A)*
- *Information is great, but if you don’t tell them [teens] how to use it, in the sense of, for instance, if we’re talking about abstinence – if we don’t teach them refusal skills about how to be abstinent, it doesn’t do any good to teach abstinence. ‘Cause you don’t teach them how to say no, like we do with drugs and like we do with other things. (A)*

Teens also expressed a strong desire for decision-making skills, often speaking eloquently about their confusion regarding sexual decisions, and the lack of information and guidance that they find in the classroom to help them with these decisions.

- *Male teen 1: [S]ome teachers...[they’re] kind of ignorant to it, they’re kinda just like, “yeah, this is what happens”, and leaves you at that.
Interviewer: Instead of?
Male teen 2: Explaining on how to prevent it, and how to make better choices, if you, do think you want [to be sexually active]. What to -- what to do.
Interviewer: So they’re giving you information, but not giving you the full...
Male teen 1: The full picture.
Male teen 3: It’s like saying, “Here, son, here’s a condom. Use it.” And you’ve never seen the damn thing in your entire life.
Male teen 2: “How do I use it?”*
- *They don’t prepare you for it [sex]. (T, female)*

Teen Comments: “Too Late” and “Out of Touch”

While some teens felt good about the curriculum, the majority of them had some criticisms about it. These criticisms tended to be shared across the gender line. Their first criticism was that they felt they received sex education too late. An addendum to this particular theme is that the majority of the teens (and some adults) felt that the information they do receive is repeated too often.

- *I know kids who are like, 7,8 years old who already know all about sex. I knew about sex by the time I was in second grade, because of the environment that I was in.*
- *I don't understand why they wait, until the 9th grade. Because, you know, people are having sex...*
- *Male 1: They kind of introduce it and leave it, and introduce more and leave it, and then...finally you just get it all.
Male 2: And then by that time you're like, "oh well".*

These teens seemed to suggest two things. First, that the information they receive through the ASD's Human Growth and Development Curriculum is somewhat repetitive, and because of this repetition, its impact may decrease over time. Second, the information they receive is not the *only* type that they want and need. The information they want – which includes discussions about sex, relationships, and sexual decisions – came, in their minds, “too late”.

Their second criticism involves the manner in which the education is relayed. They described the current curriculum as relying heavily on textbooks and tests, as opposed to a discussion format. Many of these teens expressed a clear desire for more open discussion.

- *It [sex] is not very covered, not a very talked about thing. You read and you do the tests.*
- *You watch videos, about pregnancy, STD's, and raising a family. They don't let us get into it [discussion] like we could.*

More than a few adults mirrored what the teens said about the importance of and need for open discussion. One teacher said that when topics such as teen pregnancy or date rape are brought up in the classroom, teens “really come out of the woodwork and they really want to talk openly”. A school counselor said, “It doesn't matter whether we [adults] agree with them [teens] or not, but if you listen to them you hear stuff about what is going on.”

The third criticism voiced by many teens involves how well they relate to the information. Some teens felt that the education they receive is too “old-fashioned”, and does not reflect their experiences with sex “in the 90's”. Several teens described a kind of gap between what they called the “the real world” – a world they live in and relate to on a daily basis -- and the curriculum, which they perceived to be out of touch with “the real world”. Some relayed that they get more “real world” information from other sources, such as peers, family planning clinics, TV and radio.

- *It [the curriculum] doesn't really cover anything in like the real world.*
- *It's really old-fashioned. They don't know what it's like. It's by the books, it's very much by the book. They don't know what it's like in the real world. I guess they've probably been there, but it's the 90's.*

- *That's where you learn everything is school, and on t.v, and you don't learn it in your classes, you learn it with your friends and all that.*

Teens and Teachers: Finding a Trusted Adult

While many of the teens had criticisms of the ASD's Human Growth and Development curriculum, they spoke highly about individual, trusted teachers. Teens relayed that they sought out these teachers for the types of open discussion, and skill-based information that they were not receiving in the classroom. These teachers were greatly valued by the teens, who saw them as objective adults (unlike parents, for example) that were willing to help teens sort out the often complex issues surrounding sexuality.

- *I had this problem before, and [this teacher] was the first person I went to. She just kind of, she helped me out, explained to me what needs to go on, and what I needed to do as a male, to kind of help be there and everything like that.*
- *...I know teachers here that I can go talk to and they know everything about me. They know what I do on the weekends, they know what I do on school days. I mean, there are some teachers that are just very, very comfortable talking to you, and they offer you help.*

Making the Grade: How are the schools doing?

Key leaders were clear that the school district has a difficult job when it comes to sex education. Some explained that the school district needs to reflect the community when providing sex education, and is somewhat limited by that charge. Key leaders from both the abstinence only and comprehensive sexuality perspectives observed the challenges, and accompanying limitations, faced by the school district in its efforts to educate according to any specific philosophy.

- *[The school district is] really doing a good job, trying to do a good job teaching about consequences....Schools are reflective of our community. What kids get in the schools is pretty much what the community of Auburn feels is appropriate....I think there's a lot of room for more discussion on sexual decision-making....The reality of it is, although we do have kids that are making a decision to remain abstinent, there are a lot of kids who are not making that decision, and we need to give those kids a forum to talk about it. So we [school district] could do a better job with that. And I think our hands are tied. (A)*
- *I think a lot of times the school system teaches abstinence because they know that "This group of people wants us to teach that but we really don't believe it. But yet we'll communicate it because we really need to cover the broad spectrum". I don't think that we teach [teens] how – you know, what does [abstinence] look like. It's almost like lip service. (A)*

Additionally, respondents from both the abstinence only and comprehensive sex education perspectives alluded that the school district is overburdened with demands to teach values, and that parents need to teach values at home. Some described that too many parents still rely on the schools to educate their children about sex, without "doing their part" at home.

- *I still think we're running into parents who are feeling like they're not, they either don't know what to say or how to say it, so they leave it up to us [educators], and they're more comfortable leaving it up to us....There's still a question [for parents] as to*

when do you start...what information and when...if I give them this, is that too much?...I still think [parents] are leaving it to the schools, or to outside sources to get things done. (A)

Some respondents felt strongly that the school district needed to speak to values when providing sex education, and that the current curriculum did not adequately address this aspect.

- *The big thing is we talk about values, but we don't want to attach values in education. We can't attach values. But everything has a value. If we think it's a value for kids not to be sexually active, or not to be pregnant, then we need to teach them how **not** to be that. (A)*

The vast majority of respondents, whether they liked or disliked what the school district provided, felt that the school is “just one piece” of the community’s response to sex education.

- *I believe we're [the school district] only one piece. With our churches, with our parents, with peers talking with peers...we provide a value culture that's bigger and extremely significant. [A]*

The Church

[Editor's note: For the purpose of this report, the term “church” is utilized because that was the term used by the respondents themselves during interviews. However, Auburn reflects a variety of religious communities, some of whom practice their faith in settings other than churches. Hopefully, readers of this report will take into account the **entire** religious community in Auburn when the term “church” appears.]

While schools comprise an extremely important “piece” of sex education for youth, many key leaders felt that the church and religiously affiliated youth groups in Auburn can provide an additional and equally important piece. Key leaders believed this for several reasons. First, they felt that churches and youth groups, like schools, were a good place to reach a lot of youth – even youth that were not necessarily regular churchgoers.

- *Churches...are good places for kids making life decisions to be encouraged, praised...a good avenue for reaching a lot of kids. Perhaps through the “What would Jesus do?” movement, Young Life groups. A lot of the kids in those groups are not regular churchgoers. They belong more for the social aspect. [A]*

A number of key leaders felt that youth groups – whether affiliated with a church or not – provide teens with an important forum to talk about issues related to sexuality. Key leaders stated that these youth groups are usually led by adults who act as mentors, offering information and guidance to teens, and “meeting them where they’re at”. In many cases, these youth groups also teach youth decision-making skills around choices such as abstinence. As stated above, some leaders felt that many youth are initially drawn to these groups for the social aspect – the outings, retreats, and “rap sessions” with their peers – but that this isn’t necessarily a negative thing. Though the social aspect is a big draw for some youth, they do learn and discuss religious values in the groups, as well.

- [A] lot of parents have tried to instill religious values in kids, and the rebellious nature of kids, it's like, “well, I don't want to go to it, 'cause that's my mom and dad's deal.” But yet they'll come to something like [our youth group], which is religious, and a lot of times they won't tell their parents because then they feel like their parents won. It's really interesting. So a lot of kids, they don't tell their parents – they'll tell their

parents they're going to [our youth group], but they don't tell them anything about it, and so a lot of parents want to know, "what is [your youth group], what do you do?", because the kids, they love to go and they're excited about it. And once we tell [the parents], they're like, "wow, that's great, because that's what we believe." [A]

Second, key leaders reflected that church-based sexuality education takes into account more than just the physical aspect of sex, but the emotional and spiritual aspects, as well. The majority of key leaders involved with the church spoke of how sexuality is a "gift from God", and therefore must be utilized with respect and care.

- *Sexuality is a great gift of God's – something youth should treasure. They need to be taught knowledge, understanding, and appropriate use of [this] gift. [A]*
- *Sex is a gift from God, and that gift comes with responsibility. It is sacred. It is more than just physical – it is also spiritual and emotional, more than just a physical act. [A]*

This belief, that sexuality is a gift, may distinguish church-based sex education from public sex education. It also seems to influence how sex is discussed both within the church (or religious groups) and with youth in general. Key leaders noted that discussions with youth in religious settings tended to emphasize the emotional and spiritual aspects of sex, perhaps even over the physical aspect.

- [B]ut yet there's a bigger issue to the sexuality issue, which is, you know, sex is a spiritual thing. It's not just a physical thing. It's a very emotional thing. And we don't talk about those other things. We kind of look at it as just a physical thing...So what we try to do is show why, how did God create all these things, and how does it all fit together, so you see the whole picture. [A]

Finally, some key leaders noted that church-based education tends to teach sexuality from a perspective that is rooted in values. These values may vary according to the church, congregation, or interpretation of the Bible. But these key leaders seemed to agree that churches, and groups with a religious affiliation, have a certain degree of freedom to teach in a manner that is openly based in particular values. Several key leaders felt that churches were the best places to teach values such as abstinence, or secondary virginity, for example.

- *We need to educate youth to what is right and what is wrong according to our interpretation of Scripture. [A]*

But, just as key leaders felt parents relied too heavily on public schools to teach about sex, many key leaders also felt that parents relied too heavily on churches to teach about values. The message, again, seemed to be that while schools and churches provide important aspects of sex education, parents are perhaps the most important piece.

Sex Education in the Home: Parents as Sexuality Educators

Many respondents spoke about the importance of parents talking to their children about sexuality. To some, it was an essential component of sex education, and a foundational support for guiding youth through the rocky waters of adolescence. This belief was shared by adults across traditional lines of "conservative", "liberal", "religious", etc. Again, while these adults may have disagreed about the content of this education, they agreed about the importance of parents sharing their values with their children, particularly during a time when "sex is everywhere".

- *Parents need to talk to kids. By high school, it's too late for teens. Kids get almost every message from other sources than parents. (A)*

- *I do believe that family values, and parents talking to their kids about what their values are...plays an extremely critical piece. (A)*

The message conveyed by many respondents was this: in a time when young people are exposed to so many sexual references – through the media, TV, radio, movies, and their peers – parents need to take an active role in sifting through these references with their children, and providing them with adequate values and beliefs upon which to base a healthy response.

However, the majority of key leaders observed that many parents in Auburn still do not adequately prepare their children around issues of sexuality. Some respondents felt that parents are unsure about what information to give their children, and at what age, and even how to give that information. Others deduced that many parents are uncomfortable speaking with their children about sex, and so avoid the topic. Still others spoke to the fact that many parents are not available in the home – often because they are working long hours, or are absent completely.

- *...for the kids who've really needed [education from parents], there's not been that support. And I don't see that changing in that population at this point...the families that really need that, they don't tend to attend those things [i.e. workshops for parents as sexuality educators]. They don't go to groups. That's not something they really do. (A)*
- *I just question how many values are being taught in the home. You know a lot of times I think we expect the school system to teach values, we expect our churches to teach us values, and yet as parents, we don't instill those values in our kids. So we look for other people to do that. (A)*

When parents are unable to step in, due to discomfort, lack of information, or other family issues, teens are often left to sort out information on their own. However, both teens and key leaders spoke about adults in the community that offered guidance, support, and information, either in place of parental support, or as an additional support to it. These adults included school counselors, trusted teachers, youth group leaders in churches, health department staff, family doctors, relatives (i.e. aunts, uncles), older siblings, and adults who facilitate groups such as Project Empower. Teens in the focus groups valued these adults, and stressed the importance of a high degree of confidentiality when choosing specific adults to talk to about sexuality. Ultimately, however, teens felt that it was their **parents** who they wanted to confide in, and look to for primary guidance about issues pertaining to relationships, dating, drug/alcohol use, and sexuality. While many of them did not feel they were able to confide in this manner with their parents, the majority of these teens *wished* they could. All the teens interviewed said that when they themselves were parents, they would do their best to be open, approachable, and “askable parents”.

- *If my kid came to me, I'd talk to them, just so they knew they could come and talk to me, without having to be scared of [me], and rebel. 'Cause I know what I'm like now. (T)*
- *I want to have a relationship [with my kid] with talking, trust. (T)*
- *I'd probably be up front with them [my kids]. It'd be all out front. (T)*

One key leader summed up the feelings of the respondents when they said:

- *I...just wish that every parent would talk to their kids and know how important this is.*
(A)

The Unseen Male

[Editor's Note: It is important to note that when respondents discussed the male role in teen pregnancy and parenting, the majority of them referred to teen males or teen fathers. This may be due, in part, to the fact that two out of the three questions regarding the male role specifically asked about teen fathers. Some respondents did express concern about older (non-teen) males fathering babies with teen girls. However, the data regarding older males and younger females from this assessment was too scant to draw out any pertinent themes. For the purpose of this section, the findings discussed will reflect the majority of the data collected, and will refer to attitudes about teen fathers unless otherwise noted.]

An overriding theme that surfaced throughout the interviews was that of the “unseen” or “invisible” male. Many respondents had strong feelings about what they saw as the lack of male involvement in fatherhood, and a lack of **responsibility** from “disappearing males”. Respondents also spoke about some of the factors that might contribute to the lack of male involvement in fatherhood. Some felt that there were not adequate support services specifically directed to teen males in Auburn. Others felt that services were adequate, but that access to those services remained a major obstacle for teen dads. Many respondents also spoke of what they perceived to be an exclusion of teen fathers “from the fold”, whether initiated by the teen mother, the families involved, services providers, and the community at large.

Lack of Responsibility

A central issue addressed by respondents was that of lack of responsibility on the part of teen (and older) fathers. The word “responsibility” was utilized repeatedly by adults and teens when discussing the role of the teen father. Though it was not always stated clearly, many of the respondents implied that this responsibility was primarily a financial one. Young men from the focus groups already knew that teen fathers are expected to “provide” financially for their children. Key leaders also spoke of the community and societal emphasis on male financial responsibility, whether or not they personally agreed with this emphasis.

Though they had different ideas about *why* teen fathers don't take responsibility, the majority of respondents perceived that teen fathers simply do not “step up to the plate”, with a few exceptions.

- “They don't feel responsible. Some of them even say the child is not theirs, or that the teen mother has slept with someone else.” (A)
- *There is...an incredible distancing that occurs by males. Lack of responsibility, even when confronted with the responsibility, there is denial to the paternity, and it is probably the biggest disappointment...the psyche of the male, from what I've seen, is to not take responsibility for the action.* (A)
- *You don't see a lot of fathers, pushing a stroller, going to the bus, or going to school.* (T, female)

Some respondents felt that most teen males do not “step up to the plate” because they lack the maturity *developmentally* to do so.

- *You’re talking about **teen** fathers. Teenagers, boys still in high school – I just don’t think they’re mature enough to accept the responsibility. (A)*

Other respondents expressed frustration with the more punitive measures or “scare tactics” designed to encourage or require financial responsibility.

- *I don’t know how to get the males to take the responsibility...the laws are such that if they take the responsibility, they’re eternally tied to the issue forever. I don’t think that scare tactics really work very much. (A)*

Whether or not scare tactics about financial responsibility work, the young men involved with the focus groups made clear associations between fatherhood and financial responsibility. Here is what they said when asked how they thought parenting changed a teen’s life:

- *The responsibility. For one, if you’re young, you obviously want to finish school, and you have dreams, and sometimes, [having a child] is a dream, but it just happens too early. I mean, if you’re gonna do things like that, you should do it responsible.*
- *I have to agree with everyone, because you have to have responsibility. You have to be able to take care of the kid, or have to quit school, and have to be able to get a job to support [the baby], ‘cause the parents [of teen parents] might not be able to do that....*

Several young men spoke of the responsibility of teen fathers by contrasting it to the experiences of teen mothers. While they acknowledged that young men will “hopefully” help out financially, they also acknowledged that this financial responsibility poses a “hard” situation for young men.

- *For ladies it would be a lot more difficult, because you would most likely, I mean you’re gonna miss school when you’re going through the pregnancy already. Odds are you won’t go back.... Financially, you’ll need somebody to support yourself. I mean, hopefully, the guy who got you pregnant will help out, but lots of times it doesn’t happen that way. They just leave you. If they are helping out, they do need to get a job, financially make enough money to at least help out. It’s really hard...you don’t really know what to do.*

Possible Factors Related to Lack of Responsibility

Adults and male teen respondents repeatedly discussed two major factors that might play a role in why teen dads are not “stepping up to the plate”. They are: the **invisibility** of teen fathers and the **exclusion** of teen fathers. These key factors have origins in community attitudes and perceptions about men and fathering in general. Adult respondents mentioned the role of these factors most often when discussing services available to teen fathers. Male teens mentioned them when touching upon issues related to paternity and pregnancy options.

Availability of Services

Key leader respondents were roughly divided about the availability of services in Auburn for teen fathers, possibly due to how they define services. Some felt that there was a good amount of services for teen parents in general, and did not see a separation in terms of services for teen moms and services for teen dads.

- *A lot of services are available to teens, fathers as well as teen mothers. (A)*
- *[T]hose who want to be involved, can be. (A)*
Others felt that teen dads needed services specifically directed to them, and when judging services from that perspective, they assessed that there are clear gaps in the community.
- *There isn't anything for dads. (A)*
- *Society's answer is to give more services to moms – the dads are kind of left out there. (A)*

Availability vs. Access

While the availability of services for teen fathers was a topic of debate, even those respondents who felt that services are *available* for teen fathers observed that teen dads do not *access* these same services. Respondents attributed this to a number of different reasons: Some felt that services could be more welcoming towards teen fathers, and more non-threatening. Some stated that these services need to be more directly marketed to teen fathers. A majority felt that, in general, the mentality among providers is that “the pregnancy is about the woman.”

- *I don't think there's always a welcoming attitude [towards fathers]...the father is sort of the third wheel...he's sort of left...the pregnancy is about the woman.” (A)*
- *I see huge gaps. One being, how do you find [teen fathers]? Second being, if you had services available, how would you attract [teen fathers]? In addition, very few of them will stay with the program. (A)*
- *Being the mother of three boys, [I] believe that a lot of males really have their heart in the right place, but we haven't learned as a therapeutic community how to access that. (A)*

The Invisible (Young) Man: Identifying the Teen Father

Regardless of their views on availability of services, most respondents agreed that teen fathers are hard to reach because they are largely **invisible** in the community. Unlike pregnant girls, young men who are fathers have no physical sign that marks them. In addition, a teen mother may never tell the male of the pregnancy, or know the identity of the father, if she's had multiple partners. In the case of these unknowing teen fathers, they are invisible *even to themselves*. The consensus among respondents was that unless teen fathers step forward, it is extremely difficult for providers to identify and reach them.

- *There isn't any opportunity to connect with [teen dads] early on...how would you do that? Because there is no way to know unless a teen dad tells people, or in some other way it surfaces. (A)*
- *[Teen fathers] are still an underserved area. Many times the father is never identified. (A)*

Exclusion “from the fold”

To compound the invisibility, teen fathers are also sometimes excluded from the processes of pregnancy, birth, and parenting. Respondents – both adult and teen alike -- spoke about this exclusion and made the point that it can happen from the teen mother, her parents, from the teen father’s parents, from extended family, and from the community at large.

- *People lay blame on the father, then remove [him] from the picture – the ‘you’ve already done enough’ scenario.” (A)*
- *Males are not embraced in the fold. (A)*
- *Often times, the families don’t want the father involved at all. (A)*
- *[E]verybody freaked out...one friend asked me if I needed a place to hide from [my girlfriend’s] dad. (T)*

The combined effects of invisibility and exclusion seem to contribute to a phenomenon that respondents referred to often as the “disappearance” of teen fathers during the processes of pregnancy, birth, and subsequent parenting.

- *I always ask when girls come back [from having babies]...a question I always ask is ‘Where’s dad?’. A high percentage don’t know and they don’t want them around...emotionally, they recognize they’ve been taken advantage of. (A)*
- *It’s rare to see a girl who, after she’s had the baby, still has contact with the father. Boys “disappear”. (A)*

Young Men’s Concerns: Paternity and Pregnancy Options

Young men in the focus groups voiced some specific concerns regarding paternity and pregnancy options. These concerns were voiced almost exclusively by the young men (as opposed to adult respondents), and provide a different perspective on some of the factors that might affect male involvement.

Paternity Claims

Male focus group participants spoke in a variety of ways about their fears and distrust in relation to girls’ claims of paternity. Several boys told stories about girlfriends who wrongly named them as fathers, or who claimed they were pregnant when they really were not, in the hopes of stalling a break-up, or getting back together with the boy. When telling these stories, respondents expressed feelings of frustration, anger, disbelief, and loss of trust.

- *...this one time she lied about it just because we were about to break up. And I’m at my house, and I’m talking to her [on the phone], and my mom had answered the phone, too, and [my girlfriend] goes, “before we break up, I might be pregnant.”*
- *I had a girl end up saying that she was pregnant, that she was due in August. You know, we broke up in the beginning of November. If you count back 9 months from August, it’s December. And she was going around telling everybody, you know, that I was the father of her child. And I mean I lost a lot of friends right there. They were just, “oh you didn’t take responsibility”.[A]fterwards, I found out it wasn’t mine....*

'cause the girl came down to the school and told me, you know, and apologized. She basically said, "well the reason I was saying that...was because you're more responsible about things than the other person [the biological father]." And I was like, "Well, it's not my fault, you know. It takes two to tango and, if he's not responsible for what he did, that's his problem, not mine. Why did you bring me into it, you know?" 'Cause I've got a life to live. I've got dreams that I want to fulfill, and that I don't need to be brought down.

Equal Say in Pregnancy Options

Teen male respondents also discussed that they felt males should have equal say when discussing pregnancy options (abortion, adoption, and parenting), but felt they and their male peers were too often excluded from this important decision-making process.

- *And there was like a big dilemma about who was gonna take the baby. My friend wanted to keep him, but [the mother] always wanted to take him away.*
- *I've had it done to me before....the girl had an abortion behind my back. You know when I was talking before about 'my friend' – that was me. I was very pissed off. I was, I was heated for like a week straight 'cause I was so mad. I didn't even go to school 'cause I was so mad.*

It's a Female Thing

As evidenced above, many respondents spoke openly about factors affecting male responsibility – namely, male invisibility, and exclusion of males from the parenting process. These factors stem in many ways from the underlying societal assumption that pregnancy is still a “female thing”. Both adult and teen respondents noted that the burden of pregnancy falls largely on the woman, and that many males are able to “get out of” the responsibility of fatherhood without serious consequences, or lasting community rancor.

- *The teen mom can't get out of it, but the father can. (A)*
- *It isn't going to affect him as much as [the teen mom]. He can go on with his own life unscathed. (A)*

The teen males, especially, speak to a kind of double-standard around pregnancy – one that judges or shames the teen mother (at least initially), and begrudgingly accepts the teen father by “letting him off the hook”.

- *Teen Male #1: [T]he guy he can just goes back and say, 'yeah, I did this. Oh well', and just, you know, be able to hang out with his guy friends. 'Cause with a girl, I mean, they look down on her like, 'you did that with him?'
Teen Male #2: That's how society is.*
- *When a girl has a baby, they're usually out for close to 3 months, and it usually is an embarrassment to go back after 3 months. Basically you have to start an extra school year. For the guy it's probably, it's a lot easier. Because you probably just go to school, then after that go to work, and he could walk away from the whole thing and just stay there. (T, male)*

It is unclear whether this double standard is held mostly by teens, adults, or both groups. But it may provide further insight into why many males do not take more responsibility in fatherhood.

What Can Be Done: Inroads to Greater Responsibility

On the whole, respondents were clearly concerned about the lack of male responsibility they saw in the teen parenting and teen fatherhood, and somewhat unsure about what to do to counteract it. However, several respondents suggested ideas to help encourage and support male responsibility.

Education

Some key leaders felt that young men needed to be educated regarding the responsibilities of fatherhood, and the consequences of fatherhood, both before and after any pregnancy has occurred.

- *I think, first of all, as I said earlier, somehow these young men, these young boys, need to be educated to the fact that they have responsibility. I don't know that all of them understand, know, feel, want to have that responsibility....I would like to see their role be, as I said, if they are not committed to their partner, whether it was a sexual partner or a partner that didn't last or a relationship that didn't last because they are young or whatever, then I would like to see their commitment to the child. And, unfortunately, I'd rather see them learn that commitment than to have in the future the state and all these other people coming after them for financial support for the child or these kinds of things. To somehow take responsibility for the child, encouraging them to take responsibility for the child. Not necessarily for the girl or for anybody else, but for the child. (A)*
- *I think [teen dads] need to play a big part, especially be aware of what paternity is and what their expectations are. Some guys think, 'well, if I want her to have an abortion and she didn't then I'm off the hook cuz that's what I wanted.' BUT that's not the way it works. If you start a pregnancy then you are responsible until [that child] is 18 years old. Some guys have a hard time with that and think that's not fair. But they are both responsible for birth control. And with the amount of STD's I can't imagine why they would not use condoms even if [the girl is] on the pill." (A)*

According to several respondents, there are efforts in the community to provide this type of education regarding fatherhood and responsibility. They mentioned West Auburn High School's teen parenting classes as a "positive place for fathers" and a good source of support and education about parenting. Additionally, the paternity curriculum in the 9th Grade Health class in Auburn Public Schools was mentioned as a source of information.

Support from Parents

Many respondents felt that parents could do much to educate their sons regarding responsibility and consequence, but several respondents felt that many young men were not receiving this important support and education from parents – and especially from fathers. Key leaders described teen males who grow up with absent fathers, or fathers who are only partially involved in their lives. They also described young men who must often raise themselves, and who do not have adults in their lives who are watching out for them, guiding them, and teaching values such as responsibility.

- *It seems like no one has ever talked to them about the consequences of teen fatherhood...[Their attitude is] It's up to the women [to deal with pregnancy and parenting]. It isn't up to them." (A)*
- *It's a lack of personal responsibility. And they're not getting taught it from their parents, or they missed it somehow. (A)*
- *Many [male teen clients] don't even know who their father is. The fathers of some may be in jail, or may be drug addicts. It isn't a latchkey situation...[the teens] have had to bring themselves up, due to the dysfunction in the home. There's no structure, no guidance. They're just...out there. (A)*

Luckily, some parents are providing the support, education and guidance for their sons regarding male responsibility in fatherhood. For example, when discussing the "success stories" of teen fathers who do get involved, adults and teens alike noted that what set these teen dads apart was the fact that their own parents both expected and supported them to take responsibility, and "step up to the plate".

- *I think the dads who are [taking responsibility] are doing so because their own parents see that they have some responsibility, [that the teen male] needs to assume some responsibility. (A)*
- *I think if the male has the support of his parent to do what it is that needs to be done, then that makes a huge difference.... (A)*
- *I have a friend who...had a kid....now it's, now it's like it changed his life so much, that all he does is stay home and take care of the kid. But the good thing about him is that his parents really helped him out. (T, male)*

Support from the Community

Support from the community was mentioned as an important piece in involving teen fathers. According to some respondents, there are signs that support for teen fathers has increased in certain sectors of Auburn. For example, some respondents mentioned that over the past decade Auburn agencies have made an attempt to involve the father more. What they were not certain about, however, was if the "average person" in the community saw the importance of involving fathers.

Despite strides made by agencies in involving fathers, many respondents perceived that a negative attitude towards teen fathers exists in the general community of Auburn (and in society in general). Perhaps because of the common perception that teen males do not "step up to the plate", respondents related that teen fathers on the whole are considered to be "low life", and "bad guys" for "doing this to [teen girls]". However, in a number of interviews with both key leaders and young men, examples of "exceptions" to this common perception were offered as testimonies to the determination and involvement of some teen fathers. Perhaps these young men can serve as guideposts for the Auburn community, showing us what can happen when teen fathers do become involved, and helping us to understand how to reach more young fathers, so that the "exceptions" become the rule.

- *Sometimes, young men need to be encouraged to be full participants, involved in the parenting of the child. I admire young men who are trying. They need to be lifted up as examples of joint responsibility. Get them the help they need – they do not need to be shoved out of the picture. [A]*

Ten Years: Where Do We Go From Here?

A decade ago, Auburn was known by some as the “teen pregnancy capital”. High rates of teen pregnancy caught the attention of the press, and the concern of a variety of Auburn community members. Auburn responded as a community – first by creating a task force to assess the issue and write recommendations, and then by working together in a variety of ways to create programs and services targeting teen pregnancy.

At the tail end of this ten-year journey, ACTAPP wanted to know if teen pregnancy still resonates as an important issue to Auburn key leaders and teens. ACTAPP also wanted to find out if its mission and purpose still held true after a decade of consistent work on the issue. In a sense, ACTAPP wanted to know, as a coalition and as a community, “where do we go from here?”

Increased Awareness

Many key leaders felt that awareness and acknowledgment of teen pregnancy had increased in Auburn over the past decade. They saw this increased awareness in contrast to the mood a decade earlier, when teen pregnancy was more of a stigma, and discussion of it was far less open.

- *When I first came here . . .it was something that families endured alone. Today there is an openness in terms of referrals for resources for students – the information is open and readily available. The parents are dealing with the social stigma, but are willing to ask the questions [about information to assist in the pregnancy]. (A)*

But while many key leaders noted an increase in the community’s awareness of teen pregnancy, several felt that there were still areas where awareness or acknowledgment of the issue was lacking.

- *The awareness isn’t there among Auburn organizations. (A)*
- *I think a lot of people, [the issue of teen pregnancy] is probably, out of sight, out of mind. We know it exists, but a lot of people don’t talk about it a lot. . .I haven’t heard that many people come forth and say, “hey, we’ve got a problem we need to address.” (A)*

Increased Services

As awareness of teen pregnancy increased in Auburn, so, too did services and programs designed to address the issue. Key leaders mentioned a host of new services that had arisen in the past decade, though some noted that many of the new services focus on the aftermath of teen pregnancy – i.e. providing services to a pregnant or parenting teen – rather than preventing the pregnancy.

Services mentioned included: West Auburn High School and its new day care center, Auburn Youth Resources’ Project Empower (which originated as an ACTAPP project), Pregnancy AID, Auburn Public Health Center’s Teen Clinic, the City’s Late Night Program, and the Healthy Families Program. Many of these projects or programs came to be due to the collaborative efforts of a number of different players – including the City of Auburn, the Health Department, agencies such as Auburn Youth Resources, ACAP Child and Family Services, and Children’s Home Society, and community groups such as ACTAPP. Many key leaders spoke with pride about these collaborative efforts.

- *There’s been excellent collaboration in this community around this issue. These collaborations help to really identify populations, and why these populations, these particular teens are dealing w/ certain issues. (A)*

For the most part, respondents felt very positive about these services and programs, and saw them as an indication that Auburn was “doing something” about the issue of teen pregnancy.

- *Fifteen years ago, if a girl were pregnant, then there might be a caring individual in a building who would be her support. Today we have a network if the girl chooses to seek help. (A)*

A number of key leaders did still see room for growth, in terms of new services or programs. Some felt there needed to be more Project Empower groups, not just for girls, but also for young men. Others felt there needed to be more activities specifically directed to teens in Auburn. Several envisioned a kind of mentoring program, linking Auburn adults with teens as part of a consistent, ongoing effort to build strong foundations for youth. Many noted the challenges teen parents face with transportation, and the support the community could provide to them, through such things as a van service. And a majority of key leaders felt more needed to be done to involve the fathers -- whether adult or teen -- of teen pregnancies.

- *Very few fathers are involved. If they are involved, it's just at first, in the beginning when the babies are new, just born. Ideally, I would like it if they were involved. (A)*

ACTAPP: Past and Present Influences

Throughout the past decade, ACTAPP's mission and purpose has been to keep the issue of teen pregnancy “at the forefront of community concerns”. As respondents spoke about their awareness of ACTAPP and its accomplishments, many credited the coalition, in part, for increasing community awareness and encouraging new services.

- *As far as I know, ACTAPP has been really the main wing underneath this movement trying to educate the community. (A)*
- *ACTAPP over the past ten years has been a key player in changing the culture of Auburn around the issue of teen pregnancy - a culture of help and care, a culture of responsibility . . . that has made all the difference in the world and that has provided resources and responsibility for those kids. (A)*

However, many key leaders tended to see the *extent* of ACTAPP's influence according to two distinct periods of time. Respondents familiar with ACTAPP's beginnings spoke enthusiastically of the early years of the coalition, when they felt ACTAPP's influence to be quite strong. They also spoke of ACTAPP's most recent years, during which they perceived the coalition to have less influence in the community.

For the most part, respondents felt that ACTAPP's prominence was greatest during the early years of its decade-long history. They mentioned the fact that ACTAPP's initial membership consisted of “movers and shakers” – people who had “real influence” in the community, both socially and politically. They also mentioned the diverse nature of the early coalition – how it brought together many different types of people, sometimes with opposing views. Other respondents reminisced that the early years of the coalition were exciting and challenging times, during which ACTAPP faced a controversial issue head on, with such projects as the banner over Main Street, and workshops of sexuality in area churches.

- *I remember when it was not a popular movement....It was met with resistance because when you are in the public eye those problems can be blown out of proportion and can reflect on those various institutions that they are not doing enough and ACTAPP kept that healthy position of...respecting that in relationship to those community leaders . . . and at the same time went about the work of getting*

those leaders to promote, to extend the services in a way that was very much changed. (A)

When speaking of ACTAPP's "present" situation, many respondents described the coalition as "less visible" in the community, with less direct impact than in the past. Some felt that the perceived decrease in ACTAPP's visibility was related, in part, to a decrease in community interest in the issue of teen pregnancy.

- *I think that ACTAPP worked really hard to address/establish itself, to bring attention to the needs for resources to teens, etc., and I think that [interest in the issue] is dying off and slowing down, that not as many people are hearing about it as such an emergent need... [Y]ou are not hearing as much about ACTAPP as you did before, as you have in the past. (A)*

Interestingly, slightly over 25% of key leaders interviewed regarding their awareness of ACTAPP had very little or no knowledge of the coalition. For some, their first awareness of ACTAPP came when they were asked to participate in the assessment. For others, awareness came in slow steps, and they still lack basic information about ACTAPP's mission, goals, and accomplishments.

- *I'm really glad you asked that question ... for years I didn't have a clue what ACTAPP was. And then I became aware that it had something to do with teen pregnancy. And then I realized that one of the things that was going on was that the ACTAPP members were very interested in making sure that Project Empower got on board. So, it became clear to me that they were involved with the problem of teen pregnancy in Auburn. But as far as what their specific, what goals they had, and whether they had achieved their goals...the concrete things we're talking about here – no, I don't [know about ACTAPP]. Which is very telling, I think. (A)*

Others had awareness of ACTAPP's early history, including its accomplishments and prominence, but had no knowledge of current accomplishments and activities.

- *When Subject first started teaching [about 9 to 10 years ago], Subject knew of a lot of issues going on with ACTAPP. Subject remembers the workshops that Kelly Riggle-Hower [Public Health Educator] was doing and being involved in those issues. "Maybe I've gotten comfortable about teaching and haven't gone out and figured out what [ACTAPP is] doing now." (A)*

After a decade of work, and in light of this perceived decrease in influence, some key leaders felt that ACTAPP had reached a crossroads in its own history.

- *I believe that ACTAPP is at a crossroads right now and kind of unsure of their mission as we head into the next century. And that that is part of what this survey is all about, is, is there a role, is there a vision, is there a mission, and that they as an organization need to answer that question. (A)*

Conclusion

While ACTAPP may have sought to find some answers during the course of the assessment, many more questions were raised. It is clear from the assessment that a number of key leaders and teens still see areas for growth -- new programs, new ways to involve teens, new ways to assist teen parents. It is also clear that many respondents -- both adult and teen -- still see teen pregnancy as an issue that continues to affect and even shape Auburn as a community. However, what seems less clear is how to go about addressing teen pregnancy as Auburn faces a new millenium.

Key leaders and teens did give clues that might help guide the community over the next decade. These clues can be seen as guideposts -- guideposts that show us different ways of looking at the issue of teen pregnancy in Auburn, and different ways of addressing the issue.

From the start of this process, it was ACTAPP's hope that the findings from this assessment would be used as a "working tool" by interested individuals and groups who want to address the issue of teen pregnancy. As it turns out, assessment participants highlighted a number of different issues -- such as drug/alcohol use, lack of adult supervision, adolescent boredom, and "unseen males" -- that may not have been associated with teen pregnancy in the past. The breadth and scope of these additional issues represents tremendous potential for new collaborations among groups that may not have seen much "in common" with each other before.

But perhaps what stood out the most during the assessment was the genuine commitment to Auburn youth expressed by key leaders, and the genuine desire to be heard and valued on the part of the teen participants. Their combined voices, despite differences, have the interest of the community at heart, and the hope of new solutions at their core.