The National Campaign
to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

NCLR

Toward a Common Future

Latino Teens and Adults Speak Out About Teen Pregnancy

By

Liz Sabatiuk
Ruthie Flores

May 2009

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Updated as of April 2009

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Acknowledgements

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy warmly thanks the Abbott Fund, the Summit Fund of Washington, and the Turner Foundation for their generous support of The National Campaign's Latino Initiative. Without their assistance, this publication and the Latino Initiative's efforts to help address teen pregnancy in the Latino community more generally would not be possible. The National Campaign also acknowledges our additional funders and individual contributors, including the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and Southwest Airlines for generously supporting the full range of National Campaign activities.

The entire National Campaign *familia*—board, staff, and colleagues nationwide—express their deepest gratitude to the Latino Initiative Advisory Group members for their continued insights and advice, and to the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) for their valued and productive partnership on this project and beyond. In particular, The National Campaign thanks Charles Kamasaki, Liany Arroyo, and Emilia Gianfortoni of NCLR's Institute for Hispanic Health for their important contributions, constructive ideas, suggestions about questions to include or not include in the survey, and ways to analyze and express the findings of this report.

Finally, The National Campaign recognizes some of our own—Chelsey Storin for her many important contributions to this document, Katherine Suellentrop for reading every version of this publication and providing excellent feedback, and Andrea Kane and Paula Parker-Sawyers for orchestrating and shepherding this project.

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Table of Contents

I. **Introduction** 4

Background 4

About the Survey 4

A Note on Acculturation 5

Notes on the Report and Methodology 6

II. **Findings at a Glance** 8

III. **Survey Results** 10

Goals and Aspirations 10

Parents and Other Influences 15

Sex, Contraception, and Relationships 22

IV. **Now What?** 30

V. **References** 32

Introduction

BACKGROUND

Three in 10 girls in the United States become pregnant before turning 20. Despite continuous declines since the early 1990s, the United States still has the highest rate of teen pregnancy among developed nations. Teen pregnancy affects every race, community, and economic group in our country. While the rates of teen pregnancy remain high among all racial and ethnic groups, at present more than half (53%) of Latina teens get pregnant at least once before age 20—nearly *twice* the national average.

To underscore the urgency of this issue, the overall national teen birth rate increased 5% between 2005 and 2007—this after 14 years of continuous decline. Although the teen birth rate among Latinas remained stable during this time period, at present Latinas have the highest rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008).

Latinos constitute the largest minority group in the United States—15% of the total population.[1] According to recent U.S. Census reports, the Latino population—currently at 45 million people—is growing at twice the rate of the total U.S. population. It is predicted that by 2025, one in every four teens in the United States will be Latino (US Census Bureau, 2000). Given these projections, it is clear that trends among Latinos will have a major impact on the nation as a whole.

Early pregnancy and childbearing are closely linked to many of the economic and educational challenges facing the Latino community.[2] Almost seven in ten Latina teen mothers (69%) drop out of high school, compared to 58% of teen moms overall (Manlove, 1998), and children of teen parents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to live in poverty and start school at a disadvantage, continuing the cycle of poverty. For these reasons and others it is important not only to include Latino families in national, state, and local teen pregnancy prevention efforts, but also to ensure that these families receive culturally—and linguistically—appropriate information and support.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

To reduce teen pregnancy, it is critical to understand not only the behavior prevention efforts are trying to change, but also the beliefs and attitudes that influence those behaviors. To that end, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has conducted a number of surveys over the years to help youth service providers, media, educators, and the general public better understand the perspectives of teens and parents on sex, relationships, contraception, and other topics.

In recent years The National Campaign and others have created a modest and growing body of research on teen pregnancy in the Latino community. Nevertheless, much remains to be done to better understand the attitudes and behavior of Latinos regarding sex, relationships, family formation, and related issues. Moreover, much of the existing research has only examined Latinos as an aggregate group. The term Hispanic, or Latino, refers to a diverse group of people

[1] Not including Puerto Rico.

[2] For more information on the economic and social consequences of teen pregnancy, visit www.thenationalcampaign.org to view the *Why it Matters* fact sheets (http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters) and *The Costs of Teen Childbearing portal* (http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/costs).

and often includes individuals whose families have been in this country for generations as well as those who have recently immigrated; it includes people who are proficient in the language and culture of the United States as well as those who are unable to speak English; and it encompasses 22 different countries of origin. To date very few studies have examined the socio-economic and cultural differences within the Latino community that could potentially affect attitudes and behavior. Given the high rates of Latina teen pregnancy and the incredible diversity of the Latino community, many researchers and service providers have identified a need for more specific information on the many subgroups that compose the Latino population to better address the needs of the community.

For these reasons and others, The National Campaign and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) commissioned a nationally representative survey to (1) contribute to existing research on teen pregnancy in the Latino community and (2) begin to address the relative lack of information regarding subgroups within the Latino population. The survey is intended to build upon—not refute or replace—previous research. It is also intended to provide new insight into the attitudes and beliefs of Latino teens and parents on topics such as goals and aspirations, influences, and communication about sex and relationships, while taking into account some of the many factors that make up an individual's personal and cultural experience. The survey examined attitudes and beliefs according to three primary subgroup factors—country of origin, nativity or length of time in the United States, and language preference. Age and gender are also captured in the survey results, as are levels of parental educational attainment and household income.

This public opinion poll follows The National Campaign's first survey of Latinos, *Voices Heard: Latino Adults and Teens Speak Up About Teen Pregnancy.*[3] Although *Voices Heard* allowed the National Campaign to present findings about how Latinos as a whole compare with the general population, subgroup differences and similarities were not addressed due to limited sample size. The survey also compliments The National Campaign's *With One Voice* publications, our periodic polling reports of the general teen population.

It is our hope that the findings from this nationally representative survey will provide youth service providers, media, educators, and the general public with valuable insight into the beliefs and attitudes of Latino teens and parents to help inform and improve teen pregnancy prevention messages, programs, and services for the Latino community. We also hope these insights will be a starting point for further exploration and conversation at the national and local level.

A NOTE ON ACCULTURATION

"The process of acculturation involves retaining or separating from country of origin gender roles and other cultural norms while at the same time resisting or acquiring new host country norms" (McDonald, 2008, Suellentrop, 2008). Although researchers and experts are still in the process of reaching a consensus on how exactly acculturation happens and how best to measure it, several indicators have been established as proxies for measuring levels of acculturation. In previous studies, socio-demographic factors such as language preference, city of residence, generational status, nativity, and ethnic self-identification have been used as measures of acculturation (Afable-Munsuz, 2006). The indicators used in this survey were language preference and nativity or number of years in the United States.[4]

This survey was intended to contribute to the growing body of research on the relationship between socio-demographic traits and attitudes about aspirations, sex, and social norms. Understanding the effect of acculturation on beliefs and behavior regarding sex and relationships can help practitioners, providers, and educators to create more effective messages and outreach strategies for Latino teens, their families, and their communities. Acculturation is a complex process and references to measures and levels of acculturation in this report are not meant to suggest that the indicators selected for this survey tell the whole story of an individual's cultural identity and experience.

[3] For more information on *Voices Heard* and *With One Voice,* please visit http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/reports.aspx.

[4] Specific information on the socio-demographic questions included in the survey can be found at www.thenationalcampaign.org/espanol/polling.

NOTES ABOUT THE REPORT AND METHODOLOGY

As noted previously, The National Campaign and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) commissioned this nationally representative survey to learn more about Latino attitudes and beliefs concerning teen pregnancy and related issues and, in particular, to begin to address the scarcity of information regarding subgroups within the Latino population. Readers should note that:

- The questions in this survey were developed by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR).
- The survey consisted of 16 questions, two of which were asked of both teens and parents, the rest of which were asked only of teens. A number of socio-demographic questions were asked as well.[5]
- All socio-demographic data were self-reported by the respondents.
- Three factors were used to identify subgroups: country of origin,[6] language preference, and nativity. Country of origin was included in response to the many youth service providers who seek to better provide culturally-appropriate services and resources. Language preference and number of years in the United States are objective measures often used to reflect level of acculturation.
- Since many of the findings of the survey were consistent across subgroups, this report focuses largely on aggregate findings. Subgroup comparisons are noted when relevant. Survey results are presented in Section III of this report and include the exact wording of the polling questions. Implications are summarized along with suggestions for next steps in Section IV.
- For some questions, the sample sizes for particular subgroups are too small to report. For example, analysis of subgroup differences by country of origin is rarely included in this report due to small sample sizes. Except where noted, this report does *not* refer to any subgroup differences with sample sizes of fewer than 30 respondents.
- This report focuses almost exclusively on statistically significant differences; exceptions are noted in the text. The term "statistical significance" refers to the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc.) correspond to real differences in attitudes/behavior or whether they are particular to the individuals included in the sample, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. Latino teen and parent population (ages 12–18). For the purpose of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the "p value" (or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%.
- The report also includes quotes from Latino teens. The quotes are taken from focus groups conducted in 2008 by The National Campaign in Los Angeles, CA; San Antonio, TX; Miami, FL; and New Britain, CT, with groups of Latino boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 19. The focus groups were not directly related to this survey, but are included to provide a qualitative complement to the qualitative data.
- Of course, it is worth acknowledging that some of the factors that shape people's attitudes and beliefs cannot be captured with a telephone survey.

The survey was conducted by International Communications Research (ICR), an independent research company in Media, PA. ICR executed two telephone surveys: (1) a survey of 759 Latino teens between the ages of 12 and 18 that took place between July 24, 2008 and August 19, 2008, and (2) a survey of 915 Latino adults with children in the household under age 18 that took place between July 21, 2008 and August 25, 2008. The number of respondents in the survey was designed to ensure an adequate sample size of each Latino subgroup of teens and parents. The margin of error for total Latino teen respondents is +/- 4.13%

[5] It is important to note that although the survey collected socio-demographic data such as income, education, and religion, these were not the key subgroups by which this report explored differences in attitudes and beliefs about teen pregnancy, relationships, and sex.

[6] Visit www.thenationalcampaign.org/espanol/polling for information on which countries were represented in the survey.

at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for total Latino parent respondents is +/- 4.52% at the 95% confidence level.

The teen survey was administered to any male or female age 12–18 of Latino origin or descent. Parental permission was sought for the teens before conducting the survey. ICR maintained a staff of Spanish-speaking interviewers who offered respondents the option of completing the survey in Spanish or in English. A total of 588 teen respondents were surveyed in English, 157 respondents interviewed in Spanish, and another 14 equally in both languages.

For the adult portion, the survey was administered to any male or female age 18 or older of Latino origin or descent with children in the household under the age of 18. The parents in this survey are not the parents of the teens included in the survey. The adult portion of the study was executed in ICR's monthly Hispanic omnibus survey, *HispanicEXCEL,* through telephone interviews. For more information on ICR, please visit www.icrsurvey.com.

For the adult portion of the study, ICR also maintained a staff of Spanish-speaking interviewers who offered respondents the option of completing the survey in Spanish or in English. A total of 222 respondents were surveyed in English, 687 respondents interviewed in Spanish, and another 6 equally in both languages.

Findings at a Glance

This survey was conducted to enhance the growing body of research on the beliefs and attitudes of Latinos regarding teen relationships, sexual activity, and related issues. In particular, the survey sought to tease out differences between Latino subgroups by three primary factors—country of origin, nativity, and language preference. In addition, information about age and gender are included in this report.

Although some compelling differences were found between subgroups, the most striking overall finding from the survey is the great uniformity of Latino teens' and parents' beliefs about sex and related topics regardless of their country of origin or level of acculturation. Furthermore—although comparing the responses of Latino teens with teens in general was not an original goal of this survey—several surprising commonalities, and a few surprising differences, emerged when the results of this survey were compared to findings from The National Campaign's 2007 survey of the general teen population—*With One Voice 2007.* These comparisons are noted when appropriate throughout the report. Noteworthy findings from the survey are spelled out in summary fashion below.

Goals and Aspirations

- More than eight in ten Latino teens (84%) and nine in ten Latino parents (91%) surveyed believe that graduating from college or university or having a promising career is the *most* important goal for a teen's future. Only 3% of Latino teens and 2% of Latino parents said starting a family was the most important goal for the future.
- Eight in ten Latino teens (81%) believe getting pregnant as a teen would delay or prevent them from accomplishing their goals.
- Three-quarters of Latino teens (77%) agree that planning for their future is important. More acculturated Latino teens are more likely than their peers to agree that planning for their future is important.

Parents and Other Influences

- Like teens more generally, Latino teens say that their parents *most* influence their decisions about sex.
- Latino teens in this survey report that their parents are already talking with them about relationships; less so about contraception.
- Even so, Latino parents and teens agree that parents could use help addressing these topics more effectively.
- Latino teens are *less* likely than Latino parents to say that parents need help talking about sex—in other words, Latino parents don't give themselves enough credit.
- Less acculturated parents say they need more resources and support when it comes to having quality conversations with their teens about sex and relationships.

Sex, Contraception, and Relationships

- Latino teens in this survey report that the most common reason why teens do not use contraception is because they are afraid their parents might find out. The second most common reason cited by Latino teens is lack of knowledge or education about contraception.

- Older teens are more likely than younger teens to say that it's okay for a teen to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older, although overall the majority of teens surveyed reported it's *not* okay.

- The majority of Latino teens in this survey said that they think it is important for a person to be married before starting a family.

Although the report focuses on commonalities, we do not mean to suggest that a uniform approach to preventing teen pregnancy should be adopted to reach all Latino teens regardless of geographic location, level of acculturation, and other socio-demographic factors. In fact, one possible interpretation of the findings from the survey is that disparities in rates of teen pregnancy and other measures are likely explained, in part, by such factors as socio-economic status. More research on the intersection of beliefs, behavior, and socio-demographic factors would undoubtedly be very useful in addressing the disparities in health outcomes for Latinos and to improve educational, economic, and family well-being in the Latino community.

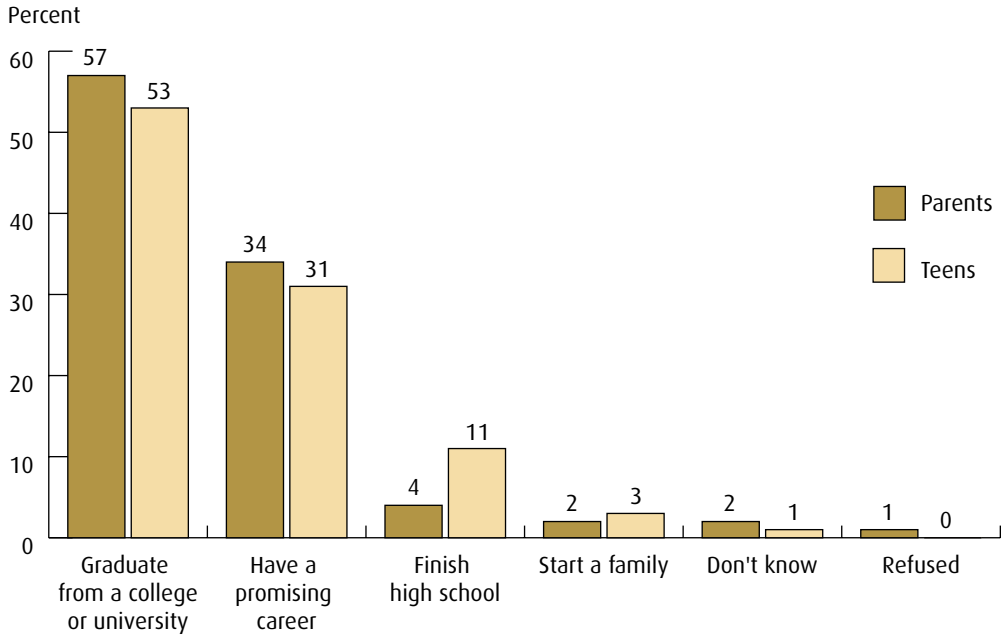
Survey Results

Goals and Aspirations

Education, career, and planning for the future are important to Latino teens and parents. Specifically, the overwhelming majority of Latino teens and Latino parents report that graduating from a college or university, or having a promising career is the *most* important goal for their future (Figure 1). More than three-quarters of Latino teens believe planning for the future is important: eight in ten Latino teens also believe that having a child as a teenager would either delay or prevent them from reaching their goals for the future (Figure 5).

Most Latino teens say higher education and career success are a priority over starting a family. Many youth service providers and others have suggested that high rates of teen pregnancy in the Latino community can be attributed in part to the value Latinos place on starting a family at an early age. Data from *this* survey tell a different story. While there is no doubt that starting a family is important in Latino culture, the majority of both Latino teens *and* parents reported that either graduating from a college or university, or having a promising career are the *most* important goals for their [their child's] future. In fact, only 3% of Latino teens and 2% of Latino parents reported that starting a family was the most important goal for the future.

Figure 1. Latino Parents and Teens: Of the following goals, what goal do you consider most important for your [child's] future?[7]



Readers should note that "teens" refers to Latino teens ages 12–18 unless otherwise noted.

[7] Some of the survey responses do not total 100%. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, responses totaling 2% or less are not reported.

Figure 2. Latino Teens by Language Spoken at Home: Of the following goals, what goal do you consider most important for your [child's] future?

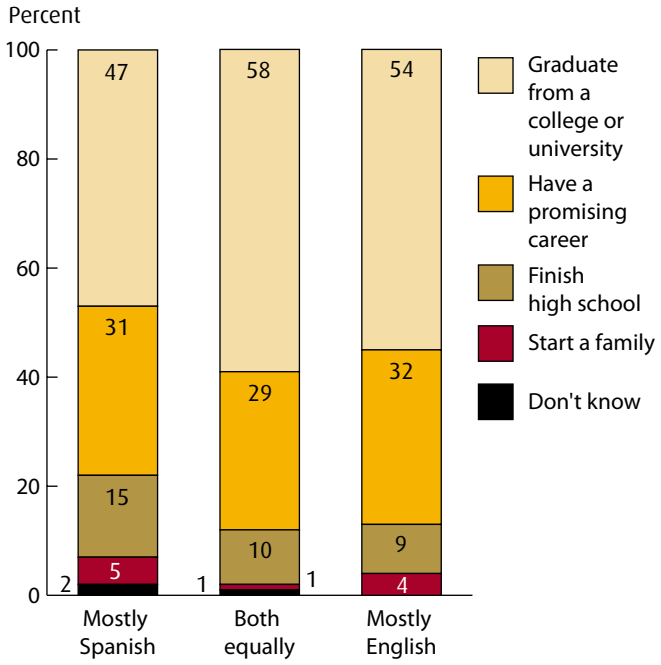
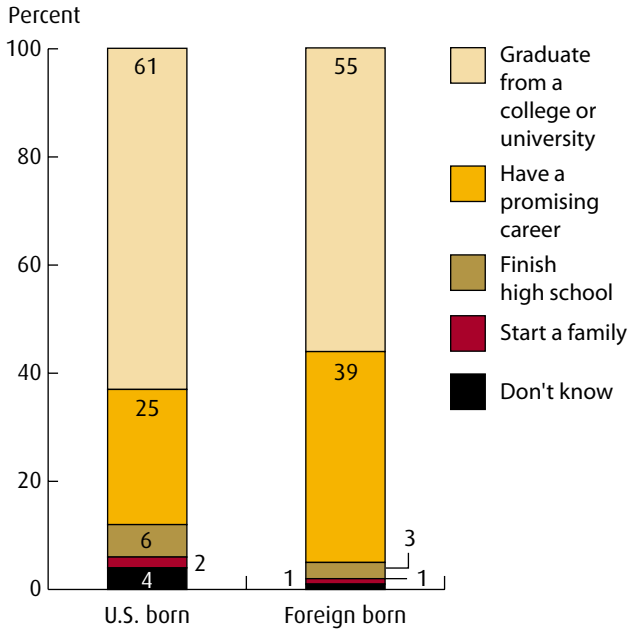


Figure 3. Latino Parents by Nativity: Of the following goals, what goal do you consider most important for your [child's] future?



Of the following goals, what goal do you consider most important for your [child's] future?

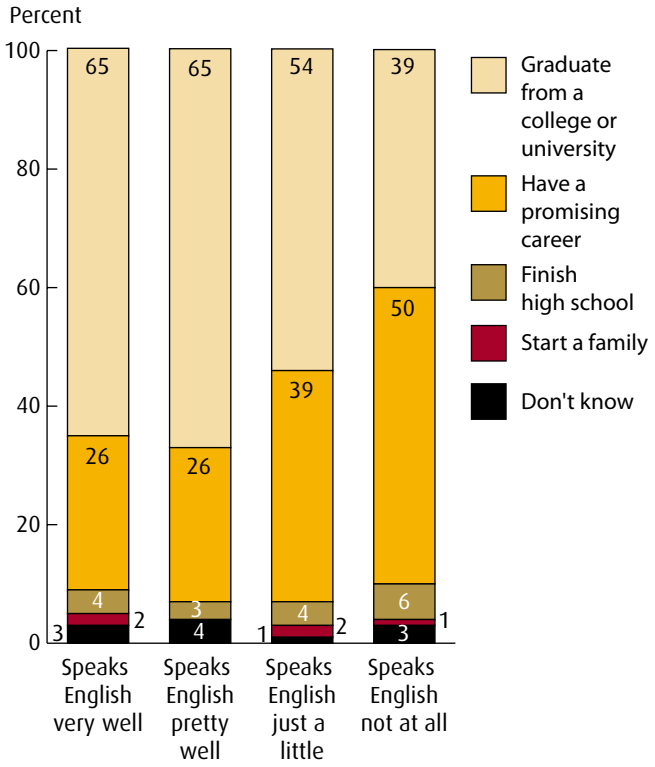
Almost 6 in 10 Latino parents (57%) report that graduating from a college or university is the *most* important goal for their child's future. Nevertheless, Latino teens have the highest high school dropout rates of any racial and ethnic minority, which limits their opportunities for a promising career (Llagas, 2003). Discussions with teens, parents, and service providers suggest that navigating institutions such as the public school system, particularly when using a foreign language, can be a huge challenge for recent immigrants. Latino teens in focus groups often express frustration that their parents place pressure on them to succeed without being prepared or able to help them reach their educational goals. Clearly Latino parents place great value on higher education and career opportunities for their children, but they may need extra assistance in providing the support their children need to succeed in high school and beyond.

These findings—as well as results from focus groups—also suggest that many Latino teens are not receiving adequate support and resources to pursue their educational and career aspirations. It is important for youth service providers, educators, and counselors to help Latino teens and parents learn about the specific steps required to attend college or university, and to ensure that Latino families have the support necessary to set goals and achieve them.

Teens living in bi-cultural households (those in which both English and Spanish are spoken equally) are more likely than other households (those that speak mostly Spanish or mostly English) to say that graduating from a college or university is the goal they consider most important for their future, though the difference between bi-cultural households and households where mostly English is spoken is not statistically significant. Teens in mostly Spanish-speaking households are slightly more likely to say that graduating from high school is the most important goal. This difference, which is not statistically significant, might also be attributable to socio-economic differences or parents' level of education (Figure 2).

"They're just stereotypes and we can break them. Instead of getting married and having babies as teens we can go to college and be successful.
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

Figure 4. Latino Parents by English Proficiency: Of the following goals, what goal do you consider most important for your [child's] future?

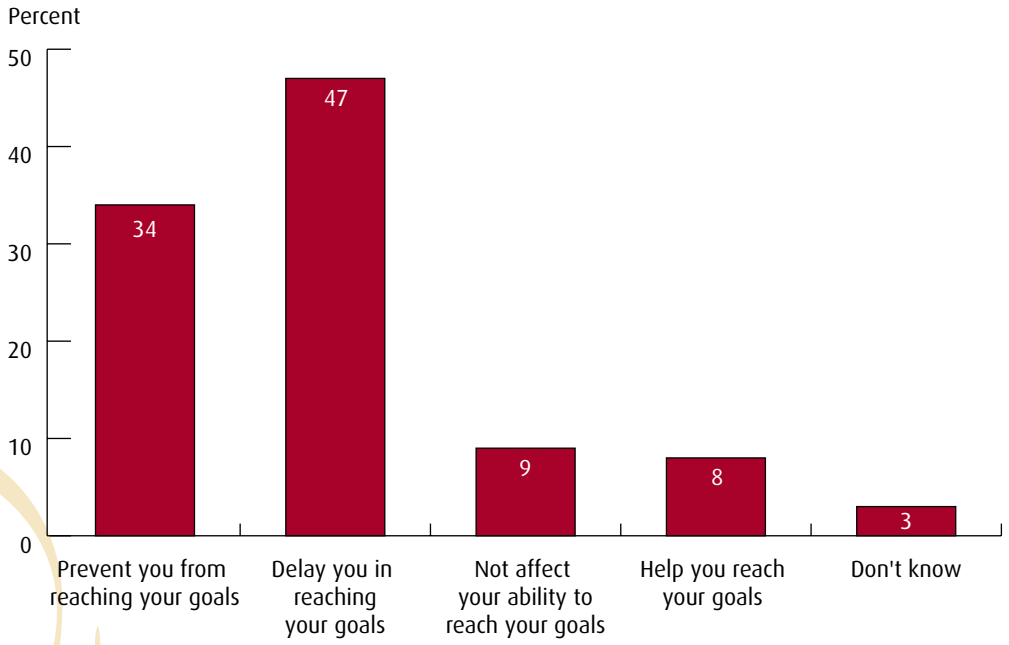


Another striking finding is that the overwhelming majority of Latino parents, regardless of English proficiency, aspire to see their child graduate from college or have a promising career. Still, when examining survey results by language preference, acculturated parents are more likely than those less acculturated to place a premium on higher education. These findings could suggest that less acculturated parents have ambitious aspirations for their children but do not necessarily see college or university as the most important step on the path to a promising career (Figure 4).

Do you think being a teen parent would...?

Fully 81% of Latino teens believe that being a teen parent would either delay or prevent them from reaching their goals for the future. However, Latino teens (34%) are less likely than teens in general (40%, not shown) to believe that being a teen parent would prevent them from reaching their goals. It is also the case that 17% of Latino teens believe that being a teen parent would either help them reach their goals for the future or would not affect their ability to reach their goals. These findings suggest, at least in part, that many Latino teens may be aware of some of the consequences of teen pregnancy but not fully grasp how much of an impact a pregnancy could have on their lives.

Figure 5. Latino Teens: Do you think that being a teen parent would...?



Unfortunately the reality is that 69% of Latina teen mothers never finish high school and only 2% of all teens who have a baby before age 18 ever graduate from college (Manlove, 1998 and Hoffman, 2006). The children of teen parents are more likely to face a number of disadvantages, including poverty and health problems, than children of mothers who are just 20–21 years old when they have their first child (Hoffman, 2006). Although many Latino teens recognize that teen pregnancy could negatively affect their ability to reach their goals, a continued focus on primary prevention seems necessary to ensure that teens are not faced with the challenges of a too-early pregnancy and parenthood. For some teens, increased emphasis on the consequences of a pregnancy might provide the motivation they need to focus on prevention.

Younger Latino teens (ages 12–14) are more likely than older Latino teens (ages 15–18) to believe that being a teen parent would prevent them from achieving their goals (Figure 5). Conversely, older Latino teens are more likely than their younger peers to say that being a teen parent would simply delay them in reaching their goals. It may be that the possible impact of early pregnancy and parenthood is not as acute for those older teens who are likely closer to graduating high school, even though just 3% of mothers who are 18 or 19 when their first child is born attain a college degree by age 30 (Hoffman, 2006). It's also possible that older girls are more aware of resources for young mothers, or simply that their expectations change—perhaps as a result of discouragement or lack of support—as they get older. Regardless, it's apparent that additional support and guidance is needed to successfully provide young Latinos with a clear understanding that in order to avoid early pregnancy they should either wait to have sex or learn how to use contraception consistently and effectively.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have any control over it.

Nearly eight in ten Latino teens (77%) *disagree*—most of them *strongly* disagree—with the following statement: "Planning for the future is not important because you don't have any control over it,"(Figure 7). Given that attitudes can affect behavior, nurturing a sense of stewardship of one's life can be a powerful

Figure 6. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: Do you think that being a teen parent would...?

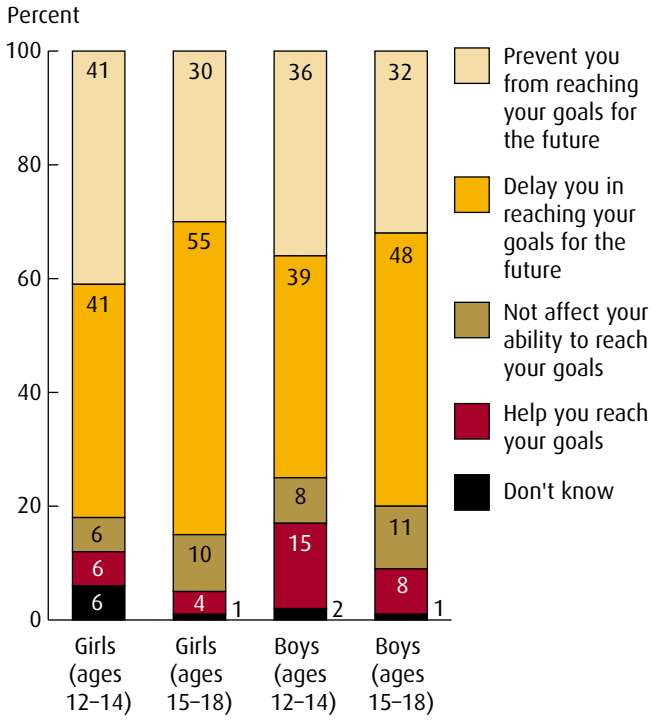
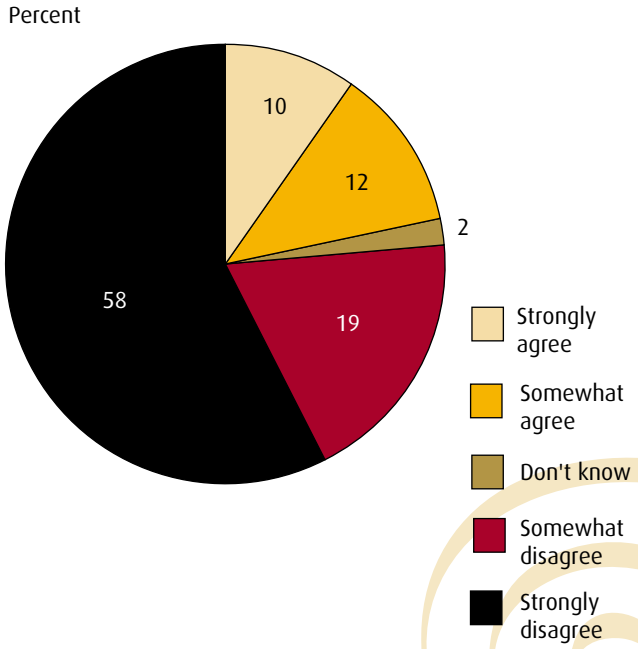


Figure 7. Latino Teens: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have control over it.



tool to help Latino teens to plan for their future and accomplish their goals.

Still, several measures of acculturation included in this survey—specifically nativity and language preference—indicate that more acculturated Latinos place a stronger emphasis on the value of planning for the future. This suggests that less acculturated families might benefit from more support in setting ambitious goals for the future and making plans to achieve them.

A clear majority of Latino teens—regardless of nativity—report that planning is important (Figure 8). However, Latino teens born in the United States are more likely than their foreign-born peers to believe that they are in control of their future and that planning for the future is important. These findings suggest that Latino teens born in the United States might better identify with to messages about planning their pregnancies.

A clear majority of Latino teens—regardless of the language spoken in the home—report that planning is important and that they have control over their futures (Figure 10). When examining the results by English language proficiency, those Latino teens who spoke English very well were the most likely of all proficiency levels to say they have control over their futures (Figure 9).

Regardless of country of origin, large majorities of Latino teens believe that planning for their future is important and that they have control over their lives.

Figure 8. Latino Teens by Nativity: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have control over it.

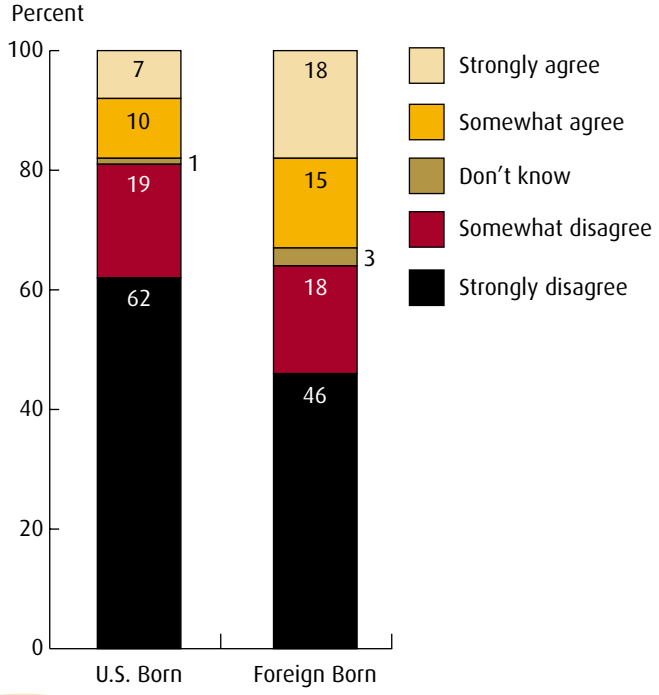


Figure 9. Latino Teens by English Proficiency: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have control over it.

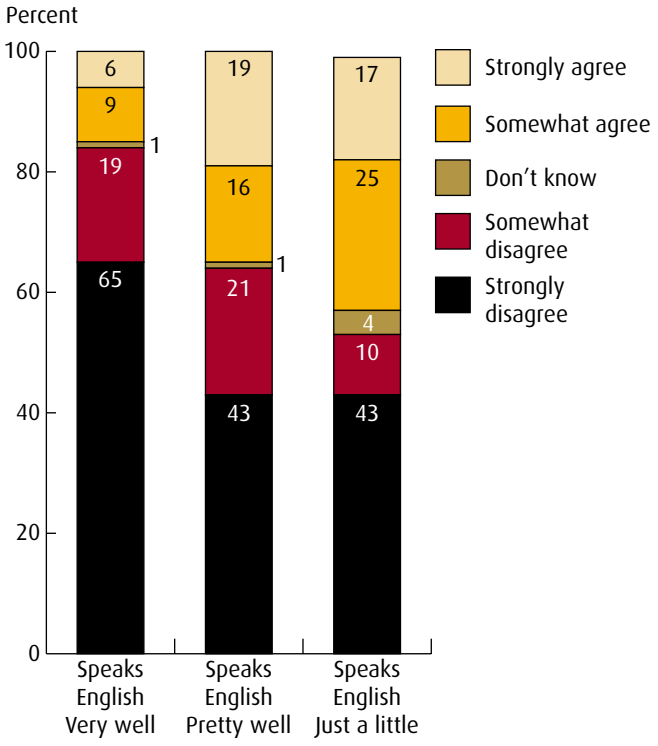
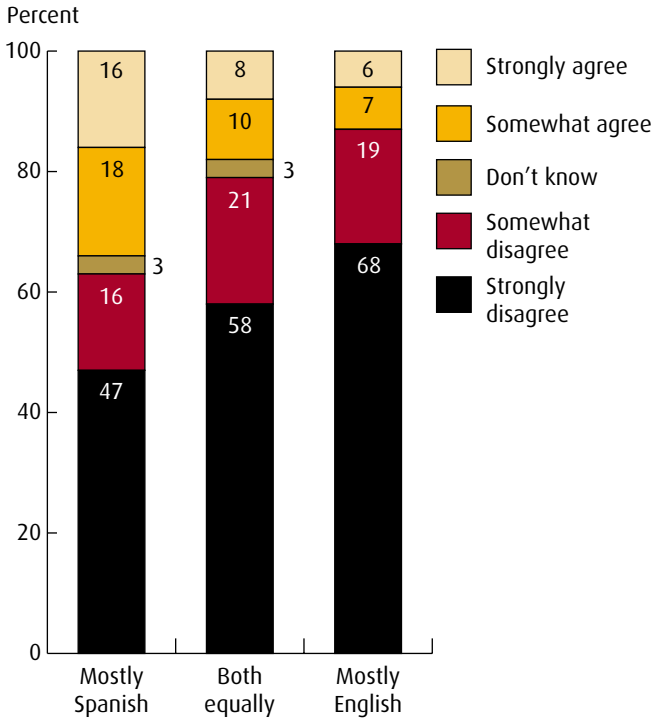
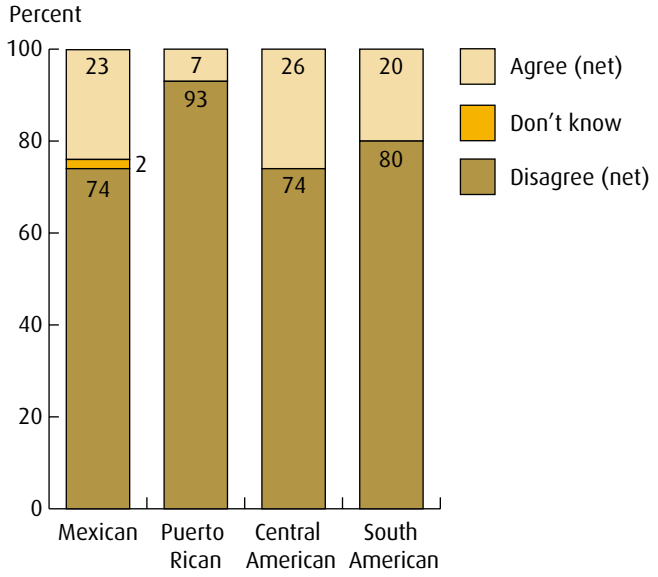


Figure 10. Latino Teens by Language Spoken at Home: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have control over it.



"You can't just say 'Go to school.' You have to give reasons, like you can travel, explore, be a leader."
—Latino teen girl, Focus Group, Miami, FL

Figure 11. Latino Teens by Country of Origin: Planning for the future is not important because you don't have control over it.



[8] Data indicate some potential differences with respect to country of origin, but sample size limitations do not allow for comparison.

Parents and Other Influences

"Parents need to get involved by going to class, talking about the subject, and getting educated about the statistics. They should have a class once a week on how to talk about sex."
-Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

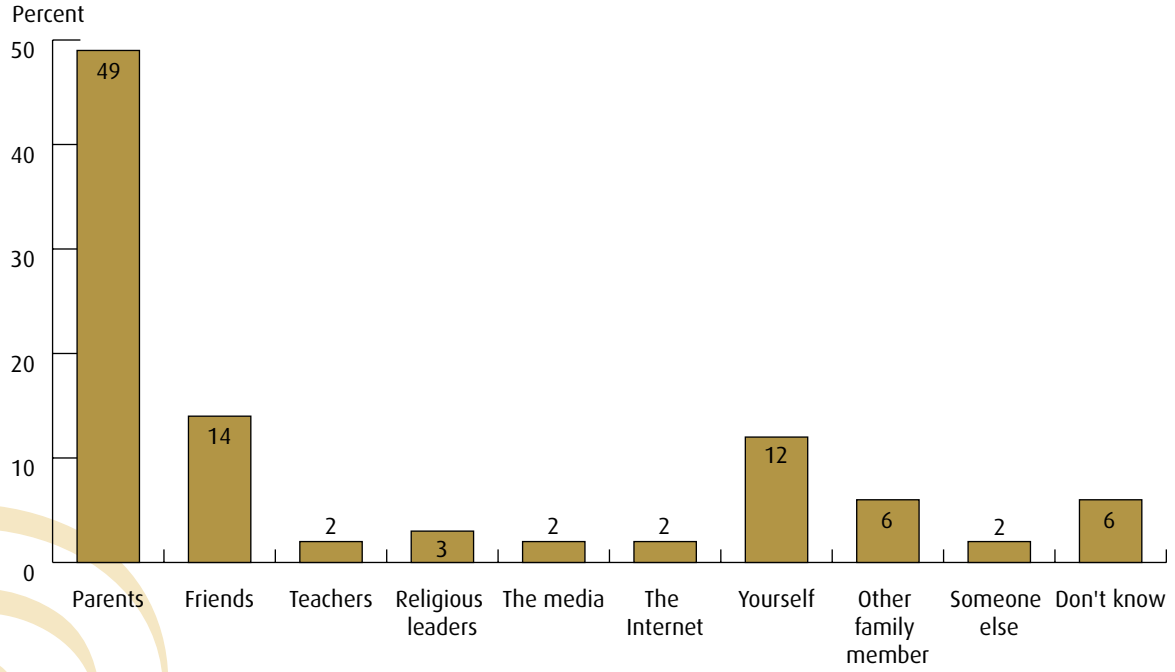
Latino teens say parents—not friends, not the media, not any other source—most influence their decisions about sex (Figure 12). Over the years many have suggested that Latino parents and teens do not discuss sex because it is a "taboo" topic in many Latino households. That belief is simply not supported by the data in this survey. Eight in ten Latino teens (79%) report that their parents have spoken to them at some point about sex (Figure 19). Still, most Latino teens and parents agree that when it comes to talking about sex and related issues, parents don't always know what to say to their children, how to say it, or when to start (Figures 14 and 15). This could indicate that although Latino parents are discussing these topics, particularly sex and relationships, with their children, they may need more guidance to improve the quality of these conversations.

When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?

Like their peers in other racial and ethnic groups, Latino teens report that their parents influence their decisions about sex more than other sources, including friends, teachers, religious leaders, the media and Internet, siblings, and other family members. Latino teens who live in homes in which English and Spanish are spoken equally are particularly likely to report their parents as the biggest influence on their decisions about sex.[8]

Latino teens of all ages say parents most influence their decisions about sex. Both older Latino boys (ages 15–18) and older Latina girls (ages 15–18) are less likely than their younger counterparts to report that parents are the biggest influence on their decisions about sex, though this change is more dramatic among older boys. This may be due in part to the fact that,

Figure 12. Latino Teens: When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?



[9] Latino parents are actually slightly less likely than parents in general (See *With One Voice 2007*) to say parents don't know how to approach a conversation with their children about sex.

as a general matter, teens become more autonomous and more self-assured as they get older. This decrease in parental influence makes it even more important for parents to talk to their children early and often about sex and relationships, in an age-appropriate way.

When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

More than three-quarters of Latino parents (77%) and more than six in ten Latino teens (64%) agree that when it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start the conversation (Figures 14 and 15).[9] Even though Latino teens give parents more credit than parents give themselves, the majority of Latino parents and teens across all subgroups agree that Latino parents could use more help having useful conversations with their children about sex. Considering that Latino teens say parents most influence their decisions about sex, it's important to make sure that Latino parents get the support and guidance they need to communicate effectively and frequently with their teens about sex and relationships.

Results from the survey suggest that less acculturated, Spanish-dominant parents may need more guidance than more acculturated parents. This is not surprising given that Spanish-dominant parents might have a harder time finding culturally relevant resources to help them approach the challenging topic of sex with their children.

It is also important to note that in addition to overcoming the universal generational barrier between parents and teens, many Spanish-dominant parents must also overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to communicate effectively with their children. Furthermore, it is not uncommon among immigrant families for the balance of power between parents and teens—who tend to be more acculturated and more comfortable speaking English—to shift as the teen gets older and might be asked to help the parents with traditionally "adult" responsibilities such as navigating school and healthcare systems.

Older Latina teen girls (ages 15–18) are more likely than younger Latina teen girls (ages 12–14) and Latino teen boys of all ages to agree that when it comes to conversations with their children about sex, parents

Figure 13. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?

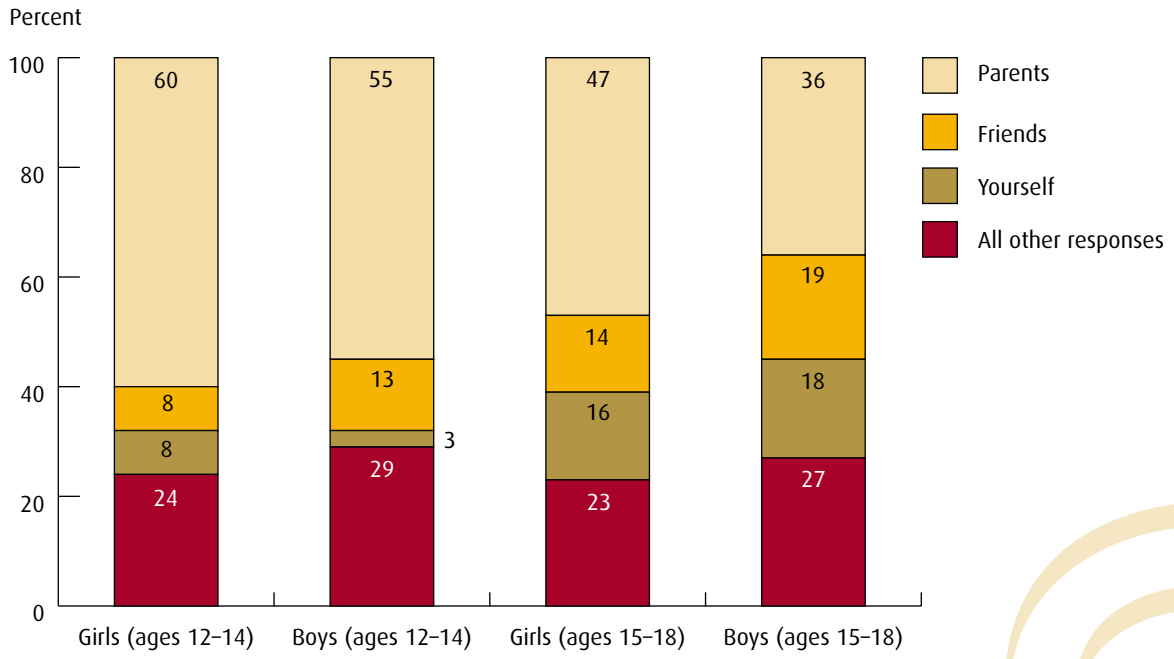


Figure 14. **Latino Parents: When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.**

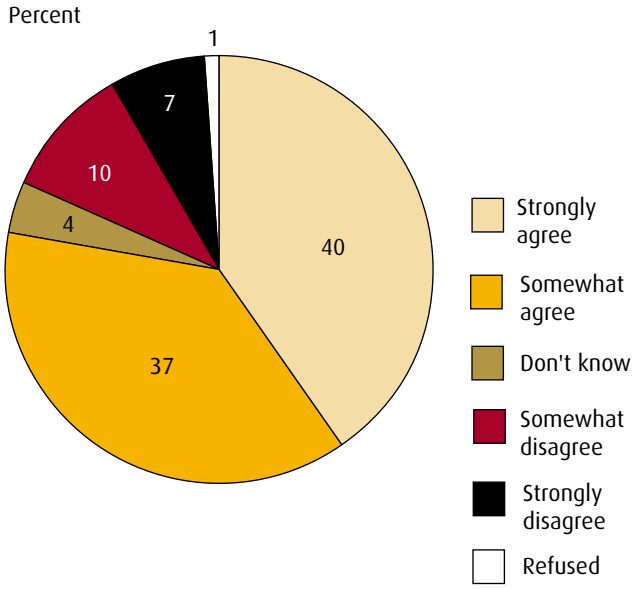
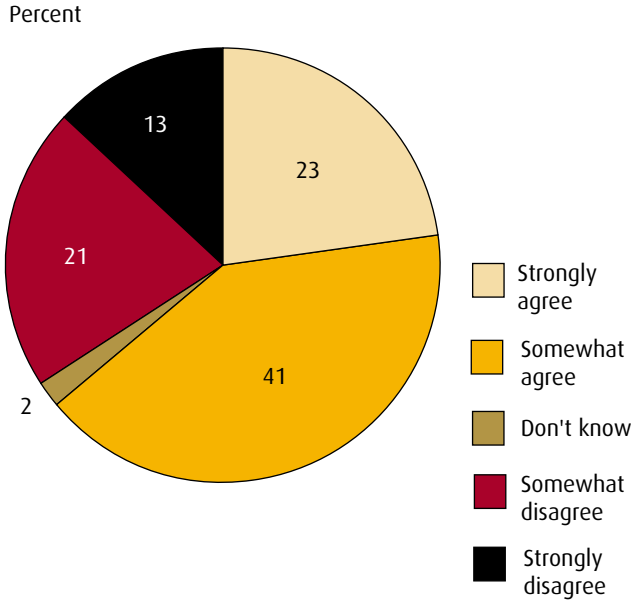


Figure 15. **Latino Teens: When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.**



don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start (Figure 16). This is a particularly interesting finding considering that older Latina girls are also more likely than younger Latina girls and Latino teen boys in general to say that their parents *have* spoken to them about sex. One possible interpretation: Although Latino parents are definitely making an effort to talk about sex with their teens—particularly older daughters—they still need more guidance about how and when to approach the topic.

Teens from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes (70%) are more likely than teens from predominantly English-speaking homes (60%) to agree that when it comes to talking about sex, parents don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start the conversation (Figure 17). This finding emphasizes the importance of providing Spanish-dominant parents with resources and guidance to help them initiate quality conversations with their children about sex.

Regardless of language preference, at least seven in ten Latino parents say they need more support or guidance to communicate effectively with their teens about sex (Figure 18). Parents from homes where predominantly Spanish or English are spoken are more likely than parents from homes where both languages are spoken equally to agree that when it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start (the difference was not statistically significant among English-dominant households).

"Be more open about it, even though it may be weird to imagine your daughter having sex. It's better than knowing that you could have done something about it but didn't."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

Figure 16. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

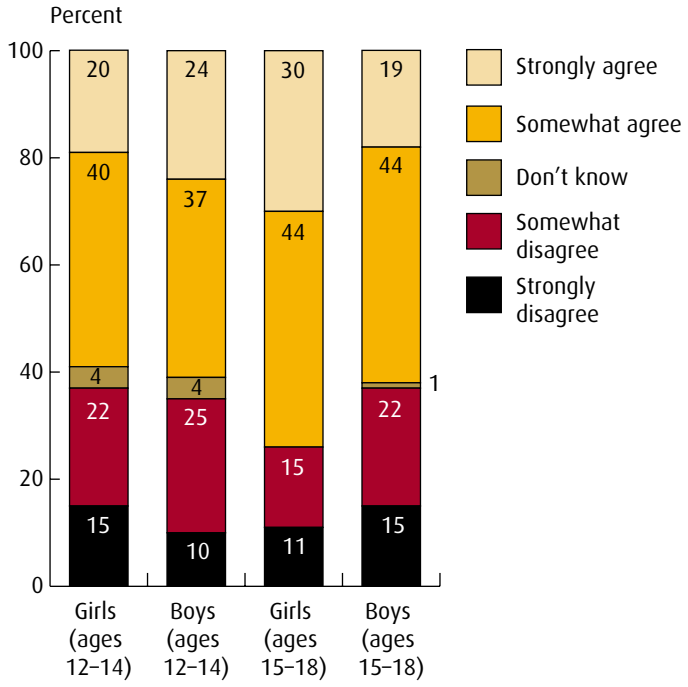
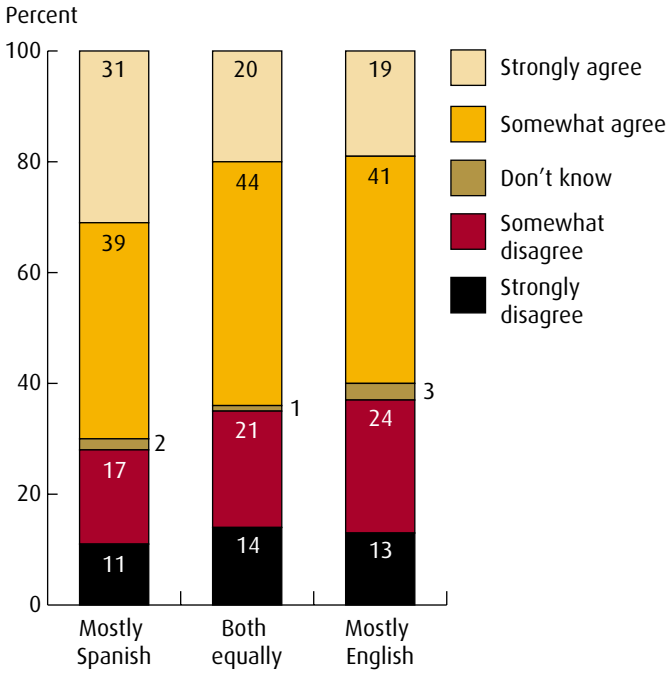


Figure 17. Latino Teens by Language Spoken at Home: When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.



Have your parents ever talked to you about sex/contraception/relationships?

The overwhelming majority of Latino teens report that they have had a conversation with their parents about sex and what it takes to have a successful relationship. However, only about half of Latino teens say that their parents have spoken to them about contraception (Figure 19). These findings suggest that Latino parents are less comfortable discussing contraception with their children than they are discussing sex and relationships more generally.

Considering that both Latino teen boys and girls are less likely to use contraception than their non-Latino peers (Abma, 2004), educating Latino parents about contraception, helping them become comfortable discussing the topic with their children, and assuring them that discussing contraception does *not* hasten the onset of sexual activity among teens, is important. In general, further research on the content and quality of the conversations Latino parents are having with their teens about sex, contraception, and relationships might help identify areas where parents might need more guidance in terms of the content and tone of these conversations.

Have your parents ever talked to you about sex?

Conventional wisdom and anecdotal evidence suggest that the topic of sex is off-limits in Latino households. Again, the results of this survey do not support this commonly-held belief. At least seven in ten Latino teens of all ages report that their parents have discussed sex with them (Figure 20). Older Latina teen girls (ages 15–18) are more likely than younger teen girls (ages 12–14) and older teen boys (ages 15–18) to say that their parents have spoken to them about sex. It's encouraging that so many Latino parents are, in fact, talking to their teens about sex. It is also important to continue to encourage parents to talk to their daughters *and* their sons, and to start the conversation early—preferably before their children become sexually active—and maintain an open dialogue from an early age into young adulthood.

Latino teens who speak English "very well" are more likely than those with other levels of English proficiency to say that their parents have talked with them about sex (Figure 21). These findings once again suggest that less acculturated Latino parents could use more help and resources to assist them in talking with their teens about sex.

Figure 18. Latino Parents by Language Spoken at Home: When it comes to talking about sex, parents often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

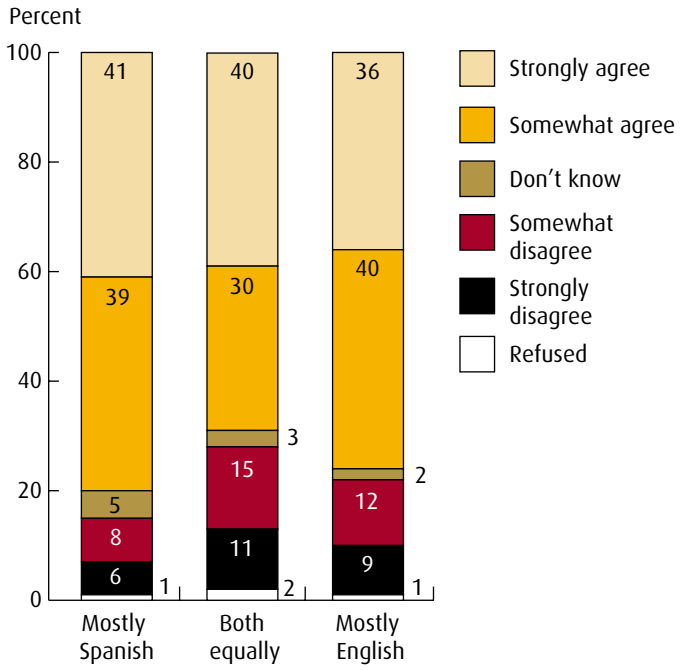


Figure 19. Latino Teens: have your parents ever talked to you about...?

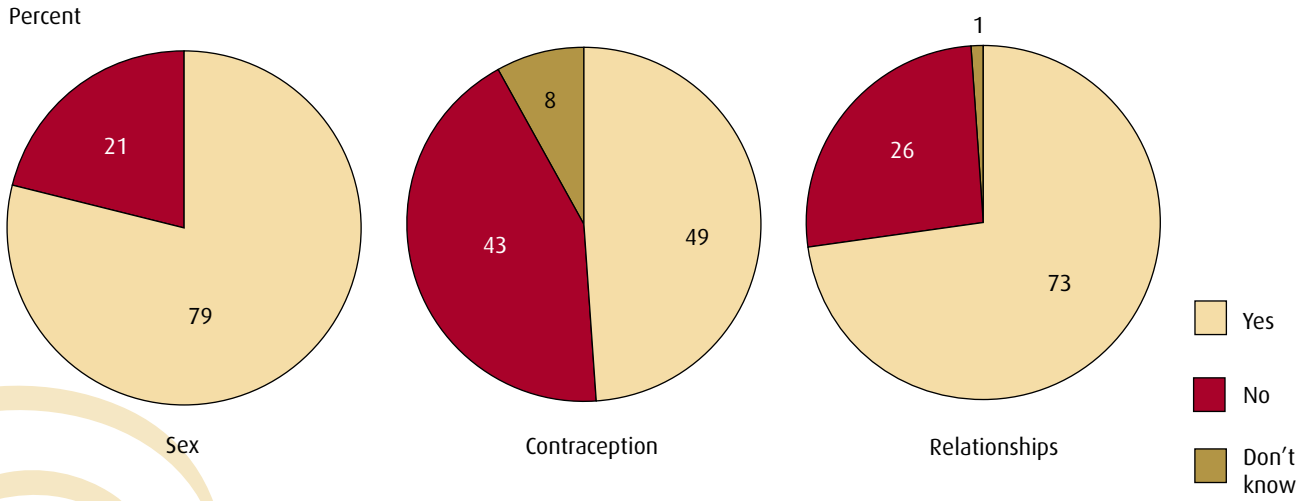


Figure 20. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: Have your parents ever talked to you about sex?

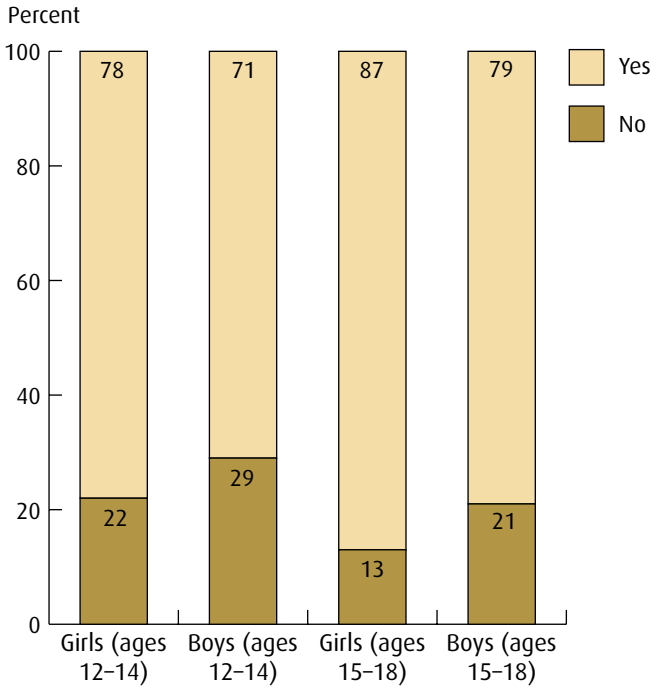
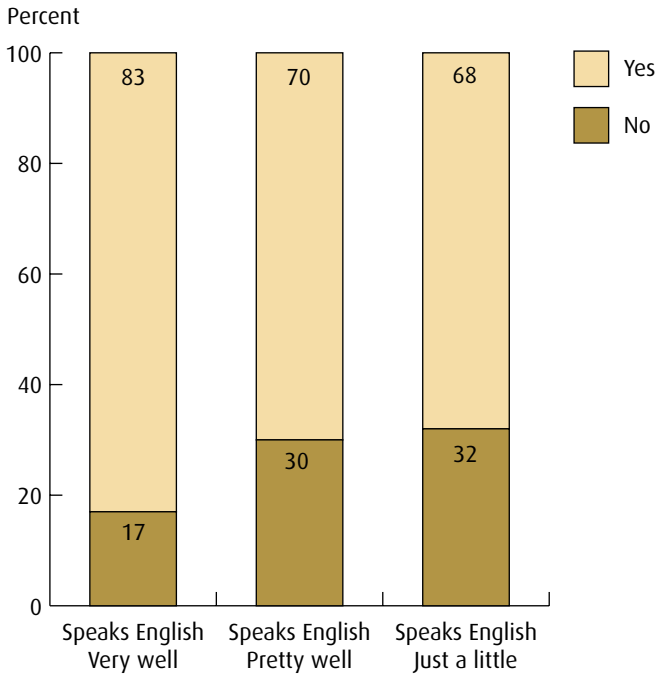


Figure 21. Latino Teens by Language: Have your parents ever talked to you about sex?



Have your parents ever talked to you about contraception?

Not surprisingly, older Latino teens (ages 15–18) are far more likely than younger Latin0 teens (ages 12–14) to report that their parents have spoken to them about contraception (Figure 22). Older Latina teen girls, in particular, say their parents have discussed contraception with them. This is encouraging, but more can be done to help Latino parents feel comfortable discussing this topic. The need for more discussion for may be greatest for young teens since this age group is less likely than older teens to use contraception the first time they have sex (Manlove, 2003). It's also important to make sure that Latino parents are equipped with the resources and knowledge to help their children *access* contraception if and when they need it.

Have your parents ever talked to you about what it takes to have a successful relationship?

Latina teen girls are significantly more likely than their male peers to report that their parents have talked with them about what it takes to have a successful relationship, regardless of age (Figure 23). While it is encouraging that eight in ten teen girls report talking with their parents about this important topic, more should be done to make sure that boys are also hearing from their parents about what it takes to have a healthy, successful relationship.

"Parents will tell him, it's okay to have sex, just not to get a girl pregnant."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Miami, FL

When it comes to talking about sex, do you think that parents send one message to their sons and a different message to their daughters?

Three-quarters of Latino teens (74%) believe that parents send one message about sex to their sons and a different message altogether to their daughters (Figure 24). This sentiment is higher among Latino teens than among teens more generally (65%, see *With One Voice 2007*). That different messages are sent to boys and girls might be related to the Latino cultural value of *machismo,* which is sometimes understood to define the qualities a Latino man should possess and cultivate in order to assume a patriarchal role in his family and social environment. On the other hand, *marianismo* is the cultural complement to *machismo,* defining a woman's role in her family and society. Generally *machismo* is characterized by dominance and aggression, *marianismo* by submissiveness and moral superiority, though interpretations of these roles vary.

It is certainly possible for values related to *machismo* and *marianismo* to have a positive effect on Latino families and the decisions teens make about relationships and sex. However, there is also evidence that the expectations that often accompany these values can hinder communication and encourage risky behavior.[10] Whatever the interpretation, the perception of a double-standard could be an important factor in shaping the beliefs and behavior of Latino teens and merits further study.

Figure 22. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: Have your parents ever talked to you about contraception?

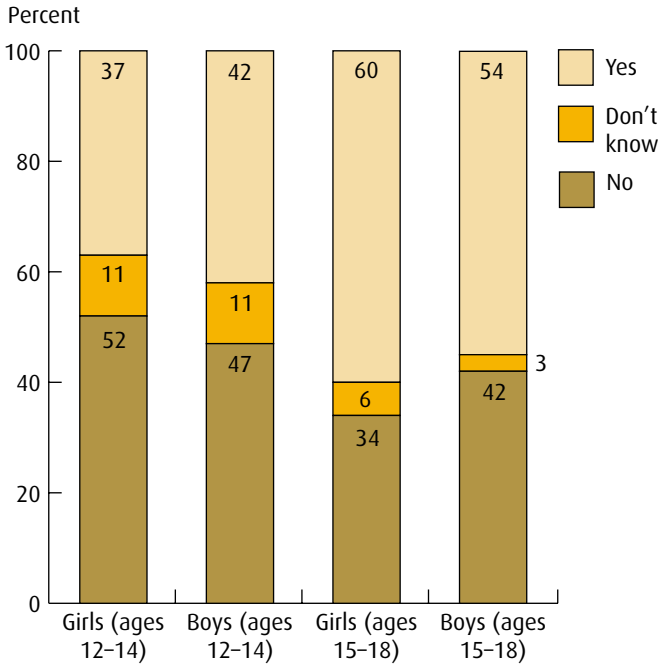
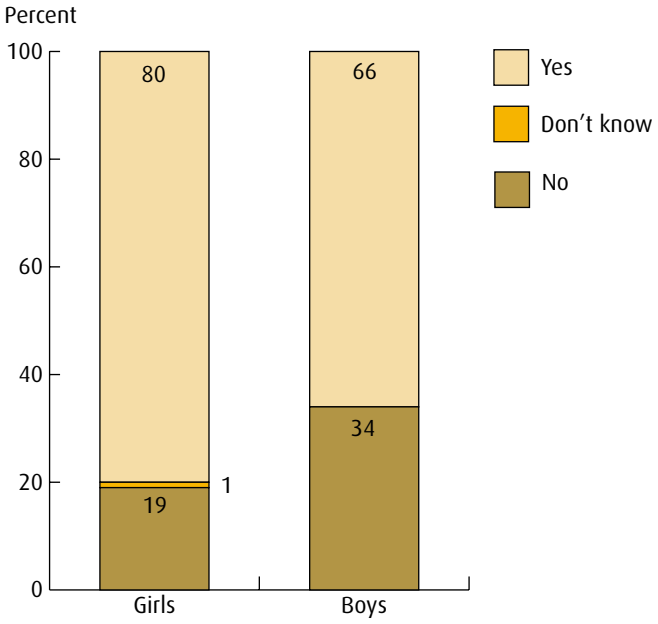


Figure 23. Latino Teens by Gender: Have your parents ever talked to you about what it takes to have a successful relationship?



[10] See *Redefining HIV/AIDS for Latinos* by National Council of La Raza for more on machismo in Latino culture and its potential effects on relationships (http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/42686/).

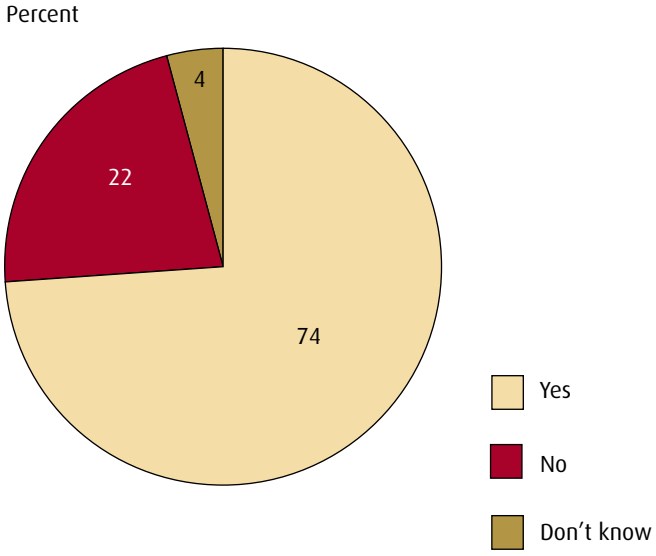
Sex, Contraception, and Relationships

"My mom says, *'Esa es la realidad y cuando tengas novio te compro los condones.'*[11] By saying that she is not telling me to have sex, she's telling me that she trusts me."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

Latina teen girls are *less likely* than their non-Latina peers to be sexually active and Latino teen boys are *more likely* than their peers to be sexually experienced (Flanigan, 2006). However, Latino teens—both boys *and* girls—are less likely to use contraception than their non-Latino peers. Some have suggested that this is because many Latino teens intend to have a pregnancy. In this survey, just 2% of Latino teens reported that teens do not use contraception because they want to get pregnant or get their partner pregnant. The two primary reasons Latino teens give for why teens don't use contraception are: 1) fear of parents finding out (21%), and 2) lack of knowledge or education about contraception (15%).

The survey also yielded some interesting findings regarding sex and regret, being in a relationship with older partners, and marriage. For example, almost six in ten Latino teens do *not* think it's okay for a teen to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older. Age differences in teen relationships are a cause for concern—research makes clear that age differences of even two to three years can lead to risky situations, including unwanted sex and sex without protection. Regarding marriage, fully three-quarters of Latino teens surveyed believe a couple should be married before starting a family. However, given that Latina teens are more likely than their non-Latina peers to have a relationship with a significantly older partner, and that most Latina teen moms are unmarried, it's clear that Latino teens need more guidance and support in making their *beliefs* their *reality.* Furthermore, more than seven in ten Latino teens reported that they wish they had waited longer to have sex.

Figure 24. Latino Teens: When it comes to talking about sex, do you think that parents send one message to their sons and a different message to their daughters?



"If you don't learn this stuff when you're young, you're not going to just know it when you're older."
—Latino teen boy, Focus Group, San Antonio

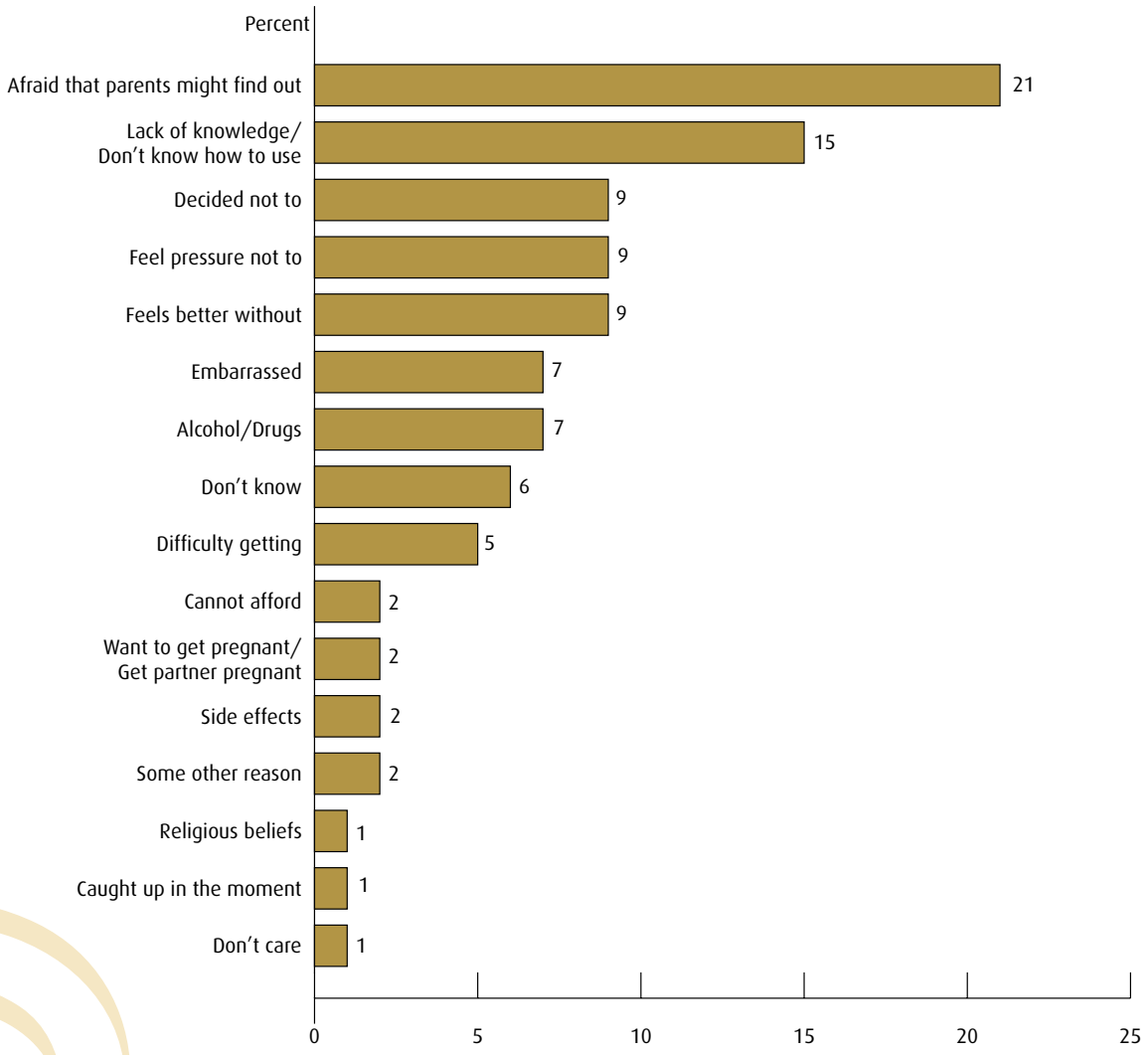
[11] Translation: "This is the reality and when you have a boyfriend, I'll buy you condoms."

What do you think is the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection when they have sex?

Teens offer many reasons for not using contraception when they have sex. More than one in five Latino teens (21%) report that the fear of parents finding out is the primary reason teens don't use contraception—15% say that lack of knowledge or education[12] about contraception is the main reason (Figure 25). Only 2% of Latino teens report that teens don't use contraception because they want to get pregnant or get their partner pregnant. Again, these findings suggest that the great majority of Latino teens are not planning on a pregnancy.

Considering that Latino teens are less likely to use contraception when they have sex than their peers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, there might be a need for more education for both teens and their parents about how to use contraception and where to access it. It might also be useful to encourage Latino parents—even those parents who believe strongly in the importance of teens waiting to have sex and who want that to be the primary message they give their sons and daughters—to make it clear to their children that they support responsible contraceptive use when and if their children have sex.

Figure 25. Latino Teens: What do you think is the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection when they have sex?



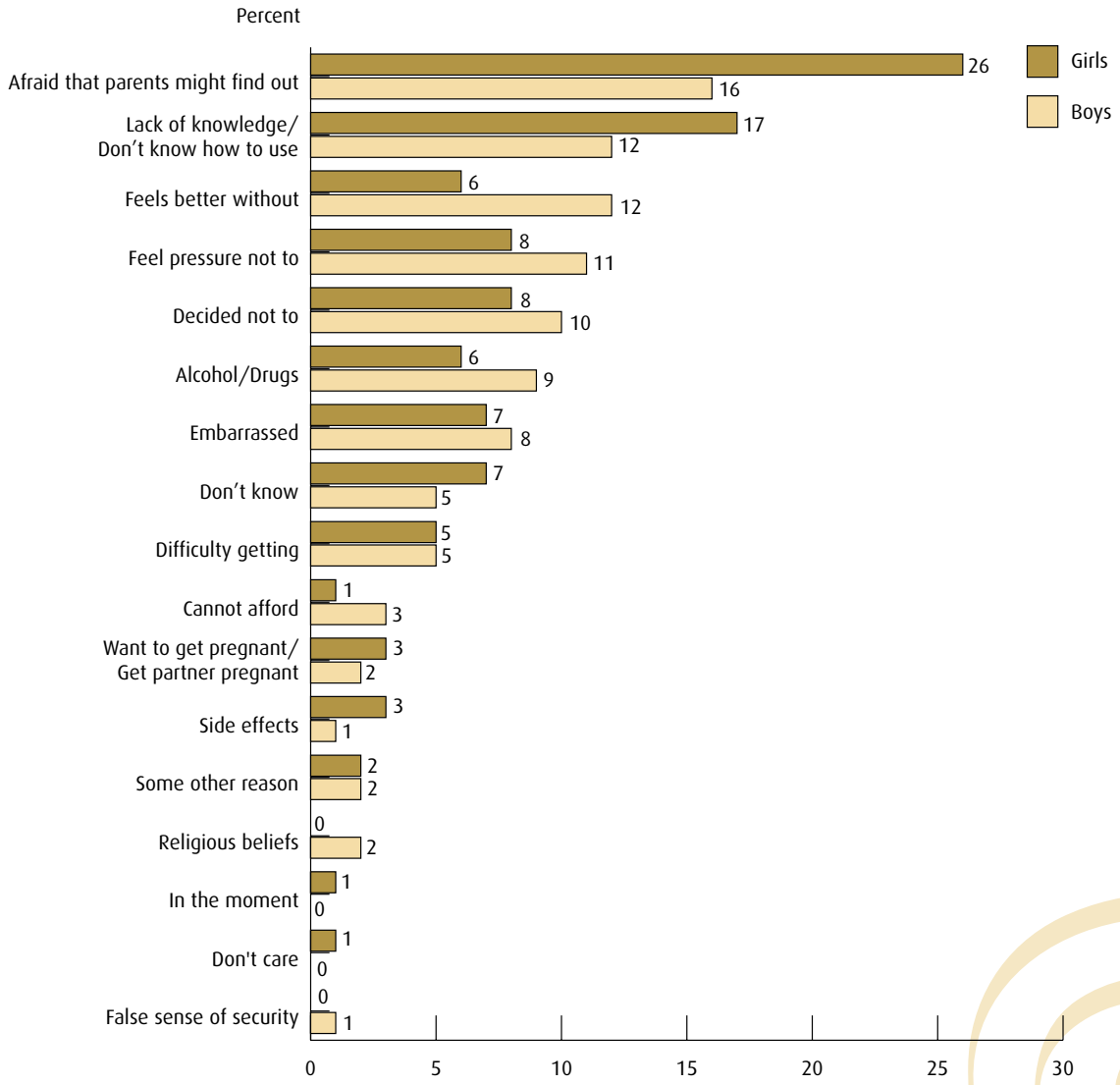
[12] For the purpose of this report *lack of knowledge/don't know how to use* is a combination of the original survey categories *Lack of knowledge/education* and *Don't know how to use.*

Many continue to suggest that religious beliefs prevent Latino teens from using contraception. In this survey, only 1% of Latino teens report that teens don't use contraception because of their religious beliefs—datum consistent with findings from the National Council of La Raza's *Entre Parejas* (Arroyo, 2006).

Latina teen girls are more likely than Latino teen boys to say that the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection is because they're afraid their parents might find out (Figure 26). It is certainly understandable that parents want their teens to delay sex—delaying sexual activity is developmentally appropriate and the only certain way to delay too-early pregnancy and parenthood. Even so, parents should also recognize that they can be important sources of information for their sons and daughters about sex—including contraception. It might be comforting for more parents to realize that learning about contraception does *not* encourage teens to have sex.[13]

Teens from predominantly Spanish-speaking homes (17%), and teens from homes that speak both English and Spanish equally (19%), are more likely than teens

Figure 26. Latino Teens by Gender: What do you think is the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection when they have sex?

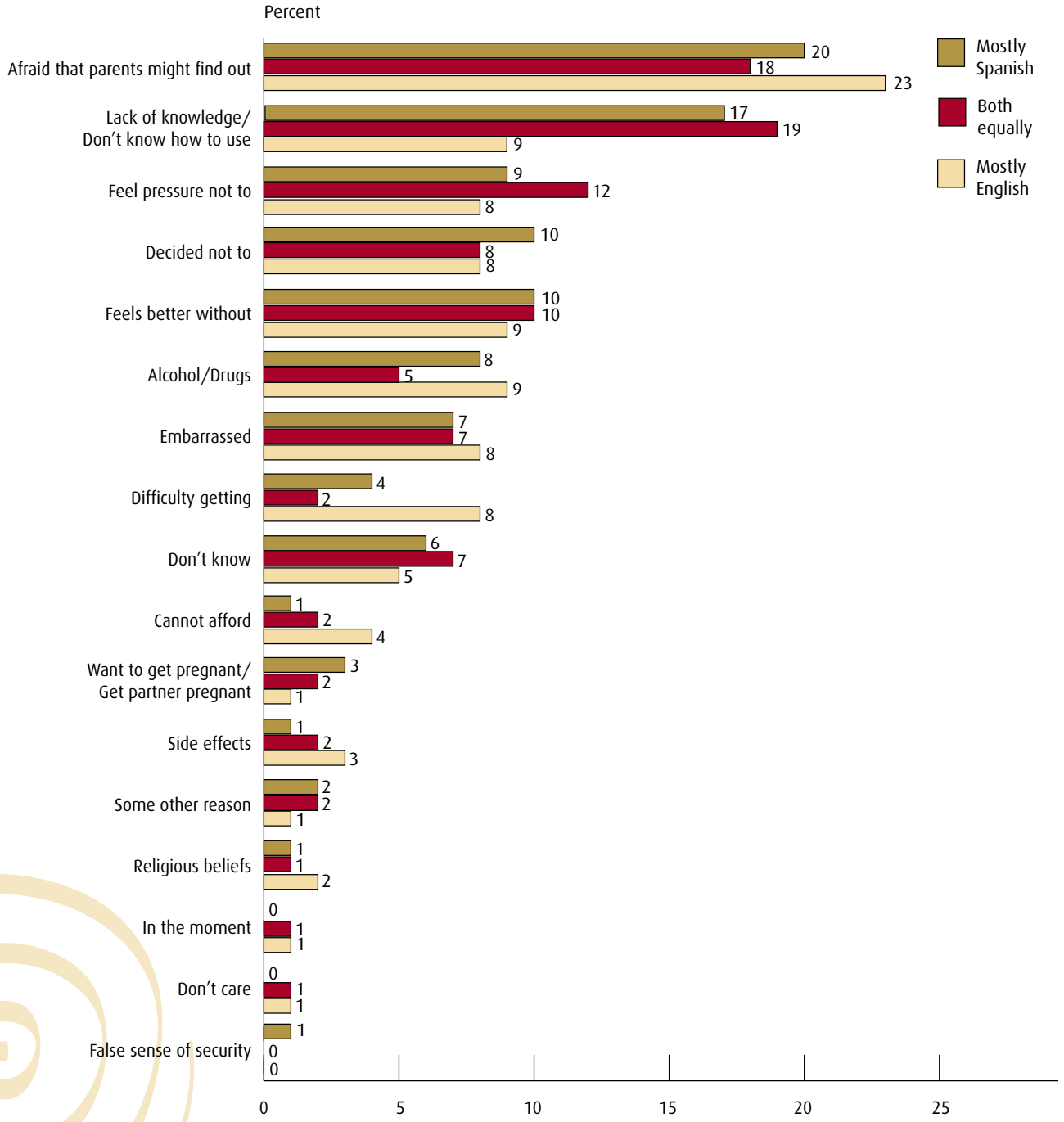


[13] See p.13 of *Voices Heard 2007* for more information.

"I think having sex to prove that you're a man is stupid. Why throw your life away? Wait until you get a good job and can support your family."
—Latino teen boy, Focus Group, San Antonio

from predominantly English-speaking homes (9%) to report lack of knowledge or education as the main reason teens don't use contraception when they have sex (Figure 27). This trend can probably be attributed in large part to cultural and language barriers in schools and healthcare systems (primarily for parents but also possibly for teens) as well as a relative scarcity of culturally appropriate informational resources.

Figure 27. Latino Teens by Language Spoken at Home: What do you think is the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection when they have sex?



If you have had sexual intercourse, do you wish you had waited longer?

More than seven in ten sexually experienced Latino teens (72%) say they wish they had waited longer to have sex (Figure 28). Latino teens are more likely than teens in general (60%, see *With One Voice 2007*) to say they wish they had waited longer before they began having sex.

Among Latina teen girls, more than eight in ten wish they had waited longer to have sex (Figure 29). Similarly, almost eight in ten younger Latino teen boys (12–14) agreed. About half of older Latino teen boys (15–18) say they wish they had waited longer before beginning to have sex. The difference between older boys and older girls might be attributable, at least in part, to the different messages about sex that Latino teens report hearing at home. These findings also indicate that younger teens are more likely than older teens to have sex before they are ready.

More needs to be done to help Latino teens resist pressure that might contribute to them having sex before they are ready. Parents and schools should be encouraged to educate young people about partner-negotiation and relationship skills in middle school or even earlier, and to highlight the simple fact that the majority of younger teens are not sexually active.

Do you think it is okay for teens to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older?

Almost six in ten Latino teens reported that they *do not* think it is okay for a teen to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older, (see *With One Voice 2007*). Compared to teens in general, Latino teens are slightly *more* likely to find it unacceptable for a teen to have a relationship with an older partner (Figure 30). This finding is somewhat counter-intuitive given that, according to a 2004 survey, more than one-third of Latina teens reported that their first

Figure 28. Latino Teens: If you have had sexual intercourse, do you with you had waited longer?

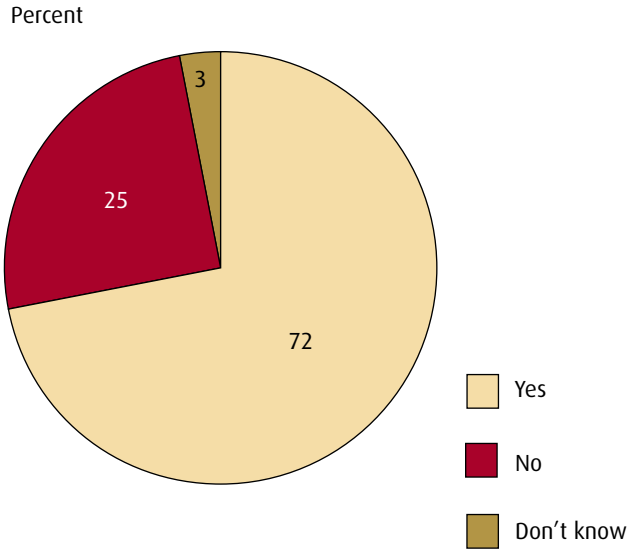
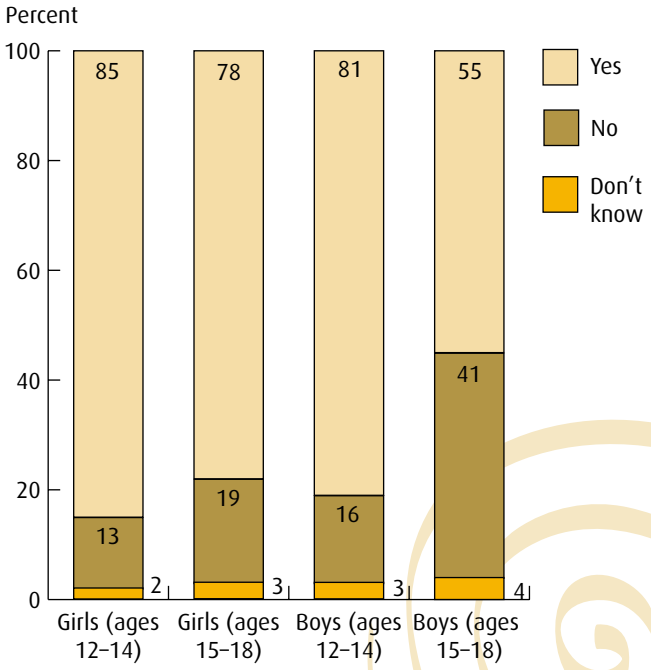


Figure 29. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: If you have had sexual intercourse, do you with you had waited longer?



male partner was four or more years older, compared to about one in five white or African-American teen girls (Abma, 2004).

Parents can play an important role in informing teens about the risks of dating someone older. For example, younger teens are even more likely than older teens to say parents most influence their decisions about sex. Latina teens in focus groups have mentioned that older family members sometimes encourage them to find an older partner, possibly because traditional Latino culture often views a man as a protector and provider for a woman, and Latino adults might believe that older partners are better able to fulfill that role for young Latinas. It is important for Latino parents to learn about the risks of relationships between teen girls and older partners, particularly as anecdotal evidence suggests that they might not be aware of the possible negative consequences associated with such an age difference.

While almost seven in ten younger Latino teens (ages 12–14) think it is not okay for teens to be in a relationship with a significantly older partner, fewer than half of older teens agree (Figure 31). While some of the risks of a relationship between a teen girl and an older man are more pronounced for younger girls—particularly the likelihood that first sex will be unwanted—many of these risks apply to teen girls of all ages (Manlove, 2006 and Kaestle, 2002). In other words, it is important to make sure older Latino teens and their parents are informed of the specific risks teen girls of all ages face when their first relationship is with someone three or more years older.

"An older guy with a baby, like the girl is fifteen or sixteen and the guy is nineteen or twenty, is VERY common."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

Figure 30. Latino Teens: Do you think it is okay for teens to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older?

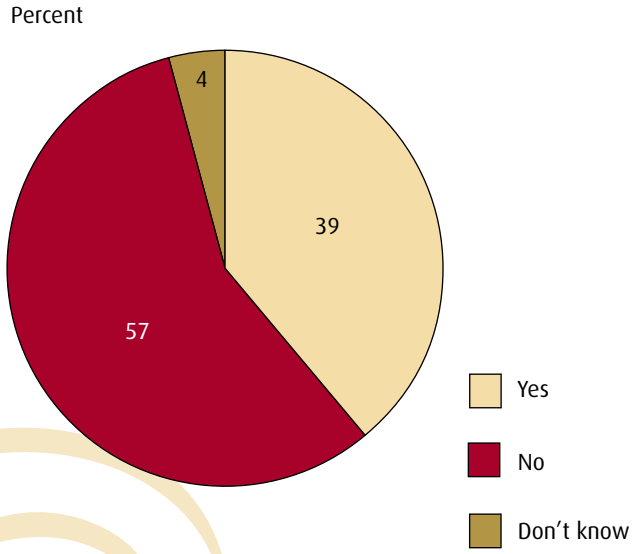
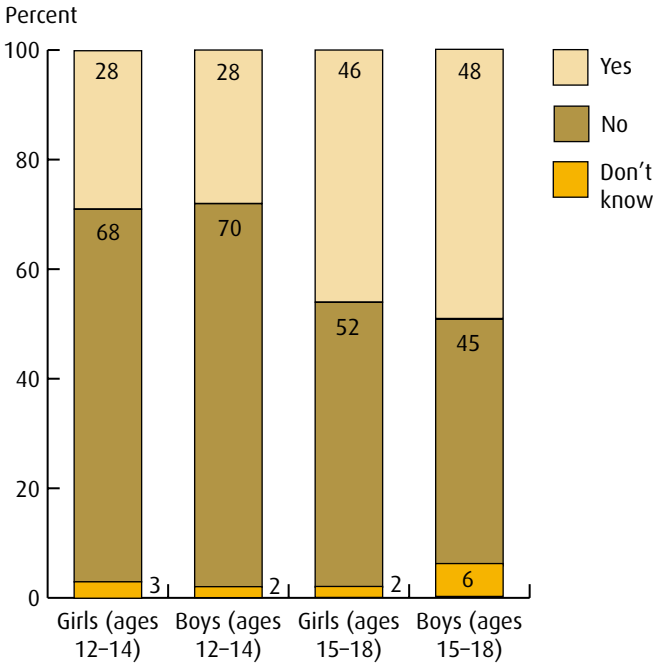


Figure 31. Latino Teens by Age and Gender: Do you think it is okay for teens to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older?



The majority of Latino teens regardless of language spoken at home do not think it's okay for a teen to be in a relationship with someone older (Figure 32). Teens from mostly Spanish-speaking homes and mostly English-speaking homes are more likely than teens from homes where both languages are spoken equally to say that it's okay for teens to be in a relationship with someone older.

"Marriage is better for kids. It's bad for them to see too many boyfriends. Children need a stable home."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: It is very important for a couple to be married before starting a family or having a child.

More than three-quarters of Latino teens (76%) agree that it is very important for a couple to be married before starting a family or having a child (Figure 33). There were no significant differences between any of the subgroups analyzed, with the possible exception of country of origin.[15] Given that Latino culture—like many cultures—values the benefits marriage provides for families and particularly for children, it is not surprising that many Latino teens disapprove of non-marital childbearing. The reality, however, is that more than eight in ten Latina teen mothers (81%) are unmarried when their first child is born (Martin, 2009), suggesting that many Latino teens are not achieving their own aspirations with regard to marriage and childbirth.

Figure 32. Latino Teens by Language Spoken at Home: Do you think it is okay for teens to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older?

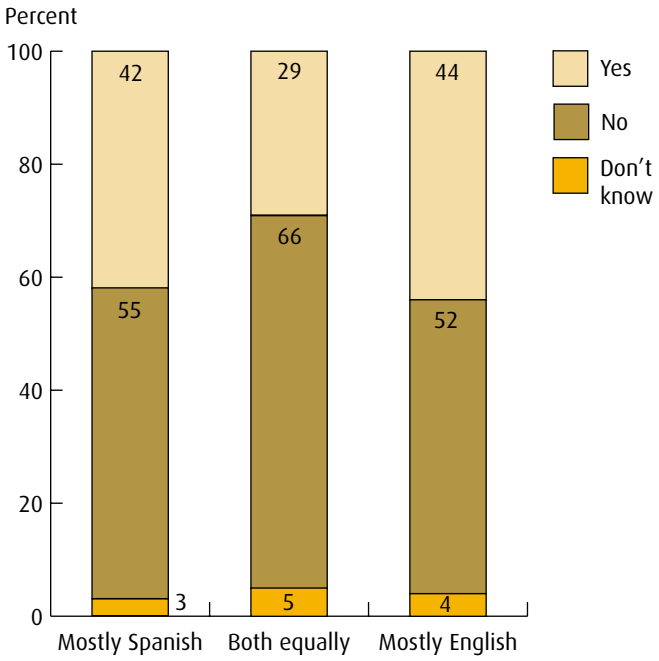
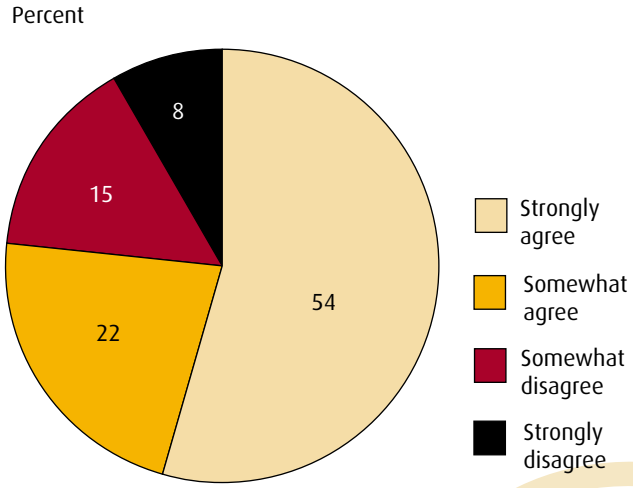


Figure 33. Latino Teens: It is very important for a couple to be married before starting a family or having a child.



[15] Data indicate some potential differences with respect to country of origin, but sample size limitations do not allow for comparison.

Now What?

Like most research, particularly on topics where existing research is limited, many of the findings from this survey give rise to a host of other questions warranting further study. It's clear that there's still much to be learned about the many factors that affect the beliefs and behavior of Latinos regarding teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and related issues. The fact that this survey found relatively few variations within the sample based on country of origin, language preference, and number of years in the United States suggests that health disparities between the Latino population and other racial and ethnic groups in the United States are influenced, in part, by other factors, such as socio-economic status or education, for example. On the other hand, the uniformity of the responses provides some valuable insights into the beliefs and attitudes of Latino teens and parents, upon which outreach and prevention efforts can build.

For instance, the vast majority of Latino teens aspire to graduate from college and have a promising career. Most Latino parents share those aspirations. Given this, it is important to frame the issue of teen pregnancy within the broader context of higher education and career opportunities. Latino teens clearly share many of the same motives for waiting to start a family as their non-Latino peers. However, high teen pregnancy rates among Latina teens and other factors such as lower socio-economic status, language difficulties, and cultural barriers make it imperative to provide targeted outreach and support to the Latino community.

Educating Latino teens and parents about the connection between teen pregnancy and critical social issues such as educational attainment and poverty can help provide motivation to prevent teen pregnancy. More importantly, Latino parents and teens need the tools and resources to realize their goals. Strengthening access to and engagement in healthcare and educational systems is an important place to start. In their efforts to provide support to Latino families, it is important for educators, service providers, and practitioners to keep in mind the communication and cultural barriers Latino parents and teens sometimes face not only in navigating these systems but also, in many cases, within their own families.

Latino teens and parents clearly want to talk about relationships, sex, and contraception, but parents may feel they lack the skills or the authority to start and/or continue effective conversations with their children on these important topics. Although most Latino parents would welcome more guidance and resources to help them have quality conversations with their children about sex and relationships, this survey suggests that relatively less educated parents or parents that speak only Spanish are likely to need extra support. Differences in level of acculturation or in nativity between parents and children, for example, may influence the balance of power within some Latino families and should be taken into account in outreach efforts. Parental resources should be available in both Spanish and English, using simple language to accommodate low levels of literacy. Parents with low levels of education and income often use a vocabulary that mixes Spanish and English and therefore tend to prefer bilingual materials so they can "flip" between Spanish and English. Some questions worth exploring: Where are Latino parents and teens getting their information and in what language? What is the language preference of the families being served? Are materials written in a clear, easily understandable way? Ultimately, more needs to be done to create and disseminate culturally-competent, language-appropriate materials and resources for Latino teens and parents.

Although this survey found more similarities than differences among the Latino subgroups examined, this

does not mean that a uniform approach should be taken to reach all Latino teens and parents regardless of geographic location, level of acculturation, and other socio-demographic factors. Youth service providers and community programs should, of course, tailor outreach and services to the population they serve. However, the findings *do* suggest that in spite of the diversity within the Latino community, there is common ground upon which organizations and communities can build programs and outreach efforts to address the high rates of teen pregnancy and, by extension, facilitate education, and reduce poverty.

"Maybe teens need positive role models and organizations that show us that we can succeed. But not all teens know about opportunities in their community."
—Latina teen girl, Focus Group, Los Angeles

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE:

Consejos a los padres: Para prevenir el embarazo en la adolescencia (2000)

Parent-Adolescent Communication about Sex in Latino Families: A Guide for Practitioners (2008)

Visit The National Campaign's Resources page (http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources) to order or download these and other publications. Ten Tips for Parents (2007)

Entre Parejas: An Exploration of Latino Perspectives Regarding Family Planning and Contraception (2006)

Redefining HIV/AIDS for Latinos (2006)

Download these publications from National Council of La Raza's publications page (http://www.nclr.org/section/publications/).

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The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) – the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States – works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations (CBOs), NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

Founded in 1968, NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization headquartered in Washington, DC. NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and has operations in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Antonio, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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