INTRODUCTION

Loving, supportive, nurturing parents are one of the strongest threads in the fabric of our communities. Raising our next generation is a task of enormous import and impact. Parents’ influence on their children, from infancy through adolescence, is more significant than any other. Studies, both national and in Minnesota, on adolescent attitudes about sexual decision making show that parents have the strongest influence on healthy outcomes for youth. See Figure 1.

Parent-child connectedness (PCC), a strong emotional bond between parent and child, is known in the public health world as a “super protector,” buffering adolescents from the many challenges and risks they face. Strong PCC protects against 33 negative adolescent outcomes such as unintended pregnancy; HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs); violence; depression; eating disorders; alcohol, tobacco and drug use; and poor academic achievement.

This report provides insight into the power of PCC. It also serves as a call to action for community leaders and institutions to develop community-wide strategies to foster PCC, creating new supports for parents and families.

AN ENVIRONMENT OF SUPPORT

Any parent recognizes parenthood as one of the most rewarding but also challenging responsibilities of a lifetime. For parents raising children in a community context that includes poverty, crime, and violence, the chores and squabbles of daily life are compounded by broader social influences such as economics, public policy, and infrastructure. An environment of solid community support may afford parents more opportunity to develop strong PCC in their families.

When the milestone of becoming a parent happens during the teen years, the challenge of parenting is even greater. Health outcomes for both young parents and the children they raise are compromised, in part because too early parenting and poverty are inextricably linked. We know that teen parents are less likely to finish high school or pursue higher education, making it more difficult to qualify for a well-paying job. The daughters of teen mothers are three times more likely to become teen mothers themselves (when compared with the daughters of mothers who were age 20-21) thus perpetuating the cycle of early childbearing and its link to poverty. When young parents have so much to manage, fostering PCC is difficult, and the protection it provides may be elusive. Young parents in poverty need community support most of all.

Top reason Minnesota teens are delaying intercourse: One or both of my parents would object. From the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey
WHAT IS PARENT-CHILD CONNECTEDNESS?

PCC is a condition characterized by the quality of the emotional bond between parents (or those with a parenting role) and their children, and by the degree to which this bond is both mutual and sustained over time. The actions leading to connectedness are different given children’s ages and their developmental needs and progress — connectedness between a parent and an infant looks different from connectedness between a parent and a fifteen-year-old daughter or son.

Parents must provide the basic physiological needs of their children: shelter, clothing, and food — the first of seven Key Parent Behaviors. In order to establish, maintain and increase PCC, families benefit when parents also:

- build and maintain trust.
- demonstrate love, care and affection.
- share activities with their children.
- prevent, negotiate and resolve family conflicts.
- establish and maintain structure.
- communicate effectively.

The result is a lasting bond between parent and child based on mutual respect, trust, love, and affection — all demonstrated in day-to-day interactions and expressed freely as both parent and child move through their relationship together.

The Sticky Hypothesis: Parental messages and modeling regarding health, values, and decision making are more likely to stick if there is a state of connectedness in the parent-child relationship. This “stickiness” contributes to the super-protective role PCC plays.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the super-protective nature of PCC, there is clear and compelling need to cultivate it throughout our communities. As stated in the Minnesota Student Survey Trends Report 2010:

Minnesota must continue to support intensive and comprehensive evidence-based prevention efforts that involve parents, communities, schools and public agencies working together to promote healthier behaviors by youth. Our state has made major investments in prevention programming that are now showing results. It is essential that current partnerships and coalitions be sustained and new ones created to ensure that existing effective practices and programs in school and community settings be sustained. These groups must continue to promote the understanding and use of a common framework for prevention.

Planned Parenthood recommends strategy development at multiple levels, following the guidance of the Spectrum of Prevention, put forward by the Prevention Institute. Organizational and community leaders have an opportunity to bring people together in order to understand the power of PCC and to strategize about what activities, projects, campaigns, or policies would be most effective. A multi-tiered approach will lead to robust support of PCC for all families.
Parents get a lot of well-intentioned advice. Many benefit greatly from individualized education that focuses on knowledge, skills, and healthy behaviors. To be sure, parents bear the bulk of responsibility for the daily welfare of their children. But there is a function for the larger community in fostering strong connectedness between parents and their children as well.

A 2004 Search Institute study, Building Strong Families, brings to light the commitment and challenges of individual parents and families. Many of them are low income, working hard at parenting and doing right by their children. The study calls on communities to step up and help support parents’ efforts.

Perhaps the more important message in this study is a call for the broader society to reflect on and rethink how it views and supports parents. Rather than merely blaming them when things go wrong (which they will sometimes), how can we support, encourage, and affirm parents? Instead of leaving them to their own devices, how can we be there for them as trusted friends and allies in the vital task of raising this society’s youngest generation to be healthy, caring, and responsible? The answer to these kinds of questions points toward creating communities, organizations, and systems that recognize strengths of parents, regardless of their family composition, cultural background, or other individual differences, and that understand that parenting is best done in the context of a supportive, engaged community.17

Minnesota is home to many experts and leaders who make valuable contributions to our shared public health. But we continue to have ample opportunity to improve adolescent health outcomes such as rates of pregnancy and STI/HIV infection. Since PCC is a strong protector against so many negative outcomes for young people, we must find ways to support it on multiple levels so that connectedness within families flourishes across our communities.

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<tr>
<th>Level of Spectrum</th>
<th>Planned Parenthood’s Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills</td>
<td>Encourage individuals to connect with experts (pediatricians, teachers, counselors, etc.) and take advantage of recommended resources on parenting – see insert.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting Community Education</td>
<td>Create ways for more parents and families to take advantage of parent-child focused community education opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educating Providers</td>
<td>Provide education and information on PCC and healthy youth development to school personnel, pediatricians, faith leaders, social workers, counselors, and other community providers and leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fostering Coalitions and Networks</td>
<td>Build awareness of and strengthen existing networks and coalitions for professionals and parents. Develop new relationships and networks among experts in the multiple fields of study devoted to healthy families and young people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing Organizational Practices</td>
<td>Encourage organizations to reach out to their communities to establish supportive relationships with parents and young people. Build a vision for all employers to offer a flexible work environment to support parent involvement in children’s activities and school life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influencing Policy and Legislation</td>
<td>Work toward age-appropriate, medically-accurate responsible sexuality education in schools that includes a parent engagement component.</td>
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PARENT-CHILD FOCUSED COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Planned Parenthood supports families by helping women and men make informed decisions about parenthood and by helping parents make healthy connections with their children through family-centered programming and resources. Programming is age-appropriate and culturally relevant.

For more information: www.ppmns.org/education Phone: 612-821-6198 Email: education@ppmns.org

Making the Connections

All-day retreats for daughters, ages 10-12, and their mothers or female mentors. Participants learn and play together while exploring puberty, healthy sexuality, and family communication and connection. Offered in English, Spanish and Hmong.

Building Foundations

All-day retreats for sons, ages 10-12, and their mothers or female mentors. Activities are designed to support positive communication about puberty and sexuality and to emphasize the value of building healthy relationships.

PASE

Interactive forums where parents explore their role as the primary sexuality educator of their children. Groups discuss parenting opportunities and challenges and learn about typical developmental stages.

Let’s Eat, Let’s Talk…
Let’s see where it takes us!

The Let’s Talk Tablemat™ (in English or Spanish) is a tool to help get mealtime conversations started. Like PCC, regularly shared family meals protect against many adverse health outcomes for young people.18

ENDNOTES


3 Ibid. 1.


5 Ibid. p. 55.


10 Ibid. 4. p. 55.


12 Ibid. 4. p. 28.


17 Ibid. 6.

Training for the important role of being a parent happens on the job. Our children are fascinating, wonderful, and challenging. Just as we figure out how to help them along, they make another developmental leap and we find ourselves in a whole new dynamic. Maintaining connection through these changes is a good goal. Fortunately, there are great resources available. Here are a few:

**Child and Adolescent Development**

If we understand what developmental tasks children and adolescents are working on, we can support them more successfully. **Advocates for Youth** provides a clear and insightful online resource. Information about growth and development includes typical physical, cognitive, sexual, and emotional stages.

**Advocates for Youth Parents’ Sex Ed Center:** [www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home)

**Five Core Needs**

In her book *Sex and Sensibility, the Thinking Parent’s Guide to Talking Sense About Sex*, Deborah Roffman describes five core needs for all the children and adolescents filling our families. Though her context is sexuality education, keeping these needs in mind is helpful whatever the parenting issue at hand:

- Affirmation
- Information Giving
- Values Clarification
- Limit Setting
- Anticipatory Guidance

**Emotional Bank Account**

Take a moment to think about your relationship with your parent(s) or other important adults in your life growing up. Think specifically about two different times in one or separate relationships:

1. First, when your parent or another important adult did or said something that made you feel good about the relationship.
2. Second, when your parent or another important adult did or said something that made you feel disappointed and less connected to him or her.

The first experience – of feeling good – is like making a deposit in an emotional bank account. The second is like a withdrawal from the account. It is often due to conflict and results in a lessened sense of connection.

Allow your memories and reflections to help inform how you respond to your own children. It is easier to maintain a feeling of connection when the accumulated “balance” in an emotional bank account is positive over time. When you do something to help someone else feel valued and understood, you make a deposit in his or her account. Conflict (which happens in all families and relationships) may cause a relationship to feel less positive, less connected. Working to maintain a positive balance over time supports feelings of closeness and connection.

This concept and activity are adapted from Bean, S., Rolleri, L. and Wilson, P. (2006): *Parent-Child Connectedness: New Interventions for Teen Pregnancy Prevention*. Santa Cruz, CA; **ETR Associates**

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**Promoting Parent-Child Connectedness in Your Family**

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**Women’s Health Matters**
Giving the Time of Day

The time we spend with our children lets them know we value them — they feel important and esteemed. Consider ways to give your children time. Here are a few examples:

- Take the time to listen in order to truly understand what your child is saying. What is the question behind his or her words? Is he/she concerned about him/herself, or a friend, or something heard at school? Intentionally single-task, focusing on your child in order to truly hear.
- Spend time enjoying entertainment together. Having fun together contributes enormously to connectedness.
- Spend time together that is not necessarily productive, that has no agenda or purpose. An intentional pause is good for parents and good for children. It may result in some unexpected but valuable shared experience.
- Eat together as a family. Talk about anything, everything, or nothing. Shared family meals contribute to connectedness.

Ways to Connect – resources here in Minnesota and through the internet

**Advocates for Youth — There’s No Place Like Home for Sex Education**
This website provides guidance in sharing important and meaningful conversations about values and beliefs. [www.advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/article](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/article)

**ECFE – Early Childhood Family Education, Building Blocks for Family & School Success**
Play and connect with your child, from birth through kindergarten-age, in a variety of groups. Start early friendships for you and your child to last through the school years. [www.ecfe.info](http://www.ecfe.info)

**Parent Further**
An online community for parents supported by Minneapolis-based Search Institute. Their goal is to help you raise caring, healthy, responsible, successful kids. [www.parentfurther.com](http://www.parentfurther.com)

**Planned Parenthood Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota**
Community education, including programs focused on parent-child connectedness: [www.ppmns.org/education](http://www.ppmns.org/education) education@ppmns.org or 612-821-6198

**Shoulder to Shoulder**
A Minnesota-based organization supporting parents (and other caring adults) of teens. Their website is full of practical, evidence-based information and tools. [www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org](http://www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org)

**Teenwise Minnesota – the source on adolescent sexual health and parenting (formerly MOAPP)***
Resources for parents, teens, educators, health care providers, youth workers, media professionals and policy makers. [www.teenwisemn.org](http://www.teenwisemn.org)

Your local library is a great resource!

**Books for you**
Doherty, William J. *Take Back Your Kids, Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times*
Walsh, David. *NO, Why Kids – of All Ages – Need to Hear It, and Ways Parents Can Say It*
Wilson, Pamela M. *When Sex Is the Subject, Attitudes and Answers for Young Children*

**Books to share with your children**
The following titles are authored by Robie H. Harris and illustrated by Michael Emberley:
For ages 4 & up – *It's Not the Stork, A Book about Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends*
For ages 7 & up – *It's So Amazing, A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families*
For ages 10 & up – *It’s Perfectly Normal, Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*