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Is Teen Sex Bad?

Americans and Western Europeans Don't Agree on What's Normal and Acceptable. But Many Health Experts Do

By Elizabeth Agnvall

Special to The Washington Post
Tuesday, May 16, 2006; Page HE01

In our bicultural household -- I am American, my husband is Swedish -- we are trying to raise our children with the language, cultures and values of both countries. In most cases this isn't difficult. In one area, however, our values differ widely: My husband, reflecting the predominant view in Sweden and much of Western Europe, thinks sex is a normal part of adolescent development. Like many in this country, I disagree, believing it's better for teens to wait -- if not until marriage, at least until they are in an adult, loving relationship.

As a health journalist, I wondered if one way of thinking is demonstrably healthier, physically and psychologically. I resolved to find out.

Among the findings that surprised me: Although prevalent attitudes on teen sex differ in Western Europe and the United States, the views of leading researchers and doctors on both sides of the Atlantic do not. Their opinions lean much closer to the European model. They tend to agree that the mixed message America sends to teens about sex -- authorities say "don't" while mass media screams "What are you waiting for?"-- endanger our children.

The outcome? Levels of teen sexual activity look remarkably similar here and abroad, but U.S. [rates](#) of teen pregnancy, childbirth, abortion and [sexually transmitted diseases](#) are among the highest of all industrialized nations, despite recent decreases. Read brief accounts of how [Western European](#) and [American](#) perspectives compare.

SPECIAL REPORT



Teens and Sex

Americans and Northern Europeans don't agree on what's normal and acceptable. But researchers in Europe and the U.S. agree America is sending mixed messages.

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