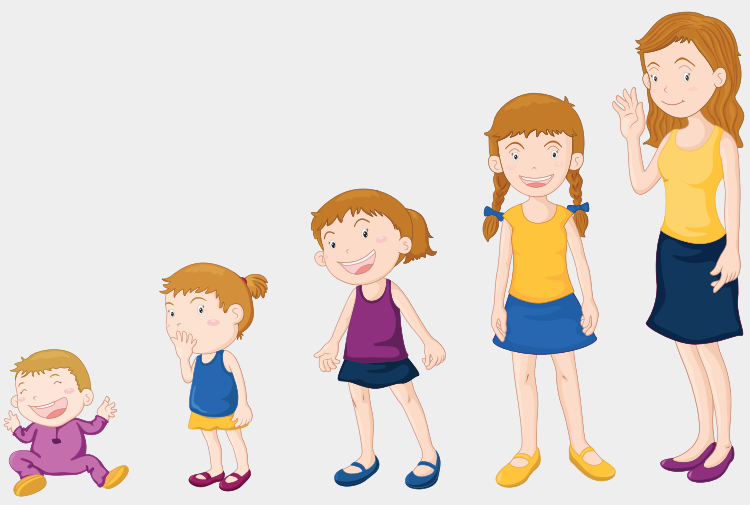
5 Facts: How Adolescent Development Relates to Teen Pregnancy

Understanding the physical, cognitive, and interpersonal changes that occur during adolescence can inform program providers who serve young people – and can help them understand how these changes relate to teen pregnancy.

FACT 1

Adolescence is marked by fast and drastic physical changes second only in magnitude to infancy.



- Physical changes during adolescence include changes to primary sexual characteristics —features directly related to reproduction (e.g., the onset of menstruation)—and changes to secondary sexual characteristics that distinguish adult males from adult females (e.g., body hair, deepening voices, and breast development).
- Changes in the body lead to changes in desires, body image, and how teens are perceived by others. These changes impact decisions about sexual activity that can increase the risk of teen pregnancy.

FACT 2

There is a wide span of ages during which sexual maturation begins for most adolescents. Very early maturation is a risk factor for teen pregnancy.

- For many girls, maturation begins between 10 and 14. For many boys, it starts between 12 and 16.
- Environmental influences (e.g., poor nutrition, exposure to stress, etc.) can lead to early or delayed maturation.

FACT 3

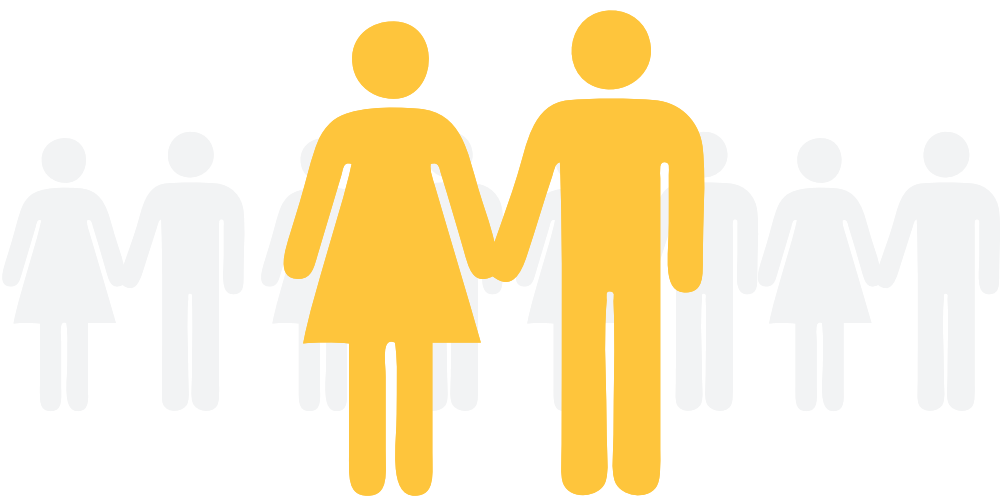
Just like adolescent bodies, adolescent brains are still growing and changing, which can help explain why some adolescents engage in risky sexual behavior.

- Considerable changes occur in the brain during adolescence, improving adolescents' abilities to process information, control emotions, form ideas and strategies, and control impulses. These emerging abilities are critical to making informed choices about delaying sexual activity, using contraception and, ultimately, avoiding teen pregnancy.
- Complex decision-making skills and an ability to think about the future do not fully form until early adulthood, leaving adolescents vulnerable to making risky, in-the-moment decisions about sexual intercourse and contraception.

FACT 4

Parents and caring adults never stop being important, but it's also important for adolescents to explore peer and romantic relationships.

- Adolescence is a time of increasing autonomy and reliance on peer groups. Adolescents spend double the time with friends as they do with their parents. Having safe and supportive peer groups can serve as a protective factor against teen pregnancy.
- Many people begin dating in adolescence, and roughly half have sexual intercourse in the high school years.
- Healthy romantic relationships can set the stage for making safe and healthy decisions surrounding sexual activity and contraception, but initiating sexual intercourse during adolescence can also lead to teen pregnancy and STDs!



FACT 5

Adolescence is not one-size-fits-all!

- U.S. adolescents are an increasingly diverse group. Different subpopulations and cultures have different expectations for adolescents, including expectations surrounding roles and responsibilities and expectations surrounding relationships and family formation.
- There have recently been dramatic declines in teen pregnancy in the U.S., especially among racial and ethnic minorities, but there's still a need to eliminate disparities in teen pregnancy and sexual health and to ensure health equity among:
  - vulnerable youth, like youth in juvenile justice and residential treatment programs;
  - hard-to-reach youth, such as runaway and homeless youth and out-of-school youth; and
  - other groups of youth that are diverse (in language, urbanicity, sexual orientation, disability status, socioeconomic status, etc.).

For more resources, check out the TPP Resource Center at http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy.