

Interview with Sarah Brown,
Director National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
by Tony Norris

Sarah Brown is the Director of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a private non-profit initiative organized in 1996 to reduce the teenage pregnancy rate by one-third by 2005. She holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from Stanford University and the University of North Carolina. Before co-founding the National Campaign with Isabel Sawhill, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, she was a senior study director at the Institute of Medicine (a component of the National Academy of Sciences).



Brown has received numerous awards, including the Institute of Medicine's Cecil Award for Excellence in Research, the John MacQueen Award for Excellence in Maternal and Child Health from the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, the Harriet Hylton Barr Distinguished Service Award from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Martha May Elliot Award of the American Public Health Association, and the Spirit of Service Award from the National Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention.

Norris: Can you tell us about your background? How did you get involved in teen pregnancy prevention?

Brown: As a general matter I think it's safe to say that I have been interested in maternal and child health all of my adult life. Just before becoming Director at the National Campaign, I was a senior study director at the Institute of Medicine — part of the National Academy of Sciences. One of the major projects I worked on while at IOM was a study on unintended pregnancy, resulting in the report, *The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families*. Prior to that, I worked on other related projects including health care reform, substance abuse among pregnant women, access to prenatal care, and preventing low birthweight as a means of reducing infant mortality.

It's also true that when I took the job as National Campaign Director I had three teenage daughters at home. That may be the real reason why I got involved in the teen pregnancy prevention business.

Norris: What was the impetus for the National Campaign?

Brown: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy was organized in 1996 by a diverse group of individuals who had concluded that the problem of teen pregnancy was not receiving the intense national focus that it deserved. In particular, there was good evidence that too few Americans understood the central role that teen pregnancy plays in child poverty, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and welfare dependency, and that there was, therefore, merit in both raising the profile of this problem and in pushing hard for solutions. At its first meeting, the Campaign's Board set a numerical goal for the new organization: to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

Norris: What is the mission and role of the National Campaign?

Brown: Quite simply, the mission of the National Campaign is to improve the well being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign has been built on the core idea that preventing teen pregnancy is an effective, targeted way to reduce child poverty and many of the related problems afflicting children in the United States. Although there may be many ways to ameliorate child poverty, one of the most effective and easily understood is to reduce the number of too-early pregnancies and births.



The role of the National Campaign is, we believe, reflected in our strategies. The Campaign has adopted a two-part strategy to reach our goal of a one-third reduction in the rate of teen pregnancy: (1) build a more coordinated and effective grassroots movement, and (2) influence cultural values and messages by working with the entertainment media and such other influential social sectors as faith communities

The first strategy — building a grassroots movement — involves working with people in states and communities. We provide research and data that they can use in their programs or coalitions, and we also offer direct technical assistance through national conference calls, site visits, regional meetings, and access to our Resource Bureau, which includes experts in 26 different subject areas related to teen pregnancy. Our website is another source of extensive information and support to practitioners in states and communities. The demand for the support we offer has grown exponentially in our short life, probably because we provide not only good materials but also some new ideas and approaches, such as respect for differing opinions, a bipartisan approach to tough issues, and a crisp focus on parents and adults, as well as on boys and men, not just teen girls.

The second strategy — influencing cultural values and messages — is embodied principally in our work with the entertainment media as well as some activities with faith leaders. Simply put, it is fine to work with states and communities to make their efforts better — more research-based, more media savvy, more tolerant of differing views, and more diverse in the remedies offered. But doing so will be a hollow exercise if the entire culture, especially popular teen culture, is sending kids the message that getting pregnant at a young age is no big deal, that having sex “early and often” is just fine, that contraception is not all that important, that refraining from sex is square and unrealistic, and that parents can’t do anything about their children’s sexual attitudes and behavior. The fact is that we have to work at both levels — state/local as well as popular culture — and the Campaign strives to do so in an integrated fashion. Although the media alone cannot solve the problem of teen pregnancy, we know that we cannot solve it without them.

Norris: I understand that the National Campaign is preparing a report on repeat births to teen mothers? What prompted the research? What is the methodology and where is it likely to go?

Brown: When it comes to research and best practices, we are always trying to fill in the gaps. Since not that much is known about efforts to prevent repeat and higher-order births to teen mothers, we thought this topic was particularly appropriate for additional research. The monograph will analyze published and unpublished reports of the results of programs that have tried to delay second pregnancies and births among women under the age of twenty, it will discuss why subsequent pregnancies among young women are a significant problem, and it will have suggestions for program approaches and additional research.

Norris: President Bush is calling for more funding for abstinence-only programming. Critics of abstinence-only programming say that this is a mistake, that comprehensive programming, which includes frank discussion of contraception, is necessary to reduce adolescent pregnancy. What kind of scenario do you predict on Capitol Hill regarding the abstinence-only funding?

Brown: Having lived in Washington, DC for a number of years, I long ago gave up the practice of political prognostication. So I won't try to predict what will happen on Capitol Hill.

With respect to the abstinence education issue, the Campaign believes abstinence is the first and best choice for teens and recognizes the value in having some federal funding for strategies that focus on abstinence. Among other things, this funding can be seen as a way to balance a popular culture that is hypersexualized and presents too little about sexual responsibility and consequences. Having said this, we also believe funding needs to be made more flexible to allow states and communities to design approaches that are responsive to community and family values and that can be effectively administered in the context of other state and local strategies and funding. It is also important to see the abstinence education funding in the broader context of other funding available to prevent teen pregnancy. All of this, and public opinion, argues for what might be called an "abstinence first" approach when one considers the spectrum of funding, messages, and programs. Abstinence is the first and best choice for teens, but young people also need information about and access to contraception to protect those who continue to be sexually active – or those who are not able to remain abstinent – from pregnancy and disease.

Norris: What is the Campaign doing to recognize teen pregnancy prevention month/day?

Brown: The Campaign is trying something new and exciting this year, with the first ever National Day to Prevent Teen Pregnancy which was held on May 8th. The primary activity for the National Day is for teens to take a fun, interactive, confidential, online quiz at our website — www.teenpregnancy.org. I know what you're thinking, what teen in this country would voluntarily agree to take a quiz? Rest assured, unlike most quizzes teens have to take, this one is based entirely on a series of scenarios and storylines that most teens will find familiar and that will challenge them to choose a course of action in various challenging sexual situations.

We encourage teens everywhere — as well as parents of teens and adults who work directly with teens — to log on and take the quiz, any time between May 8th and the end of the month. It will be fun, it will be informative, and, hopefully, it will help teens to stop and think about teen pregnancy in a very personal way. Too many teens still think, "it can't happen to me." The National Day quiz provides a concrete activity to help young people understand that it can happen to them.

We are also quite excited about the level of support that the National Day has garnered. In addition to National Day founding partners Teen People magazine and Teen People Online, we are absolutely delighted that over 80 prominent national organizations, media outlets, websites, businesses, membership associations, and youth groups have signed on as official National Day partners. The list seems endless: the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the Child Welfare League of America, Columbia TriStar Television, Jack and Jill of America, gurl.com, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Educational Association and the National 4-H Council, to name just a few.

Many have asked us why we decided to do an online activity. The reason is really quite simple: that's where teens are. Consider this: fully 73 percent of young people aged 12-17 are online. Moreover, when they are online, young people are often surfing for health information.

Norris: The National Campaign uses an interesting strategy – Structured Community Dialogues – that brings together community leaders with differing points of view to try to find common ground. What have you learned or gained through the use of this strategy?

Brown: It is really critical that we reduce the conflict that surrounds efforts to reduce teen pregnancy. Needless to say, because it touches on topics most of us hold closely — family, values, faith, sex, etc — preventing teen pregnancy engenders very strong opinions and emotions. Our differences on matters of teen sexual activity and pregnancy are deep and the only sensible alternative to arguments and stalemate is frank and respectful dialogue.

I think the primary lesson from these Structured Community Dialogues, and from the Campaign's experiences generally over the past seven years, is the understanding that agreement on the best overall strategy to prevent teen pregnancy is not absolutely necessary — only that citizens and leaders take real, serious, and committed action to help teens navigate adolescence and make it a time for education and growing-up, not pregnancy and parenthood.

Many communities and state-level coalitions spent extraordinary amounts of time trying to develop an integrated plan to prevent teen pregnancy — a plan that has all parts working together in perfect harmony, where disagreements are resolved, and where everybody is on the same page. When this is possible, it certainly can be useful. However, given the great and growing diversity of this country, and the strong feelings about teen sexual activity, it seems unrealistic to expect that communities, let alone states, will be able to develop comprehensive teen pregnancy prevention plans that are strong and productive. It seems to me, when it comes to preventing teen pregnancy, messy portfolios are okay. That is, progress can be made if we all “tend to our own gardens” and spend less time trying to convince others that their efforts and/or views are misguided. Abstinence programs can work alongside more comprehensive programs. Youth development interventions can work in the same community as religiously based interventions. These “uncoordinated” activities are okay, particularly if the alternative is doing nothing much at all.

Norris: When you view the state of teen pregnancy prevention efforts today, what do you find encouraging? Discouraging?

Brown: When it comes to preventing teen pregnancy, this nation has a lot to celebrate. Teen pregnancy and birth rates have been declining for the better part of the decade, in all states, and among all ethnic groups. That's very encouraging. Despite these impressive gains, however, the United States is still first where we should be last — leading the industrialized world in adolescent pregnancies. It is still the case that four out of ten young women in this country get pregnant at least once by age 20. Not so encouraging.

I'm also encouraged by the fact that we have increasing amounts of robust evidence about what programs work to prevent teen pregnancy. Up until quite recently, we simply did not have a lot of quality science to help guide our efforts. That is changing and I'm quite encouraged that communities have a wide variety of interventions from which to choose that can make a difference in delaying the onset of sex and preventing too-early pregnancy and parenthood.

As we already discussed, I continue to be discouraged that so many conversations and efforts about preventing teen pregnancy disintegrate into acrimonious ideological wrangling over “abstinence versus contraception.” This is not an either/or proposition — we need more of both. The arguments over abstinence and contraception are a recipe for stalemate and they obscure the more critical issue of motivation. Teens with do neither — either abstain from sex or use contraception — unless they are motivated to do so. Advocates on both sides of this topic often assume that teens are already highly motivated to prevent teen pregnancy and that the only real issue is deciding the best means to help them do what they already want to do. We must fight a two-front battle that stresses abstinence as the first and best choice for school-age teens and encourages better contraceptive use among sexually active youth. But more attention needs to be paid to the first step of all: motivating teens to choose actively not to become pregnant or cause a pregnancy. Simply put, too many teens still think, “it won't happen to me.”

Norris: What do you see as the Campaign's successes and accomplishments?

Brown: I'm very proud of the efforts of the National Campaign but the real credit for declining rates of teen pregnancy and birth belongs to teens themselves. After all they are the ones who are making increasingly responsible decisions about too-early pregnancy and parenthood.

But I can't help but to brag a bit about the Campaign. The Campaign is now a respected, stable, and influential organization. A diverse 25-member Board — including the CEOs of Procter & Gamble and General Mills, Judy Woodruff of CNN, Sister Mary Rose McGeady of Covenant House, and others — provides overall direction to the organization. This governing group is assisted by seven advisory committees that work directly with the Board and with the 23-member staff. These seven groups include task forces on Effective Programs and Research, State and Local Action, Religion and Public Values, and Media, along with bipartisan advisory panels in both the House and Senate, and a Youth Leadership Team. Last year we distributed over 600,000 publications, our website (www.teenpregnancy.org) averages close to 200,000 visitors each month, we interact with leaders and coalitions in all 50 states who are working hard to reduce teen pregnancy, and our database of individuals actively interested in the Campaign exceeds 33,000. Our numerous media partners represent some of the most influential forces in entertainment programming for teens and their parents, and, with their help, we have reached audiences totaling nearly 250 million people with various messages about preventing teen pregnancy. And that, in my humble opinion, just scratches the surface.

Norris: We understand that you will be convening a Round Table Discussion in June that includes one of Connecticut's teen pregnancy prevention programs. Can you tell us more about that?

Brown: Despite nationwide decline in teen pregnancy and birth rates, there are still “pockets without progress” in states and communities where rates are high or even increasing. The upcoming roundtable will explore in depth what we know about these pockets and the implications for teen pregnancy prevention programs. We will focus specifically on urban areas at this meeting. The goal is to turn the attention of teen pregnancy prevention leaders and policymakers to areas where the news about teen pregnancy may not be especially good, and to provide information on strategies that may be effective in bringing high-rate urban areas more in line with national trends.

We're delighted that RoseAnne Bilodeau, the Executive Director of the Pathways/Senderos program in New Britain, CT will be one of the featured panelists at the meeting. The terrific work they're doing in the program was first brought to our attention through Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-CT), a valued member of the National Campaign's bi-partisan House Advisory Panel.

Norris: What are the Campaign's future goals and plans?

Brown: When the Campaign was founded in 1996, we established a clear goal for the organization: reduce the teen pregnancy rate in this country by one-third by the year 2005. As a nation we have made steady and encouraging progress toward this goal. Of course, in the future, we will be doing all we can reach the goal we set out for ourselves. As we move forward we will, for the most part, continue to do what we have been doing all along, trying to change the national conversation about teen sex and pregnancy; working to change social norms that govern these issues; assist those working on the state and local level to make their efforts better and more strategic; provide the latest research; work to engage teens directly; partner with major media outlets; etc. In the end, I think one of the hallmarks of the Campaign is that we have always tried to find and encourage new and innovative approaches to reducing adolescent pregnancy and will continue to do so in the future.