The publication of the article by Manlove and her colleagues [1] about condom use and consistency among male teenagers in the United States is particularly timely. Recent reports of the plateauing and possible reversal of what had been a remarkable improvement of teen sexual risk taking behavior across the last 2 decades suggests that the field needs to renew its vigilance in promoting safer behaviors. The most recent reports from the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted in high schools around the country suggest no change in the share of teens who are sexually experienced and no change in the proportion using a condom at last intercourse [2]. Further, for the first time in 15 years the National Center for Health Statistics recently reported an increase in birth rates among teenagers ages 15 to 19 [3]. These disturbing statistics may mean that we have become too complacent about expecting teenagers to do the right thing (a reference to my last editorial in this journal) [4]. The article published in this issue examines data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, and provides valuable information about the factors associated with higher rates of condom use among male teenagers. As such, the findings provide some guidance about potential strategies that might put us back on the right track as teenagers better protect themselves from the risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies.

What are these strategies? The analyses provide tantalizing evidence that male teenagers who report receiving sex education in school also report higher levels of condom use. Whether the sex education includes information about contraception and abstinence or one of these topics only does not seem to make a difference. It is the absence of information about any of these topics that is associated with lower condom use. As such, the findings provide some guidance about potential strategies that might put us back on the right track as teenagers better protect themselves from the risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies.

How is the United States doing in comparison to other developed countries in terms of condom use among teenagers? A recent comparison of 2002 data from many countries indicates that condoms use at last intercourse among sexually active 15-year-old students varies considerably. In Sweden, 44% used a condom at last intercourse in 2002, and in France, the proportion was 59%, for example. Of course, there are also substantial differences among countries in the share of 15-year-old students who are sexually experienced [6]. Although the United States was not included in this comparison, data from a closely comparable year and age cohort (the 2003 YRBS for ninth graders) indicate much higher levels of...
condom use here in the United States, where 69% of sexually active ninth graders used a condom the last time they had sex [7]. Still, with the reproductive health indicators for teenagers appearing to move in the wrong direction for the first time in more than a decade, it is time to focus our attention on doing better. More, not fewer, health professionals and educators should emphasize that sexual intercourse should only occur when condoms are used. Teens need be trained to discuss condoms with their partners and to use them correctly and consistently.

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References