The Impact of Child Maltreatment, Interpersonal, and Family Violence on Adolescent Pregnancy

As many as two-thirds of young women who become pregnant are sexually and/or physically abused at some point in their lives—whether as children, in their current relationships, or both—according to several studies. A substantial number (between 25 and 60 percent) of adolescent mothers are in violent, abusive, or coercive relationships just before, during, and/or after their pregnancy.

Some young women become pregnant directly because of interpersonal violence, such as incest, sexual abuse, or through violence that includes contraceptive sabotage. Others become pregnant indirectly through circumstances or conditions associated with prior sexual or physical abuse. For example, abused children may remain in an unsafe living situation where they are likely to be exposed to additional sexual advances. They may experience emotional or psychological damage that makes them especially vulnerable to coercive or violent partners when they leave home. As adolescents, they are more likely to be exposed to additional sexual advances. As well, in many places in the world, such victimization holds the social stigma of being associated with homosexual behavior.

The Male Experience of Child Maltreatment, Interpersonal, and Family Violence

Men have reported their experiences of maltreatment before the age of 18 at alarming rates.

A troubling aspect of the male experience of child maltreatment and family violence is that males survivors tend to report their victimization less frequently than females. Male survivors may interpret their experiences of maltreatment as a failure to protect themselves and reporting it as a public admission of this failure. As well, in many places in the world, such stigmatization holds the social stigma of being associated with homosexual behavior.

Healthy Teen Network is a national membership organization devoted to making a difference in the lives of teens and young families. Healthy Teen Network was founded on the belief that youth can make responsible decisions about their sexuality and reproductive health when they have complete, accurate, and culturally relevant information, skills, resources, and support. Healthy Teen Network serves as a leader, a national voice, and a comprehensive educational resource to professionals working in the area of adolescent reproductive health—specifically teen pregnancy prevention, teen pregnancy, teen parenting, and related issues.
Implications for Research
Research confirms that some young survivors of child maltreatment and family violence are at risk for adverse outcomes including: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development delays; repeat victimization; and chronic physical and mental health conditions. Recognizing that children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and/or hospitalization are at risk for adverse outcomes, the field must support the implementation of policies and procedures that address the harm they have experienced. These initiatives should be guided by the voices of young survivors and informed by the latest research and evidence.

Widening Our Lens: A Comprehensive Strategy to Address the Impact of Child Maltreatment, Interpersonal, and Family Violence on Youth
Healthy Teen Network believes that addressing the components laid out in this comprehensive strategy, Widening Our Lens, organizations, agencies, and concerned individuals will be able to reduce the adverse effects of exposure to child maltreatment and interpersonal and family violence on the sexual, reproductive, and parenting behaviors of young men and women and help ensure the development of healthy relationships among all youth.

Action Steps
Increase Knowledge about the Issue
- Educators, professionals about the prevalence and extent of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence against young men and women.

Short Term Outcomes
- Professionals gain awareness and knowledge about the issue of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence against young men and women.
- Teenagers gain awareness of common norms around gender and youth sexuality.
- Resources and trainings are made available.

Long Term Outcomes
- Organizations and agencies effectively collaborate to promote education around the issue of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence against young men and women.
- Media use messages to frame the issue of young survivors of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence within a public health framework.
- Public accepts a new understanding of the issue around young survivors of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence.

Impacts
- Survivors are more likely to report any exposure to child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence to the appropriate authorities.
- Survivors receive treatment services to deal with their experiences of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence.
- Survivors seek out and receive sexual and reproductive health and supportive parenting services.

If we are ever to rid our society of child maltreatment, interpersonal and family violence, we must know about it, talk about it, promote community understanding about it, join with other local, state and national advocates, and take action. Let’s work together and use our combined voice to demand change.

Conclusion
There is much to be done to change the way society views and deals with young survivors of violence. Professionals and volunteers in the field must be sensitive to this change in thinking about child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence. The development of a national dialogue, from the diagnosis, through intervention and treatment, and manage the implications of such an approach among youth. It is only with such a comprehensive public health approach that we can begin to break the cycle of child maltreatment, interpersonal, and family violence and the damage to society that accompanies these tragic events.

Let each of us heed this call to action and strive to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to feel accepted and supported, to reach his or her potential, and to live a full, healthy, and rewarding life — for we are all affected.