

# Viewers' family background affects how they react to MTV shows *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*

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Two popular MTV programs about teenage pregnancy -- "*16 and Pregnant*" and "*Teen Mom*" -- were met with national debate. Critics said the shows glamorized teenage pregnancy, while supporters said they discouraged it.

A new study by an Indiana University professor suggests they're both right.

The study, which will appear in the journal [Sexuality & Culture](#), focused on female students because of the high dropout rate associated with pregnancy among this demographic.

When the programs were under development, MTV sought the consultation of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"The programs were developed to show young women how difficult it is to be a teen mom," said the lead author, Paul Wright, an assistant professor of telecommunications in the IU College of Arts and Sciences. "They were intended to be program-length public service announcements discouraging teen pregnancy.

"But critics said the programs sent mixed messages. My viewing of the programs suggested the same," Wright said. "On one hand, the programs

do show many of the difficulties teen mothers face. But on the other hand, they sometimes seem to send the message that getting pregnant was all for the best.

"The hypothesis driving our study was that the family background of the viewer might determine whether they focused on the negatives or the positives," Wright said.

Consistent with this assumption, frequent viewers of the programs whose fathers often communicated about [sex](#) with them while they were growing up were the least likely to have recently had sex.

Conversely, frequent viewers of the programs whose fathers rarely communicated about sex with them while they were growing up were the most likely to have recently had sex.

Writing in the study, Wright added, "Fathers who communicate with daughters about sex are especially apt to talk about the negatives of premarital sex, to speak of males' propensity for placing sexual pressure on females, and to point out the consequences that result from the risky sexual behavior of others.

"Females who have been regularly sent these types of messages should be especially likely to attend to the negatives of being a young mother depicted on '16 and Pregnant' and 'Teen Mom.'"

No interaction was found in the study between mother-daughter sexual communication, viewing frequency and recent intercourse behavior.

"In this study, there was only what we call an 'interaction' for fathers," Wright said. "But this doesn't mean that mother-daughter communication is irrelevant. There are other studies showing that the more moms communicate about sex, the less likely it is their daughters

will either have sex or engage in risky sex."

For this study, survey data were collected from 313 female undergraduates at two universities in the southwestern United States. All participants were unmarried. About 40 percent were 19 or younger. About 75 percent were 21 or younger. College students are a key audience for [MTV](#).

White participants comprised 56.5 percent of the sample, while others were Hispanic (18.5 percent), Asian (13.1 percent), African-American (4.2 percent) and Middle Eastern (1 percent). Whites were more likely than nonwhites to view both programs, which may be because most of the mothers on the programs also are white.

Nearly 65 percent of the women identified themselves as being Christian; 4.8 percent were Jewish; 1.9 percent were Buddhist; 1.3 percent, Muslim; and 0.6 percent, Hindu. Fifteen percent said they belonged to another religion and 11.5 were not religious.

Wright's previous research supports the hypotheses that mainstream media's portrayal of sex as a recreational activity without consequences has contributed to risky behavior among young people. His research also focuses on the role of parents in the sexual development of their children.

Provided by Indiana University

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