

***Jamaica:***

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***The Jamaica Adolescent Study***

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**This summary highlights findings from a larger scientific report  
and includes recommendations from in-country researchers**

# **Jamaica**

## **The Jamaica Adolescent Study**

### **I Introduction**

The Jamaica Adolescent Study explored the reproductive knowledge, attitudes and behavior of a group of young adolescents in Jamaica. While a number of studies have been conducted among adolescents in the Caribbean, very few have included younger adolescents – those under age 15 – in their study populations. Because many Jamaican adolescents are sexually active in the early teen years, and thus at risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), findings from studies on this age group will be important in developing reproductive health services and family life education programs for Jamaican youth in selected secondary schools between 1994 and 1996.

The Fertility Management Unit at the University of the West Indies conducted this longitudinal study with technical assistance from the Women's Studies Project (WSP) at Family Health International (FHI). Researchers followed a group of 945 young adolescents from the beginning of grade seven (September 1995) to the end of grade eight (June 1997). The adolescents attended 10 different schools in both urban and rural areas of Jamaica, and their mean age when the study began was 12.1 years. The study participants completed questionnaires and participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) to provide researchers with both quantitative and qualitative information about their sexual mores and behavior, knowledge of reproductive issues, and attitudes about sex and reproduction.

Data from the surveys also allowed researchers to evaluate the impact of the Grade 7 Project, a family life education program implemented by the Women's Center of Jamaica Foundation in which about half the adolescents participated. The primary objective of the Grade 7 Project was to prevent adolescent pregnancy by encouraging adolescents to abstain from sexual activity until they were older. In addition, the Project stressed that adolescents should use family planning if they decided to become sexually active. Grade 7 Project sessions were held once per week throughout seventh grade and lasted about 45 minutes. The sessions, conducted by educator-counselors from the WCJF, were largely didactic, although visual aids and question-and-answer sessions were sometimes used.

### **II Background Adolescent Sexual Activity and Pregnancy in Jamaica**

In Jamaica, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, adolescent pregnancy presents a serious social and health problem. Before they reach the age of 20, 40 percent of Jamaican women have been pregnant at least once, and 85 percent of these pregnancies are unplanned. Sexual activity begins at an early age for many Jamaicans. Among 15-year-olds in the 1993 Contraceptive Prevalence Survey (the youngest age group surveyed), 35 percent of females and 43 percent of males

reported having had sexual intercourse. The younger adolescents begin sexual activity, the less likely they are to use contraception, thus increasing their risk of pregnancy (Morris et al., 1995)

Early childbearing often ends a young woman's education, limiting her future job prospects, and thus her own and her child's economic well-being. Among ever-pregnant Jamaican women ages 15 to 24, almost one-third became pregnant while still in school, and only 16 percent of those returned to school after the birth of their child (Morris et al., 1995)

### **III Study Objectives**

This study has two main objectives

- 1 To learn about the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of young adolescents in Jamaica in the areas of sexuality, reproduction, and family planning
- 2 To evaluate whether the Grade 7 Project, a school based family life education project, had an impact on adolescents' reproductive knowledge, attitudes and behavior

### **IV Research Design**

This study followed 945 young adolescents from September 1995 to June 1997. When the study began, the adolescents were all in grade seven at ten different secondary schools in both rural and urban areas of Jamaica. The Grade 7 Project was implemented in five of these schools, and the students at the other five schools comprised a comparison group.

Adolescents in the Jamaica Adolescent Study completed survey questionnaires at three points in time: (1) September 1995, when they entered grade seven, (2) June 1996, at the end of grade seven, and (3) June 1997, at the end of grade eight. The questionnaire asked the adolescents about home life, relationships, sexual activity, family planning, and pregnancy. Adolescents filled out the questionnaire in single-sex groups of eight to 15, in a classroom setting. Pretesting had determined that many young adolescents could not read well enough to complete a self-administered questionnaire. Therefore, an interviewer read aloud each question and its possible responses to students, who were asked to follow along as the questions were read. The interviewer and an assistant also provided individual assistance with reading and writing to any student who requested help. To maintain privacy, empty desks were left between adolescents, and adolescents used a blank sheet of paper to cover their responses.

A subsample of the adolescents who completed the survey participated in single-sex focus group discussions. Eight FGDs were conducted in February 1996, when the adolescents were in grade seven, and another eight were held in March 1997, when the adolescents were in grade eight. The focus group discussions centered on a story about "Ted" and "Nell," two fictional characters similar to the young people participating in the focus groups. In the story, Ted and Nell were students at a secondary school who become romantically involved. The facilitators asked

participants to help develop the story about Nell and Ted – to elaborate on their lives, describe what they might be thinking, and suggest how they might behave in a given situation

**V Results**

**A Knowledge about Sex and Reproduction**

*1 Survey Findings*

In general, students demonstrated a very low level of knowledge about reproductive matters on the survey (Table 1) The answer most frequently chosen, by both girls and boys, to all questions pertaining to knowledge of reproduction was “I don’t know ” Only one of seven knowledge questions was answered correctly by at least half the students on all the survey dates For example even at the end of grade eight, half of the boys and two-thirds of the girls did not know that pregnancy was possible at first intercourse

**Table 1 Percentage of adolescents answering knowledge items correctly, by survey date and sex**

Item	September 1995 (n=945)		June 1996 (n=868)		June 1997 (n=719)	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Time during menstrual cycle when pregnancy most likely to occur	4 3	9 3	4 8	8 1	5 7	10 4
Pregnancy is possible at first intercourse	27 3	32 7	31 7	47 4	33 7	50 6
Condoms protect against STDs	52 5	77 7	60 2	81 2	57 4	78 0
Birth control pills protect against STDs	14 7	16 1	21 5	18 6	21 2	26 0
Sex with a virgin will cure an STD	16 4	28 8	27 8	32 7	27 0	44 2
Having sex while standing prevents pregnancy	14 9	30 3	23 4	41 4	27 0	46 1
Drinking Coke or Pepsi after sex prevents pregnancy	16 4	23 9	23 3	35 3	24 3	36 3

Multivariate analysis indicated that the proportion of adolescents giving correct responses increased over time for most items, regardless of an adolescent’s sex or participation in the Grade 7 Project Boys were more likely than girls to answer knowledge items correctly However, this gender difference was strongly influenced by the fact that girls chose “I don’t know” as their response far more frequently than boys Thus, the fact that boys demonstrated higher knowledge may be partly explained by boys’ greater reluctance to admit lack of knowledge

The Grade 7 Project appeared to have a positive short-term effect on adolescents' knowledge. In June 1996, the proportion of adolescents giving correct responses to four of seven items had increased more among adolescents in the Grade 7 Project than among those in the comparison group. However, in June 1997, one year after the adolescents finished participating in the Project, there was little evidence of knowledge differences between the two groups.

## *2 Focus Group Findings*

In contrast to the low levels of knowledge indicated on the survey, adolescents in the FGD appeared fairly knowledgeable about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Students often spontaneously suggested that adolescents should use family planning if they are going to have sex. They frequently mentioned the condom and the pill as appropriate methods for young people and volunteered that these contraceptives are available from doctors, health centers and pharmacies.

While adolescents were familiar with many modern contraceptive methods, there was some evidence of incomplete or inaccurate knowledge. A girl in one FGDs offered, "Some of them say when they have sex, they can drink a Pepsi or take an aspirin [to prevent pregnancy]." While many adolescents in the FGDs were aware that conception occurs at a particular time during the menstrual cycle, none seemed to know what that time was. At a rural school, a girl offered that a girl got pregnant "because she had sex with the boy while she was seeing her period."

## *B Sexual Mores*

### *1 Survey Findings*

On the survey, most students disapproved of an adolescent having sexual intercourse outside an established romantic relationship (Table 2). However, many felt that sex was required or expected in certain situations. In June 1997, 57 percent of boys and 24 percent of girls shared the opinion that "if you really love your boyfriend or girlfriend, you should have sex with them." Moreover, many adolescents, particularly boys, thought that a girl should have sex with a boy who spent a lot of money on her.

Multivariate analysis indicated that girls were less likely than boys to agree with any of the four statements in Table 2. In general, neither boys' nor girls' sexual mores changed significantly over time. The Grade 7 Project had a short-term effect on several of adolescents' sexual mores. In June 1996, participants in the Grade 7 Project were more likely than the comparison group to offer conservative responses for three of four items ("Okay for girl to have sex with boy who is not steady," "If you really love boy/girlfriend, should have sex with him/her," and "If a boy spends a lot of money on a girl, she should have sex with him"). However, by the time adolescents were at the end of grade eight, one year later, the differences in sexual mores between the two groups were no longer evident.

**Table 2 Percentage of respondents agreeing with statements reflecting sexual mores, by survey date and sex**

Statement	September 1995 (n=945)		June 1996 (n=868)		June 1997 (n=718)	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
It is okay for a girl to have sexual intercourse with a boy who is not her steady boyfriend	3 5	17 8	2 2	14 7	2 9	17 6
It is okay for a boy to have sexual intercourse with a girl who is not his steady girlfriend	5 1	28 4	4 5	35 1	2 9	30 7
If you really love your boyfriend or girlfriend, you should have sex with him/her	32 0	69 2	24 4	64 0	24 3	57 4
If a boy spends a lot of money on a girl, she should have sexual intercourse with him	29 8	57 6	18 5	48 8	14 1	46 1

## 2 *Focus Group Findings*

In the focus groups, boys' opinions varied on the acceptability of adolescent sexual activity. Some felt that young people should wait until they were older and had finished school before having sex. Many boys did not disapprove of adolescent sex, but expressed concern about the risk of pregnancy or STDs. A boy in one FGD warned, "Him would feel big but suppose him do it and the girl get pregnant? Him would be in a lot of trouble." A sizable proportion of boys, however, thought that a boy should have sex in the early teen years.

Almost without exception, girls in the FGDs disapproved of a girl their age engaging in sexual intercourse, and they appeared to be well-schooled about the dangers of sexual involvement. Girls in all the FGDs gave similar reasons as to why girls their age should not have sex. Most girls were quick to mention the risk of pregnancy. One girl warned, "My auntie say when it go in, it sweet, but when it come out, it bring sorrow – baby come." Like boys, many girls were aware of the risk of STDs. "She doesn't know if him have HIV," a girl stated.

Girls cautioned that a girl risks acquiring a bad reputation if she has sex. A girl in one FGD warned that a boy is unlikely to be discreet if he has sex with a girl. "If Nell broke up with Ted, Ted gonna go about and tell him friends. He will disgrace her." Girls in all the FGDs made derogatory comments about girls their age who were sexually active, but no girls indicated disapproval of boys their age having sex.

## **C Sexual Activity and Attitudes**

### **1 Survey Findings**

**Reported sexual experience** We advise caution in interpreting data regarding sexual behavior collected from young adolescents. Adolescents' responses may not be accurate in all cases, due to the sensitive nature of the questions and the low literacy levels of some students. In the questionnaire administration, researchers took care to assure adolescents of the anonymity of their responses, and their names and other identifying information were kept separate from the questionnaire. Nevertheless, given prevailing social norms regarding adolescent sexual activity, adolescents may not have felt comfortable in revealing their sexual experience. In addition, many students had a low level of literacy that may have limited their ability to answer questions accurately, despite the fact that an interviewer read the questions and response choices aloud and offered additional personal assistance with reading and spelling.

By the end of grade eight, 13 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys in the Jamaica Adolescent Study reported having had sexual intercourse (Table 3).<sup>1</sup> Reported sexual experience was vastly different between boys and girls throughout the study period.

The mean age at first intercourse (as reported in June 1997) was 12.4 years for girls and 9.3 years for boys (Table 3). Quite a few boys (53 percent of those reporting sexual activity in June 1997) claimed they first had sexual intercourse at age nine or younger. Only seven girls said they had sex prior to age 10. Most boys, even those who reported having sex at a very young age, said that their first sexual partner was approximately one year older than they were. On average, a girl's first sexual partner was three years older than she was.

It is possible that some boys in this study exaggerated the extent of their sexual experience. The reported prevalence of sexual activity among males is markedly lower in other surveys of Jamaican adolescents. In the 1993 Contraceptive Prevalence Survey, 43 percent of 15-year-old boys reported being sexually experienced, and among 15- to 24-year-old males, the mean age at first intercourse was 13.9 years (Morris *et al.* 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewers defined sexual intercourse aloud to students in simple terms as meaning heterosexual vaginal intercourse.

**Table 3 Sexual activity among adolescents, by survey date and sex**

Item	September 1995		June 1996		June 1997	
	Girls (n=487)	Boys (n=441)	Girls (n=463)	Boys (n=408)	Girls (n=381)	Boys (n=333)
Percentage reporting sexual intercourse	5.8	64.4	5.6	75.5	13.4	75.4
Mean age at first sex	11.3	9.4	12.2	9.8	12.4	9.3
Mean age difference between respondent and first sexual partner (partner age - respondent age)	3.2	1.2	4.1	6	2.9	1.2

Multivariate analysis showed that an adolescent's sex was the strongest predictor of his/her having experienced first sexual intercourse. Controlling for other factors, boys were 17 times more likely than girls to have had sex. Adolescents who had experimented with alcohol were 2.4 times more likely than others to have experienced sexual intercourse. The Grade 7 Project did not have a significant impact on young adolescents engaging in first sexual intercourse, either during grade seven or by the end of grade eight.

**Reasons for first sexual intercourse** On the survey, adolescents indicated that curiosity was the most common motivation for engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time (Table 4). Fifty-three percent of girls and 63 percent of boys reported that they had sex the first time to "see what it was like." "To show love" was the second most frequently cited reason for first sex (14 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys).

**Table 4 Reasons for first sexual intercourse among adolescents, in percent, June 1997**

Reason	Girls (n=51)	Boys (n=251)	Total (n=302)
To see what it was like	52.9	63.0	61.3
To show love for boyfriend/ girlfriend	13.7	18.3	17.6
Convinced by boyfriend/girlfriend	15.7	10.4	11.3
Raped or forced	11.8	2.8	4.3
Other	4.0	4.4	4.3
No response	2.0	1.2	1.3

## 2 Focus Group Findings

**Very young age at first intercourse** Given the high prevalence of reported sexual activity among boys and the relatively high proportion of boys reporting sex at a very young age, researchers considered whether some misrepresented their actual experience or had misunderstood the meaning of sexual intercourse. Therefore, in the focus group discussions (FGDs), moderators specifically explored these issues. Boys in all the groups clearly understood

“having sex” to mean vaginal intercourse with penetration “Him put his penis inside her, kiss her, and have a nice romance ” one boy said

In each group, some boys confirmed that a boy might have sex at age eight or nine or younger Other boys, however, doubted that an adolescent couple would actually have sex at such a young age “No, him just kiss her up,” a boy disagreed

**Likelihood of having sex** While most students in the FGDs did not advocate sex for young people their age, many (particularly boys) admitted that it might happen Most boys thought that if given the opportunity, few boys would decide *not* to have sex When asked what he would do if faced with such a decision, one boy laughed incredulously and said, “She want to have sex with me? Sir, me would a have sex!” Boys did not seem to question the conflict between their stated sexual mores and their actual or intended behavior The same boys who said young adolescents should not have sex often admitted, minutes later, that they themselves would have sex if given the opportunity

Most boys in grade seven doubted that a girl their age would agree to sex They suggested that a girl would decline sex politely, leaving the possibility open for the future or explaining her fear of pregnancy Other boys said a girl might at least consider having sex One boy reflected, “Maybe she would say she would think about it talk it over ” Boys in grade eight were more likely to say that a girl would agree to have sex

Almost all girls in the grade seven FGDs insisted that a girl their age would not have sex When the moderator asked, “What would you do if you were in Nell’s place?” one girl retorted, “I would not be in Nell’s place in the first place – I wouldn’t have sex with a boy ” Eighth-grade girls were a little more likely to suggest that, although she shouldn’t, a girl their age might agree to have sex with her boyfriend “She will want to go and try it and see how it feel,” suggested one girl

**Motivations for engaging in sexual intercourse** In the FGDs, adolescents introduced a variety of motivations for becoming sexually active Girls concurred that love would be the strongest impetus for having sex One girl declared, “If she say yes, that mean she really love him, and she will give him anything him want ” Some girls thought a girl might have sex to make her boyfriend “feel good” or so he would “love her more ” In one group, a girl suggested, “Maybe if she don’t have sex with him, him dump her Probably she wouldn’t want to lose him ”

Boys said reasons to have sex were physical pleasure and to enjoy elevated status among peers A boy in one group explained, “Him want to try it, to see how it feel – if it feel sweet, or what ” A boy in one focus group related, “Him friends, them tell him that him gonna love it!” For boys who have not yet had sex, encouragement from friends to engage in sex may turn into pressure “If him no do it, them a go call him chicken” explained a boy

**Peer and parental reactions to adolescent sexual activity** Girls in the FGDs said that a girl their age who has sex is unlikely to tell friends or family members that she is sexually active, fearing their disapproval and reproach According to girls in every FGD, a mother would

severely punish a daughter discovered to be sexually active. And a girl's peers are likely to react with taunts. "Them would a call her *sketel* [slut]," a girl declared.

While girls are vilified for engaging in sexual intercourse, boys who have sex receive admiration and encouragement from their peers. A boy in one FGD said, "Him would feel good 'cause him friends biggin' him up." When the moderator asked boys in a rural school if Ted would tell anyone that he had sex with Nell, the response was "Him a go tell him friend, big brother. Him tell him relative and cousin and friend and everybody!"

## ***D Family Planning Behavior and Attitudes***

### *1 Survey Findings*

**Use of family planning** The majority of girls (65 percent) who had experienced sexual intercourse reported using a family planning method during first intercourse. In contrast, only 30 percent of boys used family planning at first intercourse. Among both sexes, the condom was the most frequently used method.

Multivariate analysis of the study participants who had experienced sexual intercourse by June 1997 showed that girls were three times more likely than boys to have used family planning. Age at first intercourse was also associated with using family planning. For each additional year of age at first intercourse, an adolescent was 1.2 times more likely to use family planning, other factors being equal. Adolescents in the Grade 7 Project were more than twice as likely as adolescents in the comparison group to use family planning. (However, this relationship fell short of statistical significance, with a p-value of 0.08.) The Grade 7 Project did not have a long-term impact on use of family planning.

**Family planning attitudes** On the survey, adolescents displayed mixed attitudes toward family planning (Table 5). A large majority agreed that using oral contraceptives is responsible behavior and that a boy who uses a condom is treating his girlfriend respectfully. However, many adolescents, particularly boys, also associated family planning with promiscuity, agreeing with statements that condoms and oral contraceptives are used only by boys and girls who have multiple sexual partners.

Multivariate analysis showed that girls were less likely than boys to think that condoms and pills are only for adolescents with multiple sexual partners, and over time, both boys and girls became less likely to think so. The Grade 7 Project did not have a significant effect on family planning attitudes.

**Table 5 Percentage of adolescents agreeing with statements reflecting attitudes about family planning, by survey date and sex**

Statement	September 1995 (n=945)		June 1996 (n=872)		June 1997 (n=719)	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
A girl who uses birth control pills is being responsible	64.7	67.3	74.8	76.0	80.4	78.3
A boy who uses a condom is showing respect to his girlfriend	85.7	85.7	88.8	91.2	90.1	92.0
Condoms are only for boys who have sex with more than one girl	53.9	71.4	43.8	59.3	37.6	54.5
Birth control pills are only for girls who have sexual intercourse with more than one boy	42.5	58.9	36.4	52.9	31.3	49.4

## 2 Focus Group Findings

In the FGDs, adolescents expressed generally positive attitudes toward family planning. Both boys and girls advocated that teenagers use family planning if they have sex, often recommending the condom as the best method for young people. A boy advised, “When him use the condom, it would be more safe for the girl.” Both boys and girls, however, acknowledged that a girl is more likely to insist on using family planning because unprotected sex poses a greater risk to her. “She don’t want to have any baby, and she don’t want to get pregnant, for her mother would find out,” explained a girl.

Many adolescents, however, doubted that a young couple would use family planning, for various reasons. Despite their own awareness of contraceptive methods, FGD participants suggested that young people their age sometimes fail to use family planning due to lack of knowledge. “They wouldn’t use it because them wouldn’t know the meaning of it,” a boy stated.

Institutional barriers may also make it difficult for younger adolescents to access contraceptives. A girl in one FGD thought a teenage girl would encounter difficulty buying oral contraceptives. “They wouldn’t sell it to her because she too young.” Costs may also help explain why young adolescents do not use contraceptives. When discussing Nell’s pregnancy, a boy suggested, “Maybe she had used the condom at first, but they didn’t have any money to buy any more.”

Cultural values regarding adolescent sexuality may contribute to nonuse of family planning among both boys and girls. Some boys had heard that sex was less pleasurable with a condom, and said they would have sex “bareback.” In one FGD, a boy offered “Nuff boy around here don’t use the condom. Them say it not nice with the condom.”

A young adolescent girl may be hesitant to use family planning because, if parents and friends learned of her contraceptive use, they would, by association, know she was engaging in forbidden sexual activity. A girl in one FGD predicted that if a girl's mother found her contraceptive supplies, "[She] would curse her. She would think that she was having sex." Girls thought that girls their age would taunt and shun a friend whom they discovered was using family planning. "They would say she taking it [the pill] cause she having sex a lot of time," a girl predicted.

## *E Attitudes about Pregnancy*

### *1 Survey Findings*

Most adolescents expressed negative attitudes toward adolescent pregnancy (Table 6). Few thought a girl should have a baby as a teenager to prove her fertility, and very small percentages thought that a girl or boy their age was responsible enough to be a parent. Girls were particularly likely to say that young adolescents were not old enough to be parents. As boys matured (perhaps as teen pregnancy became more relevant to their lives), they became less likely to express positive attitudes about adolescent pregnancy.

Multivariate analysis indicated that older adolescents were less likely to think a young person their age was responsible enough to be a parent, or that a teenage girl should have a baby to prove her fertility. Girls were less likely than boys to view teen pregnancy favorably. The Grade 7 Project had a favorable short-term impact on one item reflecting change in pregnancy attitudes, but no long-term impact. From September 1995 to June 1996, adolescents in the Grade 7 Project were less likely than their counterparts in the comparison group to adopt the view that a teenage girl should have a baby to prove her fertility.

**Table 6 Percentage of adolescents agreeing with statements reflecting attitudes about pregnancy, by survey date and sex**

Statement	September 1995 (n=945)		June 1996 (n=872)		June 1997 (n=719)	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
A girl should have a baby when she is a teenager to prove she is not a mule	28.0	40.0	15.3	23.3	11.8	20.8
A girl my age is responsible enough to be a mother	9.2	20.5	5.0	13.2	4.2	7.1
A boy my age is responsible enough to be a father	9.4	25.9	6.0	14.0	3.9	10.4

### *2 Focus Group Findings*

Both girls and boys in the FGDs viewed adolescent pregnancy as unintended and unwelcome. Girls said a girl their age would feel "useless" and "embarrassed" if she got pregnant. Without prompting, they described what pregnancy would mean – financial burdens, family strife, and

potential abandonment by the baby's father "If she get pregnant, her mother a go kick her out, and the boy would a run left her," related a girl in a rural school

A boy, too, would be unhappy and scared if he impregnated a girl "Him start panic and fret," a boy predicted The pregnancy would evoke angry reactions from both his own and the girl's parents "Him mother and father would throw him outta the house," a boy predicted Boys in all the FGDs thought a boy might try to absolve himself of blame by implying that another boyfriend impregnated the girl

A pregnant girl faces disapproval and derision from her peers and community "She would [be] afraid to walk with the big belly," another girl stated, and a chorus of laughter arose from her classmates Much as they would respond to news of a friend's sexual activity, teenage girls are likely to chastise and ridicule a pregnant peer A girl in one FGD offered, "Some of them, because she get pregnant, might not want to talk to her " Only a few girls suggested that girls might pity a pregnant friend and offer her support "Some of her friends will stick by her, 'cause it could happen to them," a girl stated

Although focus group participants described adolescent pregnancy as an unplanned and unhappy event, they did not consider it utterly disastrous Both girls and boys acknowledged that teenagers would probably have mixed feelings about an unexpected pregnancy A pregnant girl "would feel happy in a way and sad in a way," said a girl in one FGD In another group, a girl presented several negative aspects of pregnancy but then qualified, "if he [her boyfriend] treatin' her good, well that different " A girl at a rural school offered that parental support would make things easier "If she know that her mother is going to mind the baby, she is not going to fret She will feel okay "

Boys were more likely than girls to express enthusiasm about an unexpected pregnancy "Him feel good Feel on top of the world," a boy described Boys suggested that a boy who impregnates a girl is the object of his friends' admiration and envy "Them would big him up and say him a big man!" a boy in one FGD described Still, some boys in the FGDs acknowledged that peers' reactions would not be wholly admiring "The good ones would ask him why him do such a thing, say him should've wait "

## **V Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that even before they enter the teen years, these young adolescents' sexual attitudes and behavior have been significantly shaped by sociocultural and gender norms that send contradictory messages to boys and girls about sexuality – messages that impose different standards of behavior for boys and girls Girls were far less likely to report having had sexual intercourse than boys However, it is possible that boys exaggerated the extent of their sexual experience, and girls may have been hesitant to reveal that they had had sexual intercourse Nevertheless, the differences in reported behavior between the sexes remain striking and likely reflect the different standards of behavior for boys and girls Focus group findings revealed that males, even young adolescents, perceive social encouragement and pressure to be

sexually active. In contrast, girls who have sex, particularly if a pregnancy reveals their sexual activity, are branded as having inferior moral standards.

On all three surveys, knowledge about reproduction was very low. Even at the end of grade eight, fewer than half the young adolescents answered the knowledge questions correctly. On the other hand, the 12- and 13-year-olds in the focus groups appeared very knowledgeable about sex, family planning, and STDs. Still, many FGD participants held misperceptions about pregnancy and pregnancy prevention.

The Grade 7 Project had a short-term impact on some aspects of adolescents' knowledge and some of their sexual mores, and a slight short-term effect on their use of family planning. However, at the end of grade eight, one year after adolescents participated in the Project, there was no measurable difference between adolescents in the Grade 7 Project and those in the comparison group.

## **VI Recommendations**

- Family life education programs and family planning providers need to recognize that some young adolescents are already sexually active, and thus in need of family planning and other reproductive health services such as information about and treatment for STDs.
- The low levels of knowledge about reproduction, combined with the substantial number of adolescents who reported having had sex, suggest that family life education programs must be introduced among younger children, not just those entering puberty. Youngsters need to be informed about the risks inherent in engaging in sexual activity before they first have sex.
- Family life education teachers, as well as family planning providers, should be aware of the strong influence of gender norms on the attitudes and behavior of boys and girls regarding relationships, sex and reproduction.
- The high prevalence of reported sexual activity among boys, their low prevalence of family planning use, and the attitudes they expressed both in focus groups and on the survey indicate that boys need particular attention in family life education programs and delivery of family planning services.
- More innovative and interactive methods may be needed to reach adolescents, particularly young males, who are influenced by strong social pressures to engage in early sexual activity. Involving students actively in Family Life Education programs has been shown to have a greater influence on their behavior than lecturing.

## **VII Study Details**

Portions of this research were presented at the 1996 and 1997 annual meetings of the Population Association of America. Findings from the September 1995 survey data were published in an issue of *Social and Economic Studies*.

The researchers responsible for this study include Ms. Jean Jackson, Ms. Joan Leitch, and Mrs. Amy Lee of the Fertility Management Unit of the University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, and Dr. Elizabeth Eggleston of Family Health International. Research was supported by the Women's Studies Project at Family Health International, through a Cooperative Agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) with field support from the USAID Mission in Jamaica.