

# More teens striving for sexual restraint

By NINA BERNSTEIN  
The New York Times

NEW YORK — Alberto and Jasmine are 16-year-old sweethearts, or were until that day in November when Jasmine, who planned to be a virgin until marriage, learned in the halls of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx that Alberto was “messing around.”

She raged, she wept and she broke up with him. He apologized, he cried and she took him back. Then she suggested they cut school and have sex — “to keep him,” she explained tearfully.

It could have been one of the oldest stories in the book, except for the real-life ending: Alberto said no.

Though he is just one teenager — short and freckled, with close-cropped kinky hair and an electric smile — his personal decision speaks to the underlying causes of an extraordinary demographic shift.

The teenage pregnancy rate in America, which rose sharply between 1986 and 1991 to huge public alarm, has fallen steadily for a decade with little fanfare, to below any level previously recorded in the United States. And though pregnancy prevention efforts have long focused almost exclusively on girls, it is boys whose behavior shows the most startling changes.

More than half of all male high school students reported in 2001 that they were virgins, up from 39 percent in 1990. Among the sexually active, condom use has soared to 65 percent for all male students and 67 percent among black ones.

The trends are similar, if less pronounced, for girls, who remain slightly less likely than boys to report that they have had sex. Nowhere are the changes more surprising than in poor minority neighborhoods like Harlem and the Bronx, which a decade ago were seen as centers of a national epidemic of teenage pregnancy.

Researchers often sum up the findings in one tidy formulation: “less sex, more contraception.” But there is nothing simple about their puzzlement over the reasons.

Experts can rattle off a litany of possible reasons for the turnaround: the fear of AIDS, and the impact of AIDS-prevention education; the introduction of injectable forms of birth control; changes in welfare policy and crackdowns on fathers for child support; the rise of a more religious and conservative generation of teenagers; an economic boom with more opportunities; and an array of new youth programs, especially those emphasizing both abstinence and contraception.

Even advocates of these developments agree that they cannot account for the shift, or predict how long it will last. Yet the cultural changes now at work are astonishing when viewed up close, in the lives of teenagers themselves.

In their topsy-turvy world of explicit sex and elusive intimacy, young people yearning for human contact are distilling new codes of conduct from a volatile blend of sex education, popular culture and family experience.

The range of attitudes toward sex is striking. Two high school buddies, Toby M. and Manuel R., are miles apart in their sexual choices at 18, though both are veterans of the same cutting-edge reproductive health program for boys at their Harlem public high school, Bread and Roses Integrated Arts.

Toby, lanky and talkative, counts five partners since he lost his virginity in the seventh grade, with a girl his own age: 12. “I wasn’t stupid,” he insisted. “We did it correctly. We used a condom.”

His buddy Manuel, who mentions that his stepsister gave birth at 12, says he intends to forgo sex until marriage, as his Pentecostal church demands. But in explaining his abstinence, he also credits the safe-sex pamphlets his older sister sneaked home from a Planned Parenthood clinic, and the Lifetime channel they watched together.

“Every other movie on that channel is, like, a teenage mother crying or a woman getting beat,” he explained. “And my older sister, who is sexually active, we’d just be watching TV and she’d be, like, ‘You do know how that happens, don’t you?’”

Demographers point out that American teenage-pregnancy rates are still two to 10 times higher than those in other Western countries, which have had the same pattern of spike and fall since AIDS erupted.

Toby and Manuel’s classmate Ali A., who lost his virginity at 14, says he is tired of thinking about sex. Of sex on TV, he said, “It’s all hyped.” Shaking his cornrow braids, he declared: “It’s not about sex no more. We try to enjoy our lives now. Not to have the stress.”