6.4: Adolescent Sexual Activity

By about age ten or eleven, most children experience increased sexual attraction to others that affects social life, both in school and out (McClintock & Herdt, 1996). By the end of high school, more than half of boys and girls report having experienced sexual intercourse at least once, though it is hard to be certain of the proportion because of the sensitivity and privacy of the information. (Center for Disease Control, 2004; Rosenbaum, 2006).

**Adolescent Pregnancy:** Although adolescent pregnancy rates have declined since 1991, teenage birth rates in the United States are higher than most developed countries.

In 2014 females aged 15–19 years experienced a birth rate of 24.2 per 1,000 women. This is a drop of 9% from 2013. Birth rates fell 11% for those aged 15–17 years and 7% for 18–19 year-olds. It appears that adolescents seem to be less
sexually active than in previous years, and those who are sexually active seem to be using birth control (CDC, 2016). Figure 6.8 shows the birth rates (live births) per 1,000 females aged 15–19 years for all races and Hispanic ethnicity in the United States, 1991, 2007, 2011, 2012, & 2013.

**Risk Factors for Adolescent Pregnancy:** Miller, Benson, and Galbraith (2001) found that parent/child closeness, parental supervision, and parents’ values against teen intercourse (or unprotected intercourse) decreased the risk of adolescent pregnancy. In contrast, residing in disorganized/dangerous neighborhoods, living in a lower SES family, living with a single parent, having older sexually active siblings or pregnant/parenting teenage sisters, early puberty, and being a victim of sexual abuse place adolescents at an increased risk of adolescent pregnancy.

**Consequences of Adolescent Pregnancy:** After the child is born life can be difficult for a teenage mother. Only 40% of teenagers who have children before age 18 graduate from high school. Without a high school degree her job prospects are limited and economic independence is difficult. Teen mothers are more likely to live in poverty, and more than 75% of all unmarried teen mother receive public assistance within 5 years of the birth of their first child. Approximately, 64% of children born to an unmarried teenage high-school dropout live in poverty. Further, a child born to a teenage mother is 50% more likely to repeat a grade in school and is more likely to perform poorly on standardized tests and drop out before finishing high school (March of Dimes, 2012).

Research analyzing the age that men father their first child and how far they complete their education have been summarized by the Pew Research Center (2015) and reflect the research for females. Among dads ages 22 to 44, 70% of those with less than a high school diploma say they fathered their first child before the age of 25. In comparison, less than half (45%) of fathers with some college experience became dads by that age. Additionally, becoming a young father occurs much less for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher as just 14% had their first child prior to age 25. Like men, women with more education are likely to be older when they become mothers.