

teenagers gone...mild?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just released an ominous report that pegged the number of teen births in 2007 at a record high—so cue the sirens, right?

Not so fast. In a New York Times interview, Maria Kefalas, author of *Promises I Can Keep* and an associate professor of sociology at St. Joseph's University, says: "There is a group of kids who engage in sexual behavior, but it's not really significantly different than previous generations. This creeping up of teen pregnancy is not because so many more kids are having sex, but... because more kids aren't using contraception."

A few bullets for Kefalas' rhetorical gun:

- Fewer than half (47.8 percent) of all senior highers have had sex, according to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey. That's significant slippage from 54.1 percent in 1991.

- Kids are also waiting longer to have sex than in past decades. According to a Department of Health and Human Services study, just under a third (30 percent) of 15- to 17-year-old girls have had sex—that's down from 38 percent in 1995. Over the same time, the number of boys who've had a sexual experience dropped even more—from 43 percent in 1995 to 31 percent a decade later.

- Despite the Oprah-induced panic over skyrocketing levels of kids having oral sex, the

practice remains the exception, not the rule. One in six (16 percent) teenagers say

they've had oral sex but haven't yet had intercourse. Researchers say a small minority of kids sees oral sex as a safer alternative to intercourse, but it's still not a common practice.

The truth: the teenage childbearing rate has dropped big-time since the late 1950's, and the teenage abortion rate has mirrored that drop. That undergirds Kefalas' insight about the drop in contraceptive practices among teenagers.

The Kryptonite recipe for neutralizing teenage pregnancies is well known by researchers—mix together these elements:

- Teenagers who have parents that actively supervise them, and
- Teenagers who come from two-parent households, and
- Teenagers who are doing well in school.

The result is a kid who delays sex until their late teens or beyond.

In the Times interview Kefalas says: "For teens, sex requires time and lack of supervision... This whole moral panic thing misses the point, because research suggests kids who don't use contraception tend to be kids who are feeling lost and disconnected and not doing well."

They're also, according to a new study by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, likely listening to music that has strong sexual content. Researchers discovered that sex-saturated music directly influences high levels of sexual behavior in teenagers.

So far, no one's attempted a similar study of how the current crop of wildly popular Judd Apatowesque teen-raunch comedies are impacting kids' sexual behavior. One thing that's certain, though: Hollywood has found a new cash cow with films like *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*. Newsweek film critic David Ansen says: "Raunch, scatology and four-letter words are nothing new in Hollywood comedies... What is new is the shotgun wedding of obscenity and sentimentality." And that's a potent brew for teenagers who are magnetized by both ingredients. ■