

## Adolescent Sexual Behavior. II: Socio-Psychological Factors

In a world radically changed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many teens nevertheless choose to initiate sexual intercourse. Teens' decisions whether to have sex and whether to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are influenced by many factors. For example, a study of students ages 13 to 18 found that not initiating sex was associated with having a two-parent family and higher socioeconomic status, residing in a rural area, performing better in school, feeling greater religiosity, not having suicidal thoughts, and believing parents care and hold high expectations for their children. Youth have little control over most of these factors.<sup>1</sup>

### Studies Link Risk Behaviors, such as Alcohol or Substance Use, to Sexual Risk-Taking.

- In one study, smoking was the best predictor of sixth graders' engaging in sexual intercourse, regardless of ethnicity or gender.<sup>2</sup>
- Another study of high school youth found links between the number of sexual partners and other risk behaviors, such as carrying a weapon, physical fighting, and using alcohol, marijuana, and/or cigarettes. Across ethnicity and gender, alcohol use was the only risk behavior that was significantly and consistently associated with an increase in the number of sexual partners.<sup>3</sup>
- A study of incarcerated youth found that unprotected sexual intercourse was most apt to occur in connection with marijuana use rather than alcohol use.<sup>4</sup>
- Seventeen percent of teens ages 13 to 18 who have had an intimate encounter say they have done something sexual while under the influence of drugs or alcohol that otherwise they might not have done.<sup>5</sup>

### Physical and Sexual Abuse Can Lead to Increased High Risk Activity.

- In a study of over four thousand high school students, 30.2 percent of females and 9.3 percent of males reported a history of sexual abuse. Abused males were four to five times as likely as non-abused males to report multiple partners, substance use at last sex, and involvement in a pregnancy. Abused females were twice as likely as non-abused females to report early coitus, multiple partners, and a past pregnancy.<sup>6</sup>
- One study of high school students found a significant relationship for both black and white females between having been a victim of dating violence and/or date rape and the number of sex partners. For males, a significant association existed between multiple sexual partners and being victims of rape (whites) or being a perpetrator or victim of dating violence (blacks).<sup>3</sup>

### Religious Involvement Influences Sexual Behavior.

- In a study of youth ages 11 to 25, respondents who were not sexually active scored significantly higher than sexually active youth on the importance of religion in their lives and reported more connections to friends whom they considered to be religious or spiritual.<sup>7</sup>
- One study of youth ages 12 to 17 found that 26 percent of teens who said they attended religious services only "a few times a year" or "almost never" still identified "morals, values and/or religious beliefs" as the factor that most affected their decisions about whether to have sex.<sup>8</sup>
- A study of first-year college students found that sexually active youth with high levels of religious identification were less likely to use a condom than those with less religious involvement.<sup>9</sup>

### Peer Relations Influence Adolescent Sexual Activity.

- In the Adolescent Health (Add Health) Survey of students in grades seven through 12, when factors of family structure, wealth, education and popularity were controlled, a female's close group of friends had

the most influence on the timing of sexual debut. Adolescents whose friendship network included mostly low-risk friends were half as likely to experience first intercourse as were adolescents whose close friend network was composed mostly of high-risk friends.<sup>10</sup>

- When asked why they had sex for the first time, 13 percent of young men ages 13 to 18 cited pressure from their friends compared to seven percent of young women. Eight percent of young women and one percent of young men cited pressure from a partner as a factor.<sup>5</sup>
- In one study, about 48 percent of 13- to 15-year-old male and female respondents said they talk to their friends about sexuality issues. Females were most likely to discuss many sexuality issues with their mothers, while less than 20 percent talked with their fathers about any sexuality issue. Fewer males than females reported talking with friends or parents about sex-based topics. However, male teens were about as likely to talk with mothers as with friends and only slightly less likely to talk with their fathers.<sup>11</sup>

## Good Parent-Child Relations, Academic Aspirations and Sports Participation Can Promote Sexually Healthy Decisions by Teens.

- According to one study, teens who reported being highly satisfied with their relationship with parents were 2.7 times less likely to engage in sex than teens who had little satisfaction with their parental relationships. Relationship satisfaction was associated with a lower probability of engaging in sex, higher probability of using birth control if sex occurred, and lower probability of pregnancy during the ensuing 12 months.<sup>12</sup>
- Another study found that, when parental responsiveness was high, sexual discussions between parents and teens were significantly associated with increased condom use during most recent intercourse.<sup>13</sup>
- Teens' perception of maternal opposition toward engaging in sex was associated with a lower probability of engaging in sex and a lower probability of pregnancy during the ensuing 12 months.<sup>12</sup>
- Among teens who did not feel close to their mother and/or father, 70.6 percent had sex by the age of 17 to 19 compared to 57.9 percent who felt close to mother and/or father.<sup>14</sup>
- In a study among seventh grade African American and Latino males, good grades and living with both parents were associated with delay of sexual intercourse.<sup>15</sup>
- In a study of women in grades nine through 12, 41 percent of non-athletes reported never having had sex compared to 54 percent of athletes. Among those who reported having had sex, 15 percent of non-athletes experience first coitus before age 15 compared to eight percent of athletes.<sup>16</sup>

## References

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