



UNH Center on
Adolescence

Adolescent Sexuality

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Sexual and reproductive development are important components of the maturation process for adolescents, but there is considerable disagreement regarding how we best prepare youth to become sexually healthy and responsible adults. A positive youth development approach to adolescent sexuality focuses on the developmentally healthy goals and possibilities for youth and considers what parents and other caring adults can do to help adolescents develop responsible sexual attitudes and behaviors as well as a clear understanding of themselves as a sexual being (Russell & Andrews, (2003).

As in every other aspect of development, the goal is to help youth receive the information they need to function optimally and become competent, healthy adults. A positive youth development approach to sexuality encourages us to think about what is reasonable and appropriate sexual knowledge and behavior for youth, rather than just focusing on problems and negative outcomes. It also provides ideas for engaging with youth to help them develop a code of personal sexual ethics to assist them in interpreting their feelings, responding to social pressures, and making good decisions (Brumberg, 1997).

Some parents, professionals, and policy makers would prefer that young people abstain from all sexual activity until they are socially, cognitively, and emotionally mature. However, for some youth, there is as much as a 15-year gap between physical and sexual maturity and their social and financial independence (Russell & Andrews, (2003). It is highly likely that most young people will be involved in sexual activity of some type before they are in a permanent, committed relationship. Nationally 46% of males and 44% of females reported ever having sexual intercourse on the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2004). However, by the 11th and 12th grades, 53% and 62% of students reported having had sexual intercourse with little difference in rates between males and females. This means that, in our society today, sexual activity among older school-aged adolescents is normative and needs to be addressed in a thoughtful, responsible way that acknowledges what we know about adolescent development, research information about effective practices, the broad range of beliefs about adolescent sexuality. Most importantly, we need to keep in mind how we can best help youth become sexually healthy adults and have loving, caring, and satisfying intimate relationships.

The good news about adolescent sexuality

The general approach to presenting information on adolescent sexuality is to focus on teen pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections, poor decision making, and other problems. In fact, although teens make a range of sexual decisions, responsible adolescent sexual behavior appears to be increasing (Nichols & Good, 2004).

- **Teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates have declined steadily since 1991** (Santelli, et al., 2004). Santelli and colleagues found that delayed sexual intercourse and improved contraceptive practices contributed equally to declines in teen pregnancy rates.
- **Most sexually active teens report using contraceptives.** Nationally, among teens who had sexual intercourse in the last three months, 83% of female teens and 91% of males reported using contraceptive method at last intercourse.

- **Most teens are motivated not to become pregnant.** In one study (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2004), 90% of males and 89% of females aged 15 to 17 said they would be upset or very upset to have a pregnancy. It is important to note that there is growing evidence that adolescents may be participating in activities such as oral-genital sexual behaviors as a way of avoiding pregnancy. Teens may not identify or report these activities as “sex” and they may not realize that these behaviors involve risks such as sexually transmitted infections (Remez, 2000).
- **Most teens are using condoms at first intercourse.** In 2002, 66% of female adolescents and 71% of male adolescents reported using condoms at first intercourse. (Abma, et al., 2004)
- **Teens are waiting longer to have sexual intercourse.** Nationally, the percent of youth reporting sexual activity before age 15 went from 19% in 1995 to 13% in 2002 for female adolescents and 21% to 15% for male adolescents (Abma, et al., 2004).
- **Parents play an important role in providing information to youth about sexuality.** One study found that 70% of participants 13-16 years old reported that they received some or a lot of information about sex and sexual relationships from their parents (NBC News, 2005). The same study found that parents thought it was important for their teens to know how to deal with sexual relationships (91%), set limits in intimate relationships (85%), and understand the consequences of engaging in sex (88%). However, there was a difference in perceptions between parents and youth about how frequently these conversations happen (85% vs 41%).

What can parents and other caring adults do?

Inform yourself. Most people are more comfortable talking about sensitive issues if they have valid, up-to-date information. Take a course at a college or university or get a good sexuality textbook such as Our Sexuality (Crooks & Baur, 2005) to read and keep as a reference.

Clarify your own values. It is difficult to talk with adolescents about many of the topics related to sexuality if you are not clear on your own beliefs and values. In addition to thinking about your opinions on various topics related to sexuality, consider the basis for your opinions and the information on which these opinions are based.

Talk with young people sharing your information, beliefs, and values. Most sexuality educators recommend parents start early talking with their children in an age-appropriate way so that the first big discussion does not come during adolescence. If there has been little discussion in the family before adolescence, parents can use “teachable moments” such as media messages, current events, or things that happen at school to launch discussions. Asking your teen what s/he thinks about an issue or whether certain behaviors happen at school or with their group of friends allows one to begin a conversation, assess how valid the teen’s information might be, and offer new ideas, as well as opinions.

Listen to youth. Although we have some information about ages at which teens become involved in sexual intercourse, whether they use contraceptives and condoms, and how many female adolescents become pregnant and give birth, we know little about adolescents’ own thinking about sexuality, why they make the sexual choices that they do, and how we might best support them to make good sexual decisions. Really listening to adolescents should provide us with a better understanding of how we can best provide the guidance and support they need.

Help youth find answers to their own questions. As young people move toward adulthood, we want to help them learn to become good consumers of valid, reliable information so they can be life-long learners and become as knowledgeable as possible about healthy sexuality. Working with youth to find sources of information and helping them to be critical consumers of that sexual information can benefit both the adolescent and the adult, as well as contribute to a respectful, caring relationship that should encourage the teen to ask for assistance in the future.

Share media experiences with youth. Research indicates that teens can benefit from media information about sexuality—learning how to talk with a partner about safer sex, learning how to refuse sexual behavior, and learning social norms about sexuality (Nichols & Good, 2004). Parents and other adults can help youth critique media messages and integrate new information into their understanding about sexuality.

Expect and support sexuality education programs in schools, community organizations, and religious institutions. Although most parents want to be sure that their children learn about their family values regarding sexuality, many are not thoroughly prepared to provide all of the up-to-date information about sexual and reproductive health that adolescents need to make healthy choices. By expecting that sexuality education be expertly taught by a trained professional in a developmentally appropriate way in the school system, we can ensure that most youth will receive information about this topic in the same way they are taught other subjects. Youth-serving organizations and religious institutions frequently provide excellent sexuality education that can complement information provided in the schools and can reach some out-of-school youth missed by other programs.

Ensure that sexual and reproductive health care is accessible to all youth. As young people move toward adulthood, particularly if they are sexually active, it is important that both young women and men have access to care providers who are knowledgeable about adolescence and can attend to their sexual and reproductive health care needs. Because of societal ambivalence about adolescent sexuality, we frequently make it difficult for young people to find and access the services they need to stay healthy. Although ideally young people will have their parents' help in getting care, youth should know where to go for assistance and what their rights are in regard to securing care, either with or without their parents' knowledge and cooperation.

Encourage help seeking. In addition to providing youth with information and helping them develop the skills they need to be sexually responsible and healthy, adults can assist youth in seeing help seeking, and asking for assistance when they need it, to be a very adult way of behaving. Many young people believe that they should handle their own problems, not upset their parents, and/or not reveal that they need help. If caring adults act and speak as though seeking help is an acceptable and expected way of responding to challenges, youth may integrate this into their strategies for dealing with problems or their needs for information.

Provide opportunities for youth to talk about their interests, feelings, and concerns regarding sexuality and reproductive health, as well as to practice decision making and negotiation skills. If youth are to develop their own moral framework about sexuality and be prepared to make healthy decisions, they need opportunities to use their information, consider a variety of perspectives, and try using various strategies for dealing with partners and making choices. By providing settings in families, schools, or in the community where teens can talk freely and practice responding to sexual situations, adults can learn about teens' perspectives and provide useful feedback as youth are developing their own sexual and reproductive ethic.

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