



Risky Business

Factors influencing adolescents' decisions to engage in risky sexual behavior

Melanie M. Watkins, MD

Psychiatrist

March 16, 2011

Noon Conference

**CONTRA COSTA REGIONAL MEDICAL
CENTER
NOON CONFERENCE SERIES**

DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- Speaker has nothing to disclose



Two things are clear

- Adolescents are going to take risks
- Parents of adolescents are terrified about this



Normal adolescent development

- Increased interest in the opposite sex
- Concerns regarding physical and sexual attractiveness
- Frequently changing relationships
- Rule and limit testing
- Experimentation with sex
- Individuation and differentiation from the parent



Risk taking and adolescence

- Risk taking is a NORMAL part of adolescence
- It is part of developing identity and confidence
- Normal to test limits and boundaries
- Cognitive and interpersonal factors that figure prominently in adolescents' perceptions of themselves and the world



YRBSS

- Monitors six categories of priority health risk behaviors among youth and young adults
- Data available on CDC website
- Most recent data (Sept 2008-Dec 2009)



Six categories

- Behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries/violence
 - Tobacco
 - Drug and alcohol
 - Sexual behaviors
 - Unhealthy dietary behaviors
 - Physical inactivity
- *In addition: obesity and asthma



Risky behavior

- Generational 1950s James Dean versus 1990s Kurt Cobain
- Seen as sexy and glamorous, but can have consequences
- Current celebrities frequently in “rehab”



Risk-taking behaviors

- Shoplifting
- Physically abusing others
- Smoking marijuana or other substance use
- Smoking cigarettes
- Texting while driving
- Body piercing
- Life threatening dieting
- Physical fights/violence
- Unprotected sex
- Multiple sexual partners
- Speeding
- Piercing and Tattooing



More risk-taking behaviors

- Sexual assault and abuse
- Tanning
- Driving under influence
- Carrying a weapon
- Riding with an intoxicated driver
- Suicide attempts and gestures



Today's teens face even more challenges

- HIV
- Texting while driving
- Sexting
- Bullying (in person, on the internet, etc)
- The internet!!!
- Facebook, MySpace, Twitter
- Reality TV shows
- Reckless participation in diving and boating
- Road rage
- Newer drugs (e.g. MDMA)
- Pressure to be thin (eating disorders)
- Easy access to adult websites
- Easy access to drugs



The facts

Among high school students screened nationwide, 34.2% were currently sexually active and 38.9% of currently sexually active students had NOT used a condom during their last intercourse.

YRBSS, 2009



Risky Sexual Behavior

- Early initiation of sexual intercourse
- Unprotected intercourse
- Multiple sexual partners
- Sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol



Risk factors regarding sexual behavior

- Early onset of puberty
- Substance abuse
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Low parental education
- Media portrayal of sex and sexuality
- Low parental monitoring



More Risk factors regarding sexual behavior

- Low self-esteem
- Poverty
- Sexually-active peer group
- Perception of sexual activity among cohort
- Media portrayals of sex and sexuality
- Adolescents with mental illness (ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, etc.)



Negative Consequences

- Low self esteem
- Teasing
- Pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Shame/Stigma
- Affect relationship with parents/guardians



Perceived positive consequences

- Having sex is pleasurable and can enhance one's sense of intimacy with others
- Being sexually active may enhance status in adolescent peer groups
- Initiation of sexual behavior marks a transition to more adult behavior
- Having sex may be a way to assert autonomy from parents



Common STDs

Bacterial (curable)	Viral (incurable)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Chlamydia○ Gonorrhea○ Syphilis○ Trichomoniasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ HIV○ Herpes○ Genital Warts (HPV)○ Hepatitis B○ Hepatitis C



Physical/Emotional Consequences of STDs

- Infertility (PID)
- Affected offspring
- Cervical cancer
- Death
- Treatment/Clinic visits
- Stigma
- Shame
- Sharing information with future partner(s)



Which teens are at highest risk for STDs?

- Youths in the juvenile justice system
- Adolescents living in areas with a high prevalence of STDs
- Adolescents exchanging sex for drugs
- Homeless and runaway adolescents
- Youth in areas with high rates of IV drug use



Why do they place themselves at risk?

- Some argue that many adolescents do not have the cognitive maturity to translate knowledge about risks into action or to anticipate the consequences of risky sexual behavior.
- Also, the sense of invincibility that often characterizes adolescent behavior may result in underestimation of risk.



Why do sexually active adolescents put themselves at risk?

- Focus on immediate gratification and not able to see long term consequences (e.g. enhanced physical sensation and feelings of spontaneity)
- Personal invulnerability
- Value the short term benefits but don't see long term implications



Protective Factors

- Religious background
- Close parent-child relationship
- Access to condoms and other contraceptives
- Perception of positive peer group attitudes towards delaying intercourse and/or contraceptive use
- Access to prevention education
- Positive parent communication



Challenges with communication

- Is it Mod, Goth or Emo?



Communication

Parents and guardians often don't know how to talk about sex and often don't want to talk about sex, although they recognize that it is important to do so.



Communication

- Adolescence is a time when relationships with peers become more influential
- Parents do get “first dibs”—before peers, the internet, ‘reality’ TV, etc communicate to the child.
- Non verbal communication is important
- “Do as I say, not as I do...”



Parents' approach

Adolescents whose parents adopt a more authoritative style of parenting (characterized by monitoring of behavior and support) have lower rates of risk-taking behavior than those who are neglectful or over-controlling




Communication is ongoing

- Discussion at six is not like the discussion at sixteen
- Kids pick up on discomfort. Okay to say, "This is kind of hard for me to talk about too."



What to keep in mind when working teens

- Supporting their autonomy
- Identifying and owning one's own values
- Familiarizing oneself with available resources
- Nonjudgmental approach
- Be mindful of the necessity of allowing adolescent patients/clients the ability to differ in opinion while maintaining a positive connection
- Referring to mental health practitioners when appropriate
- When appropriate, normalize
- Let them know what information is confidential. Provide reassurance.
- Always be open to learning from teens



Encourage collaboration and keep communication open

Although often desired by adults, adolescent behavior often cannot be controlled. When possible, clinicians should be encouraged to respect adolescent decisions and collaborate with adolescents in decision making, rather than forcing adult decisions on adolescents.



What teens need (versus what they want)

- Teens need to practice how to discuss safe sex practices
- Teens need goals and dreams to hold onto
- The need limits and boundaries
- Teens need our love and support, regardless of what they say
- Teens need activities, ideally with healthy, positive teen/young adult peers
- Parents need to help teens reduce the “screen time”
- They often need to know why



Interventions

- Increase involvement by parents in sexuality education
- Increase focus on prevention education, in addition to abstinence-focused education
- Increase access to reproductive health services for adolescents
- Focus on both reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors



Interventions

Need for a comprehensive approach:

- Individual adolescent behavior
- Family
- Community norms
- School and health systems
- Societal norms
- Government policy



Resources

*YRBSS: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/>

**The Romance of Risk* by Lynn Ponton, MD