

**Understanding and Responding to
Adolescent Sexual Behavior**
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I. Understanding developmentally expected adolescent sexual behavior

- 1. Adolescent sexual activity and behavior is normal.** Although not every adolescent engages in sexual relationships or behavior, adolescent development includes sexual exploration, sexual identity formation, and sexual behaviors. Approximately 62 percent of high school seniors in the U.S. have had sexual intercourse (Centers for Disease Control, 2010) and in a 2018 study, approximately 29 percent of high school students were currently sexually active (Centers for Disease Control, 2018).
- 2. Adolescents are inundated with sexual messages and content, whether they seek it out or not.** With the rapid development of pocket and mobile technology in the form of smart phones, tablets, and other forms of small mobile computers, exposure to sexual content and communication is widespread and essentially available to anyone, even if such content is not actively sought. For example, use of and exposure to pornography begins in early adolescence around the ages of 12-14 (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005), and earlier exposure may be increasingly common in light of ever-increasing access to social media, including pornographic sites.
- 3. The use of social media to engage in sexual behaviors is common.** The use of social media for sending and receiving sexual messages or images by adolescents is increasing. In one study that surveyed more than 2,000 10-12th grade adolescents, more than 50 percent reported having received a sexually explicit text message and more than 25 percent reported sending a sexually explicit photo. The same study found that, among sexually active students, 84 percent reported receiving sexually explicit text messages, 72 percent reported sending sexually explicit text messages, and half reported sending a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of themselves (Mitchell et al., 2014).
- 4. Adolescents are often ill-equipped to handle or respond to sexual information, messages, and activities.** For most adolescents, participation in sexual activities, including risky or harmful sexual behaviors, is not pathological or symptomatic of greater problems, but is a reflection of adolescence itself. Adolescents are still developing impulse control, as well as the ability to understand consequences and anticipate outcomes. They may have a less well-formed view of the future than adults, and be more likely to act spontaneously in selecting behaviors and activities they perceive as emotionally and socially rewarding.

II. Responding to developmentally expected adolescent sexual behavior

- 1. The nature of our responses and approach is key.** It is important to recognize that many sexual behaviors, activities, and relationships are normative. While teaching young people about the social and legal impact of inappropriate or unwanted sexual behavior, it is important to recognize adolescence as a period of physical, social, and psychological development, and to ensure responses to the behavior are built on this understanding. Similarly, it is important that young people are approached in a manner that is sensitive to developmental growth and recognizes the normalcy of adolescent sexual behavior. Such an approach will be supportive, collaborative, and respectful, and will engage with the young person as capable of independent choice.
- 2. It is important to influence adolescent behavior through supportive, collaborative, guiding, and healthy relationships.** Exposure to sexual information and the desire to engage in sexual activities is a normative part of the world in which most adolescents live. Our responses to adolescent sexuality should include elements of understanding, support, guidance, and education. Although rule-making and the application of rules alone often does not work with young people, we should not simply “roll over” and accept and allow any and all problematic sexual behaviors. Instead, we should try to positively influence adolescent thinking and behavior through building healthy relationships and communication that effectively educate, lead, mentor, and influence young people’s behavior and decision-making of all kinds, including sexual behaviors.
- 3. Education about sexuality, healthy sexual behaviors, and the impact of social media is key.** Appropriate use of social media that contains sexualized content is an ideal goal. Education should include how to respond to, and deal with, sexualized and pornographic materials in social media, and the need to build healthy sexual awareness and self-regulation. For example:
 - Create a family norm of open, honest communication about “life” topics including sexuality, social media, and relationships.
 - Ask open-ended questions about young people’s experiences in relationships and on social media.
 - Listen to adolescents and reflect back what you hear them saying.
 - Help adolescents be streetwise about social media and its potential impact on our perceptions and actions in relationships.
 - Have conversations about what factors represent healthy relationships and healthy sexuality (e.g., mutual respect, kindness, consent, support, responsiveness, trust, honesty, fairness, regular communication, playfulness, and separate identities).
 - Have conversations about what factors represent unhealthy relationships and sexuality (e.g., controlling behaviors, hostility, disrespectfulness, emotional and/or physical disconnectedness, and violence including physical, emotional, and sexual).
 - Educate adolescents about pornography and its frequently distorted, unrealistic, and sometimes harmful depictions of sexual behaviors and relationships. Given the frequency with

which pornography is used by adolescents and adults, help adolescents who use pornography recognize the role it fills for each young person and help young people recognize and consider their use. Pornography is not the cause of problematic sexual behavior, although it may be implicated for some.

- Use filtering, blocking, or monitoring software to help reduce the risk of exposure to pornography in those cases where continued use of pornography may be prohibited or believed to be harmful.
- Attend a law enforcement presentation about internet safety.

4. Healthy expressions of sexuality and healthy relationships are the goals. It is important to recognize that young persons live in a sexualized environment and that many young people will engage in sexual relationships and activities by the time they graduate high school or before. For this reason, teaching principles of safe and healthy relationships such as consent, equality, non-coercion, and respect is critical to healthy sexual development. To meet broad needs, sex education should include information on:

- Socially appropriate and inappropriate sexual boundaries;
- The elements and outcomes of healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships;
- Safe and unsafe sexual practices (including online activities); and
- The legal and social consequences of unhealthy or abusive sexual behaviors.

III. Understanding adolescent sexual behavior that is not developmentally expected

Although most adolescent sexual behavior is developmentally normative and not harmful to others, some adolescents do engage in sexual behaviors that are harmful or abusive to others. With this in mind, several points are important to note.

Some adolescents engage in sexual behavior that is harmful or abusive. This can include behaviors such as:

- Engaging, or attempting to engage, in sexual behavior with another person without informed consent;
- Engaging in or manipulating sexual behavior with a younger child or significantly more vulnerable individual unable to give informed consent;
- The use of coercion, threats, or force to engage another person in sexual behavior;
- Exhibitionism, the intentional self-display of sexual body parts, without informed consent;
- Voyeurism, the intentional observation of others engaged in sexual activity or in a sexually sensitive situation without their knowledge or consent; and/or
- The use of social media for sexually exploitive purposes.

IV. Responding to adolescent sexual behavior that is not developmentally expected

Adolescent sexual behavior determined or suspected to be harmful or abusive in nature should be further evaluated. This is necessary both to understand the nature of continued risk for sexually harmful behavior and to consider what, if any, interventions are needed. It is important to recognize that young people who have engaged in sexually abusive behavior should not be treated or viewed in the same manner as sexually offending adults. Interventions for young persons should be implemented in accordance with their age and developmental level. Further, young people who engage in sexually abusive behavior often experience a range of nonsexual problems, which are an important focus of treatment. Accordingly, rather than solely attempting to contain and manage the young person's sexual behavior, it is important to help these young people develop accountability for both sexual and nonsexual behaviors. The goals of interventions are to build strengths, protective factors, and prosocial skills that will reduce risk and promote social competence, stability, and healthy relationships.

With respect to juvenile sexually abusive behavior, recidivism is a relatively rare event. While there is legitimate concern about the possibility of continued sexually harmful behavior, or sexual recidivism, it is important to be aware that the behavior is uncommon. Research consistently finds that sexual recidivism is relatively low. The most current research strongly suggests that rates of sexual recidivism for adolescents following treatment are somewhere between 3-12% (for instance, Caldwell, 2016; Epperson et al., 2006; Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006), and most likely at the lower end of that range. For those individuals who may be at high risk for sexual recidivism, reoffending is unusual after having completed evidence-based treatment.

V. References

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