

TV: Not the only channel to early sex

November 24 2008

Watching plenty of television combined with low self-esteem, poor relationships with parents, and low academic achievement are some of the factors that may add up to young people having sex before the age of 15. Alternatively, a parent's positive influence may go a long way to reduce risky sexual behavior during adolescence, according to Myeshia Price and Dr. Janet Hyde from the University of Wisconsin in the USA. Their findings have just been published online in Springer's *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Adolescents who engage in sexual acts before the age of 15 are likely to do so without adequate protection, putting them at higher risk of sexually transmitted infections and, for girls, unwanted pregnancies. In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 750,000 pregnancies and almost half of new cases of sexually transmitted infections were among adolescents.

To help identify ways to reduce the number of adolescents who have sex before the age of 15, Price and Hyde examined a combination of individual, family, and sociocultural factors thought to predict early sexual activity. A total of 273 adolescents (146 girls and 127 boys) took part in the Wisconsin Study of Families and Work and were studied between the ages of 13 and 15. They were asked about their sexual behavior, puberty, academic achievement, self-esteem, depression, sports participation, symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), family structure and quality of relationships with parents, and exposure to sexuality through the media.

Of the 273 adolescents studied, 15 percent had experienced early sex – intercourse and/or oral sex. Girls who had been sexually active before the age of 15 spent more time watching television, had lower self-esteem, had poor relationships with their parents, had lived with either a single mother or step-parent, showed signs of ADHD, and underachieved at school. Those boys who had engaged in early sexual activity were further into their puberty, spent more time watching television, had lower self-esteem, showed signs of ADHD and ODD, and had poor relationships with their parents.

One factor had a particularly large effect: the amount of time spent watching television. Across all risk factors, the more factors pushing young people to have sex early, the more likely they were to do so. For example, compared to an adolescent with zero risks, someone with three of the above influences (the average for the studied sample) was five times more likely to have had sex by the age of 15. These findings strongly suggest that intervention programs aimed at reducing the number of adolescents who have sex at a younger age are more likely to be effective if they target a combination of factors.

This study also shows that parents influence adolescents' decision to engage, or not, in early sexual activity. The authors recommend that "preventive measures should not be left up to teachers and counselors alone, but might include parents." They add that "positive influence from parents, coupled with comprehensive education programs, have the potential to have an unsurpassed effect on early adolescent sexual activity."

Reference: Price MN & Hyde JS (2008). When two isn't better than one: predictors of early sexual activity in adolescence using a cumulative risk model. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*; DOI 10.1007/s10964-008-9351-2

Source: Springer

Citation: TV: Not the only channel to early sex (2008, November 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-11-tv-channel-early-sex.html>

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