

Unlike boys, girls lose friends for having sex, gain friends for making out

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Early adolescent girls lose friends for having sex and gain friends for

"making out," while their male peers lose friends for "making out" and gain friends for having sex, finds a new study that will be presented at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

"In our sample of early adolescents, [girls'](#) friendship networks shrink significantly after they have sex, whereas boys' [friendship networks](#) expand significantly," said Derek A. Kreager, the lead author of the study and an associate professor of sociology and criminology at Pennsylvania State University. "But what really surprised us was that 'making out' showed a pattern consistent with a strong reverse sexual double standard, such that girls who 'make out' without having sex see significant increases in friendships, and boys who engage in the same behavior see significant decreases in friendships."

The study relies on data from the PROMoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) longitudinal study, which tracked two cohorts of youth from 28 rural communities in Iowa and Pennsylvania from 2003 to 2007 when they were in sixth to ninth grade and 11 to 16-years-old. Students were surveyed in five waves: in the Fall of sixth grade and in the Spring of sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Kreager's study focuses on 921 students in the second PROSPER cohort who completed in-home surveys that included measures of sexual behavior.

As part of the PROSPER study, students were asked to nominate their best or closest friends in the same grade. In order to identify changes in peer acceptance, Kreager and his colleagues considered how many friendship nominations participants received in each wave.

According to Kreager, in waves where they reported having sex, on average, girls experienced a 45 percent decrease in peer acceptance and boys experienced an 88 percent increase. On the other hand, in waves

where they reported "making out" without having sex, on average, girls experienced a 25 percent increase in peer acceptance, while boys experienced a 29 percent decrease in peer acceptance.

"Our results are consistent with traditional gender scripts," said Kreager. "Men and boys are expected to act on innate or strong sex drives to initiate heterosexual contacts for the purpose of sex rather than romance and pursue multiple sexual partnerships. In contrast, women and girls are expected to desire romance over sex, value monogamy, and 'gatekeep' male sexual advances within committed relationships. A sexual double standard then arises because women and girls who violate traditional sexual scripts and have casual and/or multiple sexual partnerships are socially stigmatized, whereas men and boys performing similar behaviors are rewarded for achieving masculine ideals."

Kreager found that girls, who defy traditional gender scripts by having sex, lose both male and female friendships. In contrast, boys who defy gender scripts by "making out" without having sex mainly lose male friends.

"This pattern suggests that other boys are the peers that police social norms when it comes to masculinity, whereas girls receive strong messages about gender-appropriate [sexual behavior](#) from boys and girls," Kreager explained. "It is not surprising that girls do not punish boys for 'making out,' as this behavior is rewarding for girls both socially and physically. However, there is somewhat of a paradox for boys stigmatizing girls who have sex because these boys are punishing girls for behavior that benefits boys both socially and sexually. We believe one reason for this is that only a small minority of [boys](#) have such sexual access, so those who do not have sex negatively define the girls who are having sex."

While recent research that shows men and women are held to different

standards of sexual conduct largely focuses on college "hook-up culture," by studying early adolescents, Kreager was able to show that sexual double standards also affect youth who have only just reached sexual maturity.

"During early adolescence, peer evaluations of initial sexual behaviors and virginity loss are likely to have large and lasting impacts on later sexual adjustment," Kreager noted.

More information: The paper, "The Double Standard at Sexual Debut: Gender, Sexual Behavior and Early Adolescent Peer Acceptance," will be presented on Tuesday, Aug. 25, at 2:30 p.m. CDT in Chicago at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting.

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