



Parental influences on young people's sexual behaviour: A longitudinal analysis

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Abstract

Both family structure and processes have been associated with young people's sexual behaviour, but most studies are cross-sectional and focus on only one outcome: age at first intercourse. This paper uses longitudinal data from a survey of Scottish teenagers ($N = 5041$) to show how low parental monitoring predicts early sexual activity for both sexes (with some reverse causation), and for females it also predicts more sexual partners and less condom use. A lot of spending money also predicts early sexual activity and, for males, having more sexual partners. Comfort talking with parents about sex, however, seems to bear little relationship to sexual behaviour.

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Introduction

In order to develop more effective sexual health interventions and policies it is important to develop a better understanding of the factors that shape young people's sexual behaviour, particularly in the light of recent evidence that school-based programmes have little impact (DiCenso, Guyatt, Willan, & Griffith, 2002; Wight et al., 2002). There is a large body of evidence from developed countries showing that both family structure (or composition) and relationships

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within families influence young people's development, well-being and behaviour (Epps, 1983; Sweeting, West, & Richards, 1998). This paper is concerned with the internal dynamics or 'processes' within families, and explores parents' influence on young people's sexual behaviour.

Family structure and sexual behaviour

There is evidence that family structure is an important influence on sexual behaviour. Not living with both biological parents at age 11 has been associated with earlier sexual activity and higher numbers of sexual partners at age 15 (Feldman & Brown, 1993), while family structure at 15 is associated with sexual behaviour at 18 (Sweeting et al., 1998). Furthermore, those who experience their parents' separation are more likely to start child bearing early (Kiernan, 1996).

However, there have been several critiques of research focussing on family structure, summarized by Sweeting et al. (1998). It often does not recognize the heterogeneity of non-intact families; the associations between family structure and adverse outcomes may result from other factors, such as poverty; and the relationship may be the reverse of that generally assumed: children with problems may contribute to their parents separating. Notwithstanding this critical perspective, Sweeting et al. (1998) concluded from their own longitudinal data that 'school achievement, heterosexual behaviour, pregnancy and experience of drugs were each related to family structure' (p. 42), but that the effects of family structure must be understood in relation to the effects of family processes, and that the latter are probably more important.

Family processes and sexual behaviour

In terms of family processes, critical and negative parenting has been associated with higher levels of sexual activity amongst boys (Feldman & Brown, 1993), while parental monitoring (Barber, Miller, Erickson, & Heaton, submitted; Dorius, 1994; Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Huebner & Howell, 2003; Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 1999; Rodgers, 1999; Small & Luster, 1994), adult supervision (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Schuster, 2002), time engaged in family activities (Sweeting et al., 1998), parental trust (Borawski, Ievers-Landis, Lovegreen, & Trapl, 2003) and parental support or connectedness with their children (Chewning & Koningsfeld, 1998; Feldman & Brown, 1993; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996; Resnick et al., 1997) have been associated with later age at first intercourse and/or less sexual risk taking.

More specifically, in Britain, parent-child communication about sexual issues (Wellings et al., 2001) and about contraception in particular (Currie, 1999), and having parents who had portrayed sex positively (Stone & Ingham, 2002), has been associated with greater use of contraception by young men, but not young women. Those who do not discuss sex easily with their parents are at much higher risk of teenage pregnancy (Wellings, Wadsworth, Johnson, & Field, 1996). However, American studies of the relationship between parent-child communication and adolescent sexual risk-taking produce conflicting results (Huebner & Howell, 2003; Shoop & Davidson, 1994).

Some further evidence of parental influence on sexual behaviour comes from the evaluation of school sex education programmes. While most seem to have little impact on behaviour (DiCenso et al., 2002), one of the few programmes demonstrated to have increased condom use involves active parental involvement, for instance, through student-parent homework activities (Coyle et al., 2001).

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