



Comparison of comprehensive and abstinence-only sexuality education in young African American adolescents



Lindsay M. Shepherd ^{a, *}, Kaye F. Sly ^a, Jeffrey M. Girard ^b

^a Department of Psychology, Jackson State University, USA

^b Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, University of Mississippi Medical Center, USA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify predictors of sexual behavior and condom use in African American adolescents, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality and abstinence-only education to reduce adolescent sexual behavior and increase condom use. Participants included 450 adolescents aged 12–14 years in the southern United States. Regression analyses showed favorable attitudes toward sexual behavior and social norms significantly predicted recent sexual behavior, and favorable attitudes toward condoms significantly predicted condom usage. Self-efficacy was not found to be predictive of adolescents' sexual behavior or condom use. There were no significant differences in recent sexual behavior based on type of sexuality education. Adolescents who received abstinence-only education had reduced favorable attitudes toward condom use, and were more likely to have unprotected sex than the comparison group. Findings suggest that adolescents who receive abstinence-only education are at greater risk of engaging in unprotected sex.

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Despite sexuality education initiatives, rates of sexual activity have remained steady among teenagers in the past decade ([Centers for Disease Control, CDC 2014](http://www.cdc.gov)). Among American high school students, nearly half reported lifetime sexual intercourse, and less than two-thirds of sexually-active adolescents reported condom use during their last intercourse ([CDC, 2014](http://www.cdc.gov)). Less is known about the prevalence of sexual behaviors among middle school students; however, 5.6% of high school students reported intercourse before age 13 ([CDC, 2014](http://www.cdc.gov)). A study of middle school students revealed 5–20% of sixth graders and 14–42% of eighth graders reported lifetime intercourse ([Moore, Barr, & Johnson, 2013](http://www.moh.gov)). Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, African American (AA) middle school students reported higher levels of lifetime intercourse, sexual activity before age 11, and having more than three sexual partners ([Moore et al., 2013](http://www.moh.gov)).

1. Theoretical framework

The theory of planned behavior ([Ajzen, 1985](http://www.sagepub.com)) can be used as a model to explain adolescent sexual behavior. According to this theory, an individual's attitude toward a behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control together shape behavioral intentions and behavior ([Ajzen, 1985](http://www.sagepub.com)). Attitudes refer to personal evaluation of how favorable or unfavorable a

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS, 39217, USA.

E-mail address: lindsay.shepherd@students.jsums.edu (L.M. Shepherd).

behavior is. Subjective norms include perceptions of how significant others judge behaviors as well as perceptions of whether significant others believe that behaviors should or should not be performed (Ajzen, 1985). Significant others may refer to many individuals in an adolescent's life; however, this study will focus on adolescents' peers. Perceived behavioral control is the perception of ease or difficulty performing behaviors (Ajzen, 1985), which is closely related to the concept of self-efficacy, or the perception of one's ability to complete tasks and reach goals (Bandura, 1977). This study examined adolescent sexual behavior utilizing components of the theory of planned behavior, specifically attitudes towards sex and condoms, subjective norms (peer norms) and perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy).

2. Review of literature

2.1. Attitudes

Adolescents often view sexual abstinence as a normative stage of sexual development in which one is initially abstinent until transitioning into sexual activity (Masters, Beadnell, Morrison, Hoppe, & Gilmore, 2008; Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006). Most adolescents correctly identify abstinence as the most effective way to prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy (Akers, Gold, Coyne-Beasley, & Corbie-Smith, 2012); however, actual practice of abstinence often declines with age (Santelli, Lindberg, Finer, & Singh, 2007). Sexual initiation is also considered developmentally appropriate and prolonged abstinence as unrealistic (Akers et al., 2012). Consequently, many adolescents hold all-or-nothing attitudes in that once virginity is lost, they cannot revert back to abstinence (Ott et al., 2006). In a sample of eighth grade students, 18% thought abstinence was unacceptable within relationships and 39% were unsure of its acceptability (Royer, Keller, & Heidrich, 2009). Some drawbacks of abstinence according to adolescents included ridicule or teasing from peers, dating partner pressure, and sexual tension (Abbott & Dalla, 2008).

Studies have shown that sexually abstinent youth tend to have more positive attitudes about abstinence than sexually active youth (Akers et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2011; Childs, Moneyham, & Felton, 2008; Hopkins, Tanner, & Raymond, 2004). Adolescents with positive abstinence attitudes were less likely to initiate or anticipate having sex within the next year compared to peers with less favorable attitudes toward abstinence, whereas having positive sex attitudes increased the likelihood of sexual activity within the next six months (Anderson et al., 2011; Masters et al., 2008). While attitudes are strong predictors of sexual behavior, they are subject to change as adolescents age with attitudes toward sex tend to become more permissive with time (Akers et al., 2011).

Condoms are almost universally identified by adolescents as effective in preventing STIs and unwanted pregnancy (Akers et al., 2012). Adolescents' condom attitudes are associated with condom use intention, and those who viewed condoms favorably were more likely to report future condom use intentions (Alvarez, Villarruel, Zhou, & Gallegos, 2010; Hogben et al., 2006; Lee, Lewis, & Kirk, 2011; Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008; Small, Weinman, Buzi, & Smith, 2009). Positive attitudes and condom use intention are associated with greater likelihood of consistent use (Boone & Lefkowitz, 2004; Hogben et al., 2006; Manlove, Ikramullah, & Terry-Humen, 2008; Small et al., 2009). Attitudes toward condoms are also related to peer groups. Adolescents had more favorable condom attitudes when they were able to talk to friends about sex, which was associated with intention and actual condom use behavior (Halpern-Felsher, Kropp, Boyer, Tschann, & Ellen, 2004). Adolescents reported encouraging friends to carry and use condoms, and becoming angry with friends who did not use condoms (Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004).

2.2. Peer norms

While adolescents receive messages about sex from many sources, including parents, school, sexuality education and media, peers are often their preferred source of information (Potard et al., 2008; Teitelman, Bohinski, & Boente, 2009). Focus groups with female adolescents suggest that initial sources of learning about puberty, reproduction, and intercourse are parents and formal sexuality education programs; however, girls often turn to peers for more specific information, including non-intercourse sex, appropriateness of sexual behaviors, and timing of behaviors within romantic relationships (Aronowitz, Rennells, & Todd, 2006; Teitelman et al., 2009). Adolescents reported often talking with peers about dating and sex, and peers play significant roles in new partner acquisition (Harper et al., 2004).

Adolescents' sexual activity is influenced by perceived peer attitudes and behaviors. Perceived norms can influence timing of adolescents' first sexual encounter (Kirby, 2001; L'Engle & Jackson, 2008; Santelli et al., 2004; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, & Skay, 2006). Adolescents with peer norms favorable to sex are more likely to engage in intercourse at earlier ages. Longitudinal studies found that peer norms were one of the best predictors of initiating sexual intercourse for young adolescents (Santelli et al., 2004). Adolescents with personal beliefs and perceived peer norms favoring abstinence were less likely to initiate sex before the end of eighth grade compared to adolescents with lower pro-abstinence norms (Santelli et al., 2004). Similarly, adolescents who perceived permissive peer attitudes toward premarital sex were more likely to engage in sex, have sex more frequently, and have more sexual partners (Kirby, 2001).

Peer norms also influence adolescents' decisions to use condoms once they become sexually active. Consistent condom use is associated with regular discussion with friends about contraception and STI risk (Kapadia et al., 2012). Additionally, adolescents who reported communication with peers about sex had more positive condom attitudes, which in turn related to intention and actual condom use (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2004).

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