

Adolescents with High-Risk Sexual Attitudes Attract Peers with Similar Attitudes

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High-risk sexual behavior in adolescents appears to be influenced by the sexual attitudes of peers, and young people select friends whose attitudes about sex are consistent with their own attitudes. These are the conclusions of a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and published in the May/June 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The study addressed issues of peer influence. Researchers sought to determine how adolescents come to resemble their peers in risky attitudes and behaviors, attempting to learn whether they are encouraged by peers to adopt certain behaviors or gravitate toward others with similar attitudes and behaviors. They also examined the role of peer attitudes in the development of high-risk behaviors.

The study analyzed data on 1,350 15- to 18-year-old male and female students taking part in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationwide study of individual, peer, family, school, and community factors related to health. High-risk sexual behavior was defined by the number of partners with whom adolescents had intercourse without a condom, since having multiple sex partners without using condoms puts adolescents at risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. The researchers also constructed a measure of attitudes about the undesirable consequences of sex. These measures of sexual behavior and attitudes, from individual adolescents and their friends, were compared over time.

Some of the study's findings showed that peers influence adolescent attitudes and behavior. Adolescents whose friends had intercourse without a condom were more likely to have intercourse without a condom the following year. Those whose friends believed that sex had undesirable consequences were likely to change attitudes to be similar to those of their friends, and were less likely to have intercourse without a condom the following year. The effect of friends' attitudes on sexual behavior was stronger for females than for males.

Other findings showed that adolescents choose new friends with attitudes that are similar to their own. Teens who believed that sex had undesirable consequences were likely to choose new friends and retain existing friends with similar attitudes. This occurred to a similar extent in males and females, but occurred less often among Hispanic adolescents than among non-Hispanic white and African American adolescents.

"This study has two implications for prevention," according to David B. Henry, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the study's lead author. "First, it supports the use of adolescent leaders for preventive interventions. Second, it suggests that interventions that use attitude change to change behavior may be more effective among females than among males."

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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