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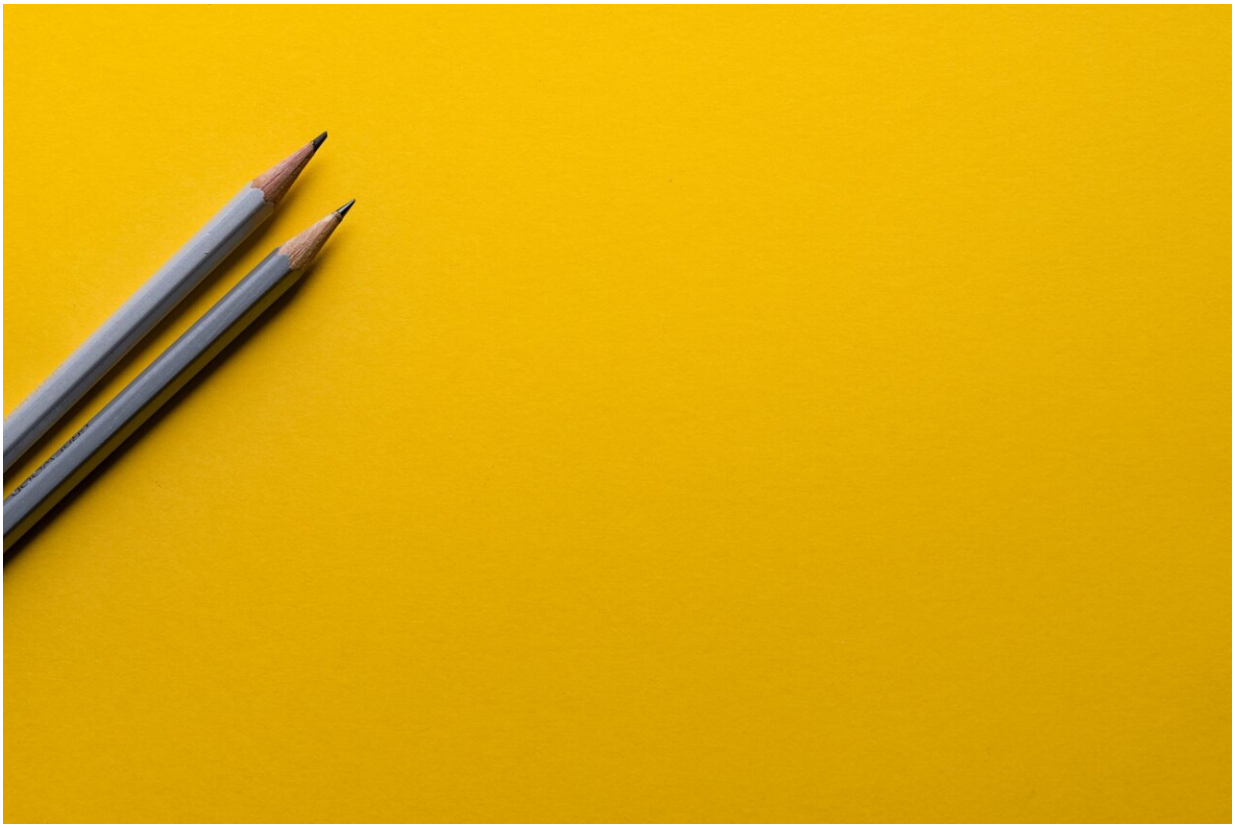
Strong evidence for double standards among adolescents regarding sex

April 22 2016, by Kristie Auman-Bauer



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Adolescence is a developmental period of immense social, physical, and emotional change. In the midst of it all, both boys and girls face double standards regarding how peers react to sexual experiences, new Penn

State research shows.

Derek Kreager, associate professor of sociology and criminology, and a team of researchers discovered the gender inequities after analyzing close to 1,000 adolescents from the PROSPER project, a longitudinal study of 28 school communities in rural Pennsylvania and Iowa. Kreager and his team followed the sample of students from sixth grade through the end of ninth grade.

The students were asked to complete self-administered surveys twice per year during school hours. The surveys asked questions about their sexual history and social life. Students were also asked to list their closest friends at school and Kreager and his team evaluated each student's peer popularity by counting the number of times he or she was named as a close friend.

The team's initial findings were consistent with the traditional sexual double standard. Girls experienced a 45 percent decrease in friends after having sex for the first time, while boys enjoyed an 88 percent increase in popularity after having sex.

In a surprising twist, the team observed that girls who reported making out but not having sex gained 25 percent more friends, while boys who only made out lost almost 30 percent of their friends.

"Girls were rewarded by their peers for having a romantic relationship, but boys lost status and were penalized for stopping short of having sex," noted Kreager. "It was an unexpected finding and not something we set out to discover."

The results point out that boys and girls are getting different messages about sex, which has important implications for sex education. "Curricula needs to be tailored to engage and react to the presence of

these double standards," Kreager said.

It's important because the double standards that arise during adolescence can have lasting effects on teenagers' sexual health and development. "If younger girls are penalized for having sex, they may associate sexual behavior as something to feel guilty or ashamed about. Conversely, boys may associate sex with social status, which can lead to unhealthy sexual behaviors," Kreager explained.

According to Kreager, there has been very little investigation into sexual double standards and how it affects adolescent development, and less still on romantic relationships in boys. "It's surprising when you consider most youth have reached sexual maturity by early adolescence, and more than 30 percent nationally report engaging in sexual behaviors by ninth grade."

Kreager would like to replicate the study in a more urban setting and expand the scope to include students through twelfth grade. "Typically rural communities are more conservative than urban ones, but we think we will find similar dynamics in other settings. I'm also interested in exploring how peer relationships evolve into romantic ones and how these changes in relationships affect social status."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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