

Helping young adults talk about decision to abstain, delay sex

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Not all college students and young adults want to be sexually active, but talking with a partner about the decision to abstain or delay is difficult. A new Iowa State University study looks at how students initiate these conversations and the strategies they use to explain their decision.

At a time of greater awareness about sexual assault, Tina Coffelt, an assistant professor of English and communication studies, says it is important to help students navigate these conversations. Young [adults](#) may be reluctant to express these needs because of fear of rejection from their partner, or they may feel it is taboo to talk openly about [sexual activity](#), she said. There are resources available, but many focus on [safe sex](#).

"Our culture assumes that [young adults](#) do not want to wait, so the messages are always about how to have safe sex," Coffelt said. "What about students or emerging adults who don't want to have sex? There just doesn't seem to be that much support, especially from a secular perspective."

Other studies have shown as many as 25 percent of young adults are virgins. Part of Coffelt's motivation for this study, published in the Western Journal of Communication, was to identify the tactics students use when talking about abstinence or delaying. She says some [health centers](#) and websites promote "talking with your partner," but offer no guidance or explanation of what that means.

Coffelt collected data through online surveys of 192 young adults and interviews with 27. Nearly all participants agreed the conversation should include a reason or explanation for delaying or abstaining. Coffelt says this point struck her because she found no evidence in the existing research of young adults explaining why they were sexually active. However, in her study a majority said some rationale was necessary when abstaining.

Goals and tactics

Asserting or enforcing an individual right was the most frequently stated goal – 43 percent – for [study participants](#). Coffelt identified three distinct themes or ways they engaged in conversations to delay or abstain:

- A personal choice that reflected independence and an expectation the choice be respected
- A joint decision or collaboration as a couple to reach an agreement about sexual activity
- An individual demand for no sexual intercourse, but presented as a joint decision

In the study, 94 percent of participants said they did not have sex on the day they had this conversation. Coffelt says this shows their partners respected and honored their wishes. The conversations were often initiated as sexual activity escalated. Participants told their partner "no" or used a nonverbal distancing cue to stop the activity, which was followed by a [conversation](#) later. Some conversations were initiated well before any sexual activity occurred, the study found.

Given that some young adults avoid these conversations because of fear of rejection, Coffelt hopes this study will lessen those concerns.

"Young adults have the right to assert their sexual goals," she said. "If those goals are to abstain or delay, those messages will likely be respected and adhered to."

Clarify to avoid confusion

People have different definitions of abstinence, Coffelt said, and delaying sex has a variety of meanings. For example, several study participants who said they were delaying were willing to engage in sexual activity once they reached a pivotal moment – not necessarily marriage – in the relationship. Coffelt says it is important for young adults to clearly define what they mean to help their [partner](#) understand their wishes, rather than assume.

Many study participants said their parents or religion were also strong motivations for abstaining. While families and religious organizations can help young adults initiate these conversations, Coffelt wants to see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and [student](#) health centers take a more active role. She recommends providing a dialogue that individuals can have if they want to abstain or delay.

More information: Tina A. Coffelt. Sexual Goals, Plans, and Actions: Toward a Sexual Script Emerging Adults Use to Delay or Abstain from Sexual Intercourse, *Western Journal of Communication* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/10570314.2017.1400095](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2017.1400095)

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