

Risky sexual behavior stems from physical abuse for boys, marijuana use for girls

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Credit: Case Western Reserve University

What leads to risky sexual behavior in adolescence seems to vary by gender, according to new research from Case Western Reserve University.

For boys, there's a direct connection to child abuse. For girls, marijuana use appears to be a risk factor.

"In [social science research](#) there are so many factors that we cannot control for and, so, we cannot claim cause-and-effect," said Laura Voith,

assistant professor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. "But, because the data were collected using a prospective design—meaning individuals were followed longitudinally—we feel much more confident in the pathways uncovered by this research."

Drawing from the national longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children at-risk for maltreatment were surveyed nationally, this study focused on data collected at ages 12 and following up every two years until age 18.

"Previous research in this area has not looked at substance use as an important factor that helps explain, or mediates, the relation between exposure to violence in childhood and risky sexual behavior in adolescence," Voith said. "What's more, boys have often been left out of this research."

The research was recently published in the *Journal of Adolescence*.

Additional highlights include:

- Gender differences related to risky sexual behavior are linked to how boys and girls cope with serious issues at home.
- Adolescent risky sexual behaviors—defined as sex with three or more partners, lack of condom use, and pregnancy—represent serious public-health concerns, jeopardizing health and well-being.
- Screening and addressing marijuana abuse using harm-reduction techniques as part of prevention efforts may be particularly beneficial for girls to address risky sexual [behavior](#) in late adolescence.
- Programs focusing on healthy gender development with boys exposed to physical abuse before they reach adolescence may

reduce [risky sexual behavior](#).

In 2015, individuals aged 15 to 24 accounted for nearly half of new [sexually transmitted diseases](#) and one-fourth of new HIV diagnoses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Joining Voith in the research were lead author Susan Yoon, from the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University, and third author Julia Kobulsky, from the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland.

The goal, Voith said, is to get this research into the hands of social workers, practitioners and policymakers involved with high-risk youth.

"Our study helps connect key experiences in at-risk children and youth's lives," she said, "which we hope will help shape stronger programming that can off-set risky trajectories of violence-exposed youth."

More information: Susan Yoon et al. Gender differences in pathways from child physical and sexual abuse to adolescent risky sexual behavior among high-risk youth, *Journal of Adolescence* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.02.006](#)

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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