

# A meta-analysis of three types of peer norms and their relation with adolescent sexual behavior

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Researchers at Utrecht University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute collaborated on a meta-analysis of research on adolescent sexual behavior.

The goal was to analyze how this behavior is related to adolescents' perceptions of three types of sexual peer norms, including how sexually active their peers are, how much their peers would approve of being sexually active, or how much they feel pressured by their peers to have sex. Awareness that these are different ways in which peers can affect adolescents' sexual behaviors is important for parents, teachers, and health care professionals who want to stimulate adolescents' responsible and healthy sexual decision making. The meta-analysis is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

## Which peer norms were investigated?

The three types of peer norms analyzed in the study include descriptive norms, injunctive norms and peer pressure. *Descriptive norms* reflect adolescents' perceptions of peers' engagement in sexual behaviors. In general, individuals tend to imitate others' behaviors based on the reasoning that if others are doing it, especially when many others do it, it might be a good or wise thing to do.

*Injunctive norms* reflect adolescents' perceptions of peers' approval of

engagement in sexual behaviors. When individuals are thinking about engaging in a certain behavior, and they believe that their peers would approve of this behavior, they are more likely to initiate that behavior. *Peer pressure*, a term that many people are familiar with, refers to explicit social pressure from peers to engage in sexual behavior. Peer pressure can affect individuals' behavioral decisions based on their perception of potential social gains or losses (e.g., status or exclusion), depending on their conformation to the exerted pressure.

The meta-analysis found that all three types of peer norms are related to adolescents' sexual behavior.

## **Does one peer norm have a greater effect than another?**

The meta-analysis reviewed 58 published and unpublished studies conducted in 15 countries. Together, the studies provided data on 69,638 adolescents, with sample sizes ranging from 29 to 7,530. The analysis found that adolescents tended to be more sexually active themselves if they perceived their peers as a) more sexually active, b) more approving of having sex, and c) exerting more pressure on them to be sexually active. "What adolescents think that their peers do (role modeling) seems to be most important: adolescents who think that their peers engage in sex are more likely to engage in sex themselves. Peers' approval of having sex, or peer pressure to have sex, also matter, but seem to matter less," explains lead researcher, Daphne van de Bongardt.

Surprisingly, the analysis found that peer pressure had the smallest effect on sexual behavior. Daphne van de Bongardt cautions this result saying, "the meta-analysis included only 10 studies that examined peer pressure, and they varied considerably in the way in which peer pressure was measured (e.g., number of items, source and focus of the pressure).

Overall, the literature could be clearer about what "peer pressure" entails, and how it can best be measured. More research is needed to get more insight into adolescents' own definitions of peer pressure, and the subtlety in which peer pressure may operate in adolescents' interactions with peers."

How strongly adolescents' sexual behaviors are related to sexual peer norms is similar for boys and girls, according to the analysis. However, the extent to which peers engage in sexual risk behavior appears to be more strongly related to girls' engagement in sexual risk behavior than it is for boys.

## Need for future research

There were several limitations that the researchers faced in analyzing the existing research. More research is needed to investigate how age, gender, ethnicity, different peer types, and other factors, such as socioeconomic status or discrimination affect relations between peer norms and adolescent sexual behaviors. Most studies also utilized a narrow description of sexual activity by assessing only heterosexual intercourse, which leaves out other forms of sexual behavior adolescents might engage in.

More longitudinal research is needed to better understand how sexual peer norms and adolescent sexual behavior are linked over-time, and to disentangle the extent to which adolescents are influenced by peers in their sexual behaviors (socialization processes), or the extent to which they select peers who share similar sexual norms (selection processes). The meta-analysis suggests that both processes play a role.

**More information:** Van de Bongardt, D., Reitz, E., Sandfort, T., Deković, M., (2014). A Meta-Analysis of the Relations Between Three Types of Peer Norms and Adolescent Sexual Behavior. *Personality and*

*Social Psychology Review.*

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