

Dating and Nondating Relationships Among Sexually Active Adolescents Are Often Surprisingly Similar

Sexually active teenagers who are not in a dating relationship most often have sex with other adolescents whom they know well, according to a study of seventh, ninth and 11th graders in Lucas County, Ohio.¹ Although 61% of sexually active adolescents surveyed had had sex with someone who was not their boyfriend or girlfriend, only a very small proportion of this group had engaged in sex with strangers, and fewer than one-quarter had had sex with people they considered to be only acquaintances. Teenagers' nondating relationships were similar to their dating relationships in many ways: In each context, partners tended to be of similar ages, to have known each other for at least a month, to tell their friends about the relationship and to see each other exclusively.

The researchers drew upon the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, which provided data on the sexual relationships of 1,316 adolescents who were randomly selected from the year 2000 enrollment records of seven Ohio school districts. The researchers note that Lucas County's demographic and socioeconomic profile is similar to that of the United States. Adolescents who had had sex in the past 12 months were asked to describe aspects of their relationships at the time they and their partners began having sex, including partner type (acquaintance,

friend, best friend, girlfriend or boyfriend, former girlfriend or boyfriend, someone they did not know or "other"), the length of their relationships, the age gap between themselves and their partners, levels of exclusivity and various attitudes toward sex partners.

Some 30% of the sample (32% of males and 27% of females) reported having ever had sex. Within this group, 61% (69% of males and 52% of females) had had a nondating sexual relationship; 74% of these nondating adolescents had had a sexual relationship with a friend, while 63% had done so with a former girlfriend or boyfriend.

Among the teenagers who had had a nondating sexual relationship in the 12 months prior to the survey, 6% had had sex with someone they did not know, 23% with an acquaintance, 14% with a former boyfriend or girlfriend, and 48% with a friend. A significantly greater proportion of males than of females reported a nondating relationship with someone they had previously dated (16% vs. 12%) or a stranger (7% vs. 5%), while a significantly larger proportion of females than of males had relationships with acquaintances (25% vs. 22%), friends (49% vs. 47%) or people they went out with occasionally (9% vs. 4%). On average, adolescents in dating and nondating relationships did not differ significantly in the

length of time they had known their sexual partners, although a larger proportion of nondating teenagers had known their partner for one year or longer (32% vs. 11%). Patterns of age disparity between adolescents and their sex partners were similar among those in nondating and dating relationships: Sixty-two percent of nondating and 53% of dating participants reported having had a sex partner whose age was within one year of their own, while 28% and 33%, respectively, reported a 1–3-year age difference. Among adolescents in both types of relationships, females tended to have known their partners longer than males; females also tended to be farther in age from their partners.

Adolescents' attitudes toward their sex partner and relationship differed significantly according to dating status. Larger proportions of dating than of nondating teenagers felt that sex brought them closer to their partner (67% vs. 32%), told friends about the relationship (92% vs. 67%) and were in an exclusive relationship (56% vs. 47%). However, the researchers point out, the large proportions of teenagers who reported having made their nondating relationships public and who felt that they and their nondating sexual partners were seeing each other exclusively indicates that nondating relationships may not be any more impersonal or fleeting than dating relationships. Along the same lines, 48% of nondating adolescents had had sex with their partner multiple times, rather than engaging in one-night stands. Furthermore, although the majority of dating adolescents were in monogamous relationships, nearly half were not, indicating that exclusivity is not a defining characteristic of either type of relationship.

According to the researchers, “a simple dichotomy (dating vs. nondating) does not adequately reflect teenagers' interpretations of the nature and meaning of their relationships or the impact of sexual intimacy.” They suggest that despite traditional assumptions to the contrary, nondating relationships may confer some of the developmental benefits that adolescents are thought to derive primarily from dating. To better understand the implications of relationship type for adolescents' emotional well-being, maturation and sexual risk-taking behaviors, the researchers encourage “recognizing the differences in these relationship contexts . . . [and] exploring some of the variability evident within each type of relationship.”—*H. Ball*

REFERENCE

1. Manning WD, Giordano PC and Longmore MA, Hooking up: the relationship contexts of “nonrelationship” sex, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 2006, 21(5):459–483.