Teenagers Who Refrain from Having Sex May Experience Social, Emotional Consequences

Reports from a sample of California high school students suggest that over time, teenagers increasingly feel negative social or emotional consequences of refraining from sexual activity, and their experiences of positive consequences diminish. In a two-year longitudinal study, changes in reported consequences of refraining from sexual activity followed similar patterns regardless of participants’ sexual experience. Reports of any consequence were more likely among females and sexually experienced students than among males and those who had never had intercourse.

The study was conducted in two public schools beginning in fall 2002, when participants were in ninth grade. Students were asked to complete self-administered surveys every six months for two years; the analyses were based on the 612 teenagers who answered the baseline survey’s questions about their sexual experience and any emotional or social consequences they had experienced because they had refrained from having vaginal or oral sex. Researchers conducted separate analyses for students who were sexually inexperienced throughout the study period, those who were sexually experienced at baseline, from 67% to 52%; and for those who initiated intercourse during the study period, from 62% to 33%.

Reports of negative consequences (i.e., a partner had become angry or participants had had a bad reputation, felt regret, felt left out of their group, or felt let down by a partner) became increasingly frequent over time. The proportion reporting any negative consequence rose from 8% to 23% among sexually inexperienced students, from 38% to 70% among those who reported sexual experience on their initial survey and from 24% to 60% among those who had initiated intercourse during the study period, from 62% to 33%.

Similarly, as students progressed through ninth and 10th grades, they grew less likely to report only positive consequences of not having sex and more likely to report only negative ones.

Analyses controlling for sexual experience reveal that at each survey, females were significantly more likely than males to report any positive consequence of refraining from sexual activity (odds ratios, 4.1–5.9), any negative consequence (1.6–2.6) and only positive consequences (2.3–8.6). On the first three surveys, according to analyses that controlled for gender, participants who had been sexually experienced at baseline were more likely than those who were sexually inexperienced throughout the study to report any positive consequence of not having sex (2.3–3.1); on all four surveys, they were more likely to report any negative consequence (4.0–9.0). At the end of grade 10, sexually inexperienced students were more likely than those who had been sexually experienced early in ninth grade to report only positive consequences.

The researchers note that their results may not be widely generalizable and that the limited number of potential consequences they studied “may not describe adolescents’ full experiences.” Furthermore, they acknowledge that they cannot determine whether teenagers who reported refraining from sexual activity were practicing abstinence, selectively rejected sexual encounters or simply lacked opportunity. Nonetheless, they conclude, their findings underscore that “refraining from sexual behavior has emotional and social consequences.” Therefore, they write, comprehensive sex education should include instruction that “may promote decisions to refrain from sexual activity that feel rewarding, and decisions to engage in sexual activity that are based on maturity and perceived readiness.” – D. Hollander

REFERENCE