Sexual Attitudes and Behavior of Young Adolescents in Jamaica

Table 1. Percentage of adolescents aged 11–14 answering selected questions about reproduction correctly or agreeing with selected statements on sexual behavior, family planning and pregnancy, Jamaica, 1995 (n=945)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question or statement</th>
<th>Girls (n=490)</th>
<th>Boys (n=455)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of reproduction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time during menstrual cycle when pregnancy most likely to occur.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>9.3**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy is not possible at first intercourse.</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoms protect against STDs.</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>77.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth control pills protect against STDs.</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having sex while standing prevents pregnancy.</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>30.3**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Coke or Pepsi after sex prevents pregnancy.</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>23.9**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attitudes about sexual behavior

It is okay for a girl to have sexual intercourse with a boy who is not her steady boyfriend. | 3.5 | 17.8** |
It is okay for a boy to have sexual intercourse with a girl who is not his steady girlfriend. | 5.1 | 28.4** |
If you really love your boyfriend or girlfriend, you should have sex with him/her. | 32.0 | 69.2** |
If a boy spends a lot of money on a girl, she should have sexual intercourse with him. | 29.8 | 57.6** |

Attitudes about family planning

A girl who uses birth control pills is being responsible. | 64.7 | 67.3 |
A boy who uses a condom is showing respect to his girlfriend. | 85.7 | 85.7 |
Condoms are only for boys who have sex with more than one girl. | 53.9 | 71.4** |
Birth control pills are only for girls who have sexual intercourse with more than one boy. | 42.5 | 58.9** |

Attitudes about pregnancy

A girl my age is responsible enough to be a mother. | 9.2 | 22.2** |
A boy my age is responsible enough to be a father. | 9.4 | 25.9* |
At my age, being a mother/father would be a good thing. | 5.9 | 28.7** |
A girl should have a baby when she is a teenager to prove she is not a mule. | 28.9 | 40.0** |

**Difference is statistically significant at p<.001. †Meaning that she would want to prove her fertility.

Results

Knowledge about Sex and Reproduction

In general, the students demonstrated a very low level of knowledge about reproductive matters (Table 1). For example, fewer than 10% could identify the point during the menstrual cycle when a girl is most likely to get pregnant, and only about one-third knew that pregnancy is possible at first sexual intercourse. Adolescents seemed most knowledgeable when it came to condom use: Seventy-eight percent of boys and 53% of girls agreed with the statement that “using a condom is a good way to avoid getting a sexually transmitted disease.”

A significantly higher proportion of boys than girls answered most knowledge items correctly on the questionnaire. However, this sex difference was strongly influenced by the fact that girls were far more likely than boys to choose “I don’t know” as their response to all knowledge items (data not shown). Thus, the fact that boys demonstrated higher knowledge than girls may be partly explained by their greater aversion, relative to girls, to admitting a lack of knowledge.

Although in the survey adolescents tended to answer knowledge questions incorrectly, in the focus-group discussions they seemed more aware of methods of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). They often spontaneously suggested that adolescents should use family planning if they decide to have sex. They frequently mentioned the condom and the pill as appropriate methods for young people and volunteered that these contraceptives are available from doctors, health centers and pharmacies. In a Kingston group, a boy even specified: “From the shelf in the pharmacy where you get all the ointment and cream.”

While adolescents were familiar with many modern contraceptive methods, there was evidence that their knowledge was incomplete or inaccurate. A girl in one focus group reported: “Some of them say when they have sex, they can drink a Pepsi or take an aspirin [to prevent pregnancy].” While many adolescents in the focus groups were aware that conception occurs at a particular time during the menstrual cycle, neither boys nor girls seemed to know when that time was. In a focus group at a rural school, a girl suggested that Nell got pregnant “because she had sex with the boy while she was seeing her period.”

Sexual Mores

Adolescents’ survey responses indicated that they disapprove of sexual activity among youth their age. Girls thought that boys and girls should first experience sexual intercourse at, respectively, ages 21 and 22. Boys said that both boys and girls should wait until age 20 to have sex for the first time. Most survey respondents believed that an adolescent should not have sexual intercourse outside of an established romantic relationship (Table 1). For example, very few young adolescents (4% of girls and 18% of boys) thought that it was acceptable for a girl to have sex with someone other than her steady boyfriend. Similarly, 28% of boys and just 5% of girls agreed that it was “okay” for a boy to have sex with someone other than his steady girlfriend. Boys’ attitudes were significantly more permissive than those of girls regarding all of the scenarios presented.

In the focus groups, boys and girls expressed differing attitudes about the acceptability of adolescent sexual activity. Boys in all groups were divided on the issue: Some felt that young people should wait until they are older and have finished school before having sex; many others did not disapprove of adolescent sex, but expressed concern about the risk of pregnancy. A boy in one focus group warned, “Him would feel big, but suppose him do it and the girl get pregnant? Him would be in a lot of trouble.” Others worried about the risk of contracting HIV or an STD. A sizable proportion of boys, however, thought that a boy should have sex by age 12 or 13.

With few exceptions, girls in the focus-group discussions disapproved of a girl their age engaging in sexual intercourse, and they appeared to be well schooled about the potential negative consequences of sexual activity. Girls in all of the focus groups gave similar reasons to explain why girls their age should not have sex: Risk of pregnancy was the predominant reason in all groups. One girl warned, “My auntie say when it go in, it sweet, but when it come out, it bring sor-row—baby come.” Like boys, many girls also cited the risk of STDs as a deterrent to engaging in sexual activity.

Girls cautioned that a girl risks acquiring a bad reputation if she has sex. A girl in one focus group warned that a boy is unlikely to be discreet if he has sex: “If Nell broke up with Ted, Ted gonna go about and tell him friends. He will disgrace her.” Girls in all of the focus-group discussions made derogatory comments about girls their age who were sexually active, but no girls indicated disapproval of boys their age who have sex.

Sexual Activity and Attitudes

- Sexual experience. Reported sexual experience on the survey was vastly different between boys and girls, with 64% of boys