Discussion

It is unsettling to focus on the high rates of early sexual initiation that are brought to the forefront in an article such as this. National surveys have consistently found that a small percentage of adolescents report first intercourse prior to high school; yet within the national statistics, it is easy to gloss over the high prevalence of early sexual initiation within some communities, such as the urban settings in which RFH operates. Few would argue that it is developmentally appropriate or healthy for one-third of males to have had sex before they entered middle school, or for one-fifth of females to have done so before they left eighth grade, yet that is what these youth report. The concern, however, is not only that some adolescents are beginning to have intercourse too early, but also that they are more likely then others to engage in a pattern of risky sexual behaviors known to be related to a host of negative outcomes. They are distinguishable from peers who initiate intercourse later by having had a greater number of sexual partners, as well as more frequent recent intercourse. Despite their greater experience, youth who initiate sex early do not use condoms more consistently, and by 10th grade they have experienced a disproportionate number of pregnancies.

It is essential to point out that the health and social consequences of early sexual onset are not equally distributed nationally among youth. The chance that a white adolescent experiences his or her first intercourse at the ages commonly reported in this sample is indeed small—one out of 20. It is clear that early sexual initiation and its subsequent pattern of risk-taking have not been receiving the attention they deserve or would get if the behaviors were more prevalent in wealthier communities. An important step toward addressing the risks of early onset is the acknowledgment that in some communities, such behavior has become normative.

It is also evident, however, that even within a community where many young adolescents become sexually active, about one-third of males and half of females delay initiation of intercourse until after 10th grade. This range in age of sexual initiation presents its own challenge. For example, how can school-based sexuality education programs (which the majority of parents support) be delivered with equal relevance and effectiveness to 10th graders when some have had three or more years of sexual experience, while others are still trying to abstain from sexual activity? The diversity of sexual histories in such a group is often overlooked when controversies center on such issues as abstinence and whether condoms can be discussed or distributed in schools.

There are multiple reasons why early sexual onset is overlooked and why prevention programs are often started too late. Despite the importance of parental monitoring on reducing early sexual and other risk-taking, parents and teachers often underestimate children’s emergent sexual behaviors. As reported in one study of black families with 14–17-year-olds, two factors...