FIGURE 1. Odds ratios from logistic regression analysis indicating the association between partners' age gap and females' having had intercourse with a romantic partner, by female's age

Note: Odds ratios were adjusted for respondent's race or ethnicity, respondent's religion, presence of mother figure at home and mother's education. The reference for each age was the group of females with a same-age partner.

covariates. Because of this interaction, the effect of age gap on the odds of intercourse should be considered for each age of female separately.

To illustrate more clearly the effect of a female’s age and age gap on the odds of intercourse, we calculated the odds of intercourse among females with older partners, relative to those among females with a same-age partner, by age gap and for each single year of age. As age difference increased, so did the odds of having engaged in sexual intercourse; this effect was strongest for the youngest females (Figure 1). For example, among 13-year-old females, the odds of intercourse with a partner who was six years older were more than six times the odds of intercourse with a same-age partner (odds ratio, 6.4; 95% confidence interval, 3.4–11.8). In contrast, the odds among 17-year-old females with a partner six years their senior were about twice those among 17-year-old females with a same-age partner (2.1; 95% confidence interval, 1.4–3.3).

When we limited our analyses to the 993 respondents who reported that their romantic relationship had ended, the association between age difference and the odds of having had intercourse was stronger than that found in the full model. For example, 13-year-old females with a partner six years older had odds of intercourse that were nearly 10 times those among 17-year-olds with same-age partners (odds ratio, 6.4; 95% confidence interval, 3.4–11.8). In contrast, the odds among 17-year-old females with a partner six years their senior were about twice those of 17-year-olds with same-age partners (2.1; 95% confidence interval, 1.4–3.3). Thus, analysis of the full model, which includes both ended and ongoing relationships, reflects a more conservative estimate of the impact of partner age difference on the likelihood of sex with a romantic partner.

DISCUSSION

Our analyses suggest that the age difference between romantic partners is an important predictor of whether they will engage in sexual intercourse. Compared with females with same-age partners, those who had older partners had a higher risk of having had sexual intercourse. The magnitude of this association was most dramatic among the youngest adolescent females. It is important to keep in mind, however, that older females were more likely than younger females to have had intercourse. Therefore, both the age of an adolescent female and the age of her older partner have an important influence on whether a romantic relationship includes intercourse.

Age differences between partners may influence the progression of a romantic relationship in a variety of ways that would affect sexual activity. Older males may enter a romantic relationship with different expectations from younger males about relationship behaviors, including greater expectations of sexual intercourse. Furthermore, females who become involved with older partners may experience longer relationships because older males may expect or desire longer or more “serious” relationships than same-age males; one result may be a higher likelihood of progression to intercourse. For this reason, we did not treat the duration of the relationship as a confounder; instead, we treated it as a possible intermediate factor in the pathway.

Although we could not directly estimate and control for respondents’ socioeconomic status, our analyses may have controlled for some characteristics that are broadly associated with socioeconomic status: The observed associations of race or ethnicity and of mother’s educational level with the odds of intercourse are likely driven largely by socioeconomic factors.

The results largely agree with the findings of others that indicate an association between age gap and sexual behaviors among adolescent couples. Our finding of an interaction between a female’s age and the age difference between partners is consistent with an earlier study showing that the effect of the age gap between a female and her first sexual partner on certain problem behaviors (suicide attempts, substance abuse and pregnancy) was largest among younger females. We suggest that power and communication dynamics between adolescent females and older partners may be substantially different for females in early and later adolescence. The data, however, did not allow us to determine whether females with older romantic partners specifically sought these relationships out of a desire for sexual activity or whether the older partner differentially pressured these females into having intercourse.

Our findings should be interpreted with caution. Although they support the idea that a romantic relationship between a young adolescent female and an older male is