

**Gender Differences in Sexual Activity:  
What Role do Parents Play in Shaping Behaviors?**

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The social context in which adolescent sexual activity occurs has changed considerably in the recent past. Since 1990, the percentage of teens who report having had sex has decreased, teen birthrates and abortion rates have declined, and contraceptive use, especially condom use has increased (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007).

Our over-riding objective in this research is to use some unique data to explore how changes in sexual and linked family mores in the most recent decade may have impacted on changes in early adolescent sexual activity between 1996 and 2006, and how social change may have altered earlier behavioral and attitudinal family linkages potentially linked with subsequent early sexual behaviors which in turn may have altered gender distinctions in the incidence of early sexual activity, as measured by age at first sex.

There are two fundamental processes that we will be exploring using longitudinal maternal and early adolescent reports from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) from both mothers and their sons' and daughters' who were young adolescents about a decade apart—in 1992 and 2002. The maternal inputs includes information from the mother about her early sexual activity and a number of activities linking mothers and daughters at those historic points that at least some research has suggested could be predictive of early sex by their children. From the child's perspective, we have a variety of inputs obtained directly from the youth about a number of their behaviors/ interactions with their mothers, and to a lesser extent with their fathers. All the explanatory variables we include are available from both the 1992 and 2002 survey rounds.

In this first component of the research, we will explore the extent to which these maternal and early adolescent behaviors/attitudes have changed over the decade, and how these changes

may have selectively impacted boys and girls. (Tentative inputs for youth and mothers are the same for the youth in 1992 and 2002 and may be noted in Appendix Table 1). We will then, within a multivariate framework, explore how gender differences in early sexual activity are linked with changes in (1992 and 2002) early maternal –child connections and subsequently , how maternal and child behavior behaviors/ attitudes are linked with the adolescent outcome in 1996 and 2006 respectively; (1) to what extent are levels/changes in these antecedents over time associated with changes in the sexual outcome and (2) to what extent are gender differentials in these inputs linked systematically with changes (reductions!) in early sexual progression for 12 to 14 year old boys and girls between 1996 and 2006?

In prior research on sexual initiation among a high risk sample of American teens (Kowaleski-Jones and Mott, 1998) we found evidence of links between early sexual activity and risk taking attitudes and behaviors, plus evidence of gender differences in the factors associated with sexual initiation. In our more recent work we compare social and familial factors associated with teenage sexual activity across this time period of changing social context, and our results suggest that not only do different social and familiar factors appear to accompany teenage sexual activity for males and females, but that these factors may change over time. For example, comparing adolescents in 1996 and 2006, we find that the influence of early maternal sex operates differently for male and female teens (Kowaleski-Jones and Mott, 2007). For female teens there is no association. For males, however, the association is a significant one, but is lessened over time. These results are shown in Table 1. We interpret this finding as evidence that there are potentially different messages given by mothers to their sons and daughters regarding sexual activity. In addition, social messages about early sex may be changing as well and impacting the messages given by mothers to their children.

In this paper we will attempt to unpack these potentially different messages about sex given by mothers who experienced early sexual initiation themselves by using current data on mother child interactions relevant to sexual activity. We use data from the 1979-2004 waves of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) and their associated child files from 1986 onwards, plus the 1996-2006 NLSY79 Young Adult data. Our sample includes youth from two different cohorts: those who are 14-16 in 1996 and those who are 14-16 in 2006. We focus on 14 to 16 year olds as they represent a segment of adolescence in which sexual activity is considered to be less normative than among older teens.

Our analysis will proceed in two stages. First, we will estimate parallel analyses for our two groups of youth ages 14 to 16 in each time period in which we evaluate associations between the likelihood of early sex and a range of maternal factors such as maternal early sex (by age 18), maternal age at menarche, maternal early substance use, and maternal early behavioral problems. These analyses will control for standard child and family characteristics. We chose to focus on 14 to 16 year olds as they represent a segment of adolescence in which sexual activity is considered to be more non normative than among older teens. Second, we will incorporate rich data available in the child supplement of the NLSY79 to explore the role potentially played by various parental behaviors and parental-child interactions in the pre-adolescent years in conditioning the associations found between early maternal behaviors and characteristics and sexual activity on the one hand and sexual activity of their adolescents on the other. Our measures of parent-child interactions are taken from each adolescent was 10-12 years old in 1992 and 2002 respectively. Data is available on the degree to which boys and girls participate in joint activities such as household chores, which could be seen as a marker for parent child cohesiveness. We also have access to data on whether the youth has input on decision making, a

process key to successful youth development. Finally, there are a series of items that tap the knowledge that parents have about their child's activities, and most importantly the extent to which the youth confides in either parent about sexual decision making.

We expect to find similar relationships between early maternal sexual activity and offspring sexual activity among 14-16 year olds as we have already observed using a sample of 16 to 18 year olds. However, we also hypothesize that our measures of parental-child interactions measured in pre-adolescence will provide important insights into the process by which mothers might be imparting different messages to male and female youth about sexual activity. More importantly, because sexual activity is a much more non-normative behavior for youth age 12 to 14, and that the "non-normative nature" of the event may well differ between boys and girls we anticipate that inputs that may be considered more non-normative will show a continued stronger connection with the outcome. Whereas sex at ages 16 to 18 may be more acceptable at present than earlier, this may not be true—or as true—for younger, 12-14 year old youth. Results from this project will be an important step forward to better understanding the familial dynamics of a key dimension of the transition to adulthood.

We have already undertaken preliminary work and expect to have our analyses completed early in the New Year. We anticipate no problem in having a complete paper well in advance of the 2008 meetings.

## References

Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Kowaleski-Jones, Lori and Frank L. Mott. 1998. Sex, Contraception, and Childbearing among High-Risk Youth: Do Different Factors Influence Males and Females? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 30(4): 163-169.

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TABLE 1: Odds of Ever Sex: Logistic Regressions for Male and female Youth aged 16 to 18 in 1996 and 2006.

Male	1996			2006		
Age	1.63	0.35	b	1.81	0.23	a
Black	3.10	1.14	a	3.11	0.75	a
Hispanic	3.87	1.79	a	2.19	0.58	a
<b>Background Maternal Characteristics</b>						
Highest Grade Completed, Mom	1.15	0.08	c	0.91	0.04	b
Prior Family Size	0.90	0.10		0.92	0.07	
Mom, Sex By 18	3.47	1.69	b	1.64	0.39	b
Mom, First Menses	0.98	0.10		0.92	0.06	
Mom, Substances	2.13	0.54	a	1.30	0.21	
Mom, Behavior Problems	1.17	0.12		1.14	0.07	b
<b>Females</b>						
		<b>1996</b>			<b>2006</b>	
Age	1.85	0.38	a	2.61	0.41	a
Black	0.60	0.23		1.07	0.28	
Hispanic	0.53	0.25		0.71	0.25	
<b>Background Maternal Characteristics</b>						
Highest Grade Completed, Mom	0.90	0.07		0.91	0.05	c
Prior Family Size	0.96	0.09		0.88	0.07	
Mom, Sex By 18	1.34	0.65		1.83	0.51	b
Mom, First Menses	0.94	0.09		0.97	0.07	
Mom, Substances	2.08	0.60	b	1.69	0.31	a
Mom, Behavior Problems	1.13	0.12		1.01	0.06	

a=significant at  $p < .01$ ; b=significant at  $p < .05$  c=significant at  $p < .10$ .

## APPENDIX. Glossary of Explanatory Variables

Variable	Content
<b>Adolescent Sexual Outcomes</b>	
Ever Had Sex	coded 1 if the adolescent ever had sex by 1996 or 2006
<b>Adolescent Demographic</b>	
Male	coded 1 if the adolescent is a male
Child age in 1996/2006	Continuous measure of adolescent's age in 1996 and 2006
Black	coded 1 if the adolescent is black
Hispanic	coded 1 if the adolescent is Hispanic
<b>Adolescent Attitudes</b>	
Planning is no fun	All of these single items were coded where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly disagree
Has to use self control	
No danger is dull	
Self Esteem	Positive self-esteem is indexed by the 9-item Rosenberg self-esteem scale, Cronbach's alpha for this index is .85.
Mastery	Positive locus of control is measured by a 7 item mean index that taps the degree to which adolescents feel that they have control over their actions and environment. Cronbach's alpha for this index is .72.
Depression score	Levels of depression is indexed by a seven item mean index that ascertains how often an adolescent's mood has affected their energy level, sleeping habits, and their ability to concentrate. Cronbach's alpha for this index is .71.
<b>Contemporary Maternal/Family</b>	
Mother's highest grade completed (HGC)	Continuous measure of highest grade completed by mother of adolescent in 1992 and 2002
Family size	Actual number of children under the age of 18 in the household in 1992 and 2002
Mother's avg. weeks. worked per yr.,	Average number of weeks per year worked in 1992 and 2002
<b>Early Maternal</b>	
Mother had sex by age 18	Continuous measure of age at first sexual intercourse of mother of adolescent.
Mother's age at first menarche	Continuous measure of age at first menstrual period of mother of adolescent.
Mother's Early Substance Use	A composite of cigarette and alcohol items asked in 1984. Alcohol use was coded one if the mother had six or more drinks on at least two occasions in the previous month. Cigarette use was coded one if the mother had one or more cigarettes per day in the previous month.
Mother's Early Deviant Behavior Score	Developed from a series of eight items addressed to the mothers in 1980. One point was added to the overall score for each of the following: 1) taking a car without the owner's permission; 2) breaking into a building to steal or just look around; 3) destroying property more than once; 4) shoplifting; 5) smoking marijuana more than once; 6) using force to obtain money or things; 7) attacking someone with the intent to injure them; or 8) trying to get something from someone by lying to them. The range of scores is from 0 (no bad behavior) to 8.