

Preventing Risky Sex and Adolescent Parenthood: Does the Effectiveness of Parenting Practices Differ for Children with Varied Risks?

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Introduction

Despite large declines in the teen birth rate, levels of early sexual activity and parenthood remain high among contemporary American adolescents compared with other countries. Moreover, the absolute number of births to teens has declined only slightly, with more than 420,000 teens having babies annually (Martin, Hamilton, Sutton, Ventura, et al., 2006). Recent efforts to achieve further reductions have focused on harder-to-reach populations, including highly disadvantaged and immigrant adolescents, and populations that have been relatively neglected, including males.

Parents are regularly found to be a critical socializing influence on the development of adolescents as well as younger children (Xiaoming, Stanton, Feigelman, 2000; DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Cobb, Harrington, Davies, Susan, 2001); but the role of fathers has been particularly neglected, with most studies focusing on mothers (Stouthamer-Loeber, and Wei, 1998; Pirog-Good, 1995). While most studies of parenting do not focus on sexual and fertility behavior, a number of studies do so. For example, an expanding research literature has found that parent-teen relationships and communication and parental monitoring/awareness are associated with delayed sexual activity and sometimes with contraceptive use (Miller, 1998).

However, most of this research assumes main effects for parenting. In other words, researchers implicitly assume that the effects of parental monitoring, for example, are constant for all children. In fact, a number of studies indicate that many aspects of parenting differ across sub-groups, such as boys compared with girls (Borawski, Ievers-Landis, Lovegreen, and Trapl, 2003), including some that examine sexual and fertility outcomes (Manlove, Terry-Humen, Ikramullah and Moore, 2006; Rodgers, 1999). Moreover, evolving research suggests that the effectiveness of varied parenting practices differs depending upon other characteristics of the child, such as levels of early risk-taking (Dishion and Bullock, 2002). However, little research has examined how parenting interacts with such risk factors to influence the likelihood of adolescent sex and parenthood.

In this paper, we explore how parenting practices interact with adolescent gender and early adolescent risks to affect sexual behavior and early parenthood later in the adolescent years. We hypothesize that:

- Higher versus lower levels of parental monitoring and authoritative parenting will be associated with reduced sexual activity, greater contraceptive use, and a lower risk of a teen birth.
- Stronger parenting (including monitoring and authoritarian parenting) will be especially protective for preventing risky sexual behaviors among high-risk adolescents (including those with behavioral problems, poor school performance, and high family, neighborhood and peer risks).
- Both mother and father reports of monitoring/awareness and parenting will have independent effects on adolescent sexual behaviors.

Data

We are using longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort (NLSY97). This is a nationally representative sample of nearly 9,000 adolescents aged 12-16 in 1997. The survey provides a broad array of information about the adolescents and their families, schools, and peers, including information about parenting practices and adolescent sexual and fertility behavior. These data allow analyses of factors in early adolescence that affect sexual activity and childbearing later in the teen years. Because questions on family processes were, for the most part, only asked of adolescents aged 12-14 in the initial interview, we conduct our analyses on this sub-sample.

Measures

We examine three dependent variables developed from the longitudinal data file: whether an adolescent has had sexual intercourse prior to age 16; whether an adolescent has had unsafe sex at age 16, defined as having had intercourse but not consistently using contraception; and whether a teen had become a parent prior to age 18. Analyses are being conducted separately for males and females, reflecting different parenting practices and sexual and fertility behaviors among teens.

The independent variables of primary interest include measures developed by Child Trends for the NLSY97, which we have previously found to be related to adolescent sexual and reproductive behavior, among other behaviors (e.g., Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps, and Zaff, 2004; Manlove, Terry-Humen, Ikramullah, and Moore, 2006). These variables include parental monitoring and authoritative parenting.

However, in this paper, we go beyond previous work by examining interactions between parenting behaviors and the adolescents' levels of initial risk. Based on an ecological model, we assess risks in the adolescent, in the family, at school, in the peer group, and in the neighborhood. Specifically, we examine:

- Early risk-taking behaviors of the adolescent, specifically whether the adolescent was reported in the initial interview to lie or cheat, whether the adolescent smoked before age 13, and whether the adolescent used alcohol before age 13;
- Adolescent report of a poor parent/child relationship in wave one;
- Reported poor school performance in eighth grade;
- Index of neighborhood risk developed from wave one data; and
- Index of peer behavior problems developed from wave one data.

Thus, using these varied measures of risk, we will examine the hypothesis that adolescents with greater risks will benefit more from parental monitoring and authoritative parenting than adolescents at lesser risk.

Methods

We have created the variables to be used for these analyses (see Table One), and we have examined gender differences in the variables. We have also examined the bivariate associations between the independent variables and the three dependent variables, and we find the expected associations between higher levels of risk and poorer parenting and a greater likelihood of risky sex and adolescent parenthood.

In addition, we have begun to examine interactions between parenting behaviors and measures of risk in early adolescence. Table Two provides initial results that examine how parental monitoring is associated with subsequent sexual and fertility behaviors for adolescents who reported that they lied or cheated, compared with those who reported that they did not lie or cheat. These initial results indicate substantial differences across the dependent variables by gender, level of monitoring, and whether the adolescent was reported to lie or cheat. They do not show evidence that monitoring interacts with early behavior problems; however, this preliminary analysis only examines one measure of early risk and one measure of parenting. Patterns will be further examined in bivariate analyses; but the primary models to be presented will be based on multivariate models. Specifically, we will estimate models that include main effects for early risks and for parenting and then estimate models that examine an interaction between early risks and parenting.

All analyses will control for a set of critical demographic and background factors found in previous research to be related to adolescent sexual and fertility behavior, including race/ethnicity, poverty, parent education, and family structure.

Findings will be discussed with regard to their implications for research on parenting behaviors as well as programs developed to reduce risky sex and early childbearing. In particular, implications will be explored for gender differences in approaches to reduce risky sexual behavior and childbearing during adolescence.

Tables

Table 1: NLSY97 Adolescents Aged 12-14 in 1997, Sample Characteristics, Weighted

Dependent Variable		Gender Distribution		
		Percent of Total Sample	Male	Female
Safe Sex by age 16				
	<i>Used Birth Control all the times or Sexually Inactive</i>	58	51	49
	<i>Sexually active and inconsistent use of Birth Control</i>	42	52	51
Early Sex (before age 16)				
	<i>Sexually inactive by age 16</i>	59	51	49
	<i>Sexually active by age 16</i>	41	52	48
Teen Birth				
	<i>Had child before age 17</i>	2.4	20	80
	<i>Had child before age 18</i>	4.9	24	76
Independent Variables				
Parental Monitoring (1997-1999)				
Range (0-16)	<i>Low Risk</i>	45	55	45
	<i>High Risk</i>	55	48	52
Parenting Style				
	<i>Supportive Mom</i>	58	52	48
	<i>Supportive and somewhat supportive mom</i>	83	52	48
	<i>Strict mom</i>	44	51	49
	<i>Supportive dad</i>	41	55	45
	<i>Supportive and somewhat supportive dad</i>	64	54	46
	<i>Strict Dad</i>	38	51	49
	Respondent's Mother was Teen Mom	32	50	50
Cheating				
	<i>Never Lies or Cheats</i>	51	57	43
	<i>Sometimes Lies or Cheats</i>	49	45	55
Early Smoking (Age of first smoke)				
	<i>Never Smoked</i>	28	47	53
	<i>Age 12 or younger</i>	24	56	44
	<i>Between Age 12-15</i>	16	43	57
	<i>After Age 15</i>	32	55	45

Family/ Home Risk Index				
Range (1-21)	<i>Low Risk</i>	62	51	49
	<i>High Risk</i>	38	52	48
Physical Environment Risk Index				
Range (0-7)	<i>Low Risk</i>	85	51	49
	<i>High Risk</i>	15	53	47
Enriching Environment Index				
Range (0-3)	0	3	55	45
	1	32	53	47
	2	47	52	48
	3	18	46	54
Negative Peer Risk Index				
Range (0-5)	0	22	55	45
	1	15	58	42
	2	17	53	47
	3	14	51	49
	4	18	45	55
	5	14	43	57
Control Variables				
Ethnicity				
	<i>Black</i>	16	51	49
	<i>Hispanic</i>	13	52	48
	<i>Mixed Race (Non-Hispanic)</i>	1	46	54
	<i>Non-Black/ Non Hispanic</i>	70	51	49
Highest Grade Completed by Residential Parents				
	<i>Did not complete high school</i>	18	52	48
	<i>High School</i>	28	50	50
	<i>Three years of college</i>	26	50	50
	<i>4 years of college or more</i>	28	53	47
School Failure (Grades at 8th grade)				
	<i>Mostly D's some C's</i>	12	63	37
	<i>Mostly C's some B's</i>	32	58	42
	<i>Mostly B's some A's</i>	37	48	52
	<i>Mostly A's</i>	19	38	62
Poverty				
	(Ratio of Household Income to poverty level)			
	<i>0 - 100 percent of the poverty level</i>	17	50	50
	<i>100-200 percent of the poverty level</i>	21	49	51
	<i>200-400 percent of the poverty level</i>	37	53	47
	<i>400+ percent of the poverty level</i>	25	52	48

Source: Child Trends analysis of NLSY97 data

Table 2:

Interaction of Reported Early Lying/Cheating and Parental Monitoring on Dependent Variables: Percent engaging in sex (before age 16), sex without contraception, and having a baby by age 18.

		Early Sex	Unsafe sex	Baby before age18
Males				
<i>Did Lie or Cheat</i>				
	Low Monitoring	55***	56***	3
	High Monitoring	41	42	2
<i>Did not Lie or Cheat</i>				
	Low Monitoring	41***	41***	3*
	High Monitoring	30	32	1
Females				
<i>Did Lie or Cheat</i>				
	Low Monitoring	50***	52***	11**
	High Monitoring	40	42	6
<i>Did not Lie or Cheat</i>				
	Low Monitoring	44***	45***	9
	High Monitoring	29	30	6

Notes: p<0.001***, p<0.01, p<0.05*

Source: Child Trends analysis of NLSY97 data

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