Child and Adolescent Sexuality: Promoting Healthy Development in the Context of Risk

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Goals for Today’s Workshop

• Provide overview of child and adolescent sexuality from a normative developmental perspective (www.siecus.org)

• Discuss how trauma and risk may impact sexual development

• Consider strategies that promote healthy sexual development for vulnerable children and adolescents
Sexual Development in **Infancy**

- Physical arousal
- Exploration of body
- Sensitive to touch
- Pleasure seeking

*Critical time for bonding, attachment, trust*
Sexual Development in **Toddlerhood / Early Childhood** (2-4)

- Curiosity about own body *and others*
- Interest in being naked

How should we handle these early stages?
Normative Exploration Behavior in Children
“How often have you seen these behaviors in the past 6 months?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Behavior</th>
<th>Males age 2-5</th>
<th>Females age 2-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Touches sex parts at home</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touches sex parts in public</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows sex parts to adults</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows sex parts to children</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbates with hands</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sexual Development in Early Childhood (4-7)

• Studies show that children exhibit a wide range of “sexual” behaviors
  • 77% of parents reported that children engaged in sex play before age 6
  • 47% reported interactive sex play before age 6

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”
“Let’s kiss”
“This is where my pee comes out”
Sexual Development in School-aged Children (7-10)

• Autoerotic – exploring sexual feelings without external stimulus

• Multi-sexual – growing interest in all bodies

• Become aware of sexual feelings and sexual responsiveness
Observed “Sexual” Behaviors in a Group Setting

![Graph showing observed sexual behaviors in a group setting by age for boys and girls. The graph indicates a peak in behaviors around age 5, with a decline thereafter.]
Children are influenced by responses they receive

How should parents and other caregivers react to self-touching behavior?

How should parents and other caregivers react to shared touching behavior?
Response of parents & caregivers

• Don’t react too negatively

• Response to observed sexual behaviors
  • Exploration is normal, healthy, and positive
  • Teach what is **socially acceptable**

When are these behaviors a cause for concern?
Sexual Development in Pre-Adolescence

• Re-integration of boys and girls (no more gender segregation)

• Beginnings of romantic relationships (25% of 12th graders)

• Complicated time for boys and girls
Sexual Development in Adolescence: Puberty

- Reproductive organs mature

- Onset 8 - 14 years old; 2 years earlier in girls

- Triggered by release of gonadotropins

- Signals testes and ovaries to release sex hormones
The biology behind puberty

• The endocrine system - produces, circulates, and regulates sex hormones
  • Estrogens/Androgens
Sexual Development in Adolescence: Puberty

Impacts of family risk and dysfunction on pubertal timing?
Aspects of *healthy* sexual development in adolescence

• Accepting one’s changing body

• Accepting feelings of sexual arousal

• Understanding that sexual activity is voluntary

• Take responsibility for own behaviors

• Practicing safe sex

Unique challenges for at-risk / vulnerable youth?
Adolescent Sexuality – By the Numbers (normative samples)
About 60% of all adolescents have sex by the end of 12th grade.
Percentage of Students Who Had Multiple Partners*, by Gender, 1991–2013

*Four or more lifetime partners
Oral Sex in Adolescence

![Bar chart showing percentage reporting specific types of sexual contact with an opposite-sex partner among females aged 15–24 years, by Hispanic origin and race: United States, 2007–2010.]

Figure 1. Percentage reporting specific types of sexual contact with an opposite-sex partner among females aged 15–24 years, by Hispanic origin and race: United States, 2007–2010.
Concerns about sexually active adolescents?

• Sexual activity, in and of itself, is NOT associated with psychological problems.

• Often associated with positive outcomes:
  • Increased self-esteem
  • Increased feelings of intimacy
  • Increased social status

Circumstances that would raise concern?
Early Sexual Experiences Linked to Risk

Compared to delayed sexual activity, early sexual activity (under age 16) is linked to:

- Greater number of partners
- Increased risk of teen pregnancy
- Increased risk of STDs
- Other risky behaviors including substance abuse
- Feelings of pressure and regret
Teen Sexual Activity

Adolescence is a time of rapid change.

% of adolescents who have had sex by each age

- Female
- Male

Age

www.guttmacher.org
Unsafe Sex Linked to Risk

• 1 in 4 sexually active teens gets a STI

• U.S. has highest teen pregnancy rates in Western world

• 1 in 5 sexually active teens becomes pregnant each year

[Diagram: Teen Pregnancy Outcomes, 2010]
The majority of teen pregnancies end in birth.

- Birth: 60%
- Abortion: 26%
- Miscarriage: 15%

www.guttmacher.org
Healthy Sexual Behavior

Older (16 and over), Wanted (fully consensual), Safe (contraceptives), and in the Context of a Relationship
Who is Most At-Risk for Unhealthy Sexual Experiences?

- Early pubertal development
- Family conflict and dysfunction
- Low supervision
- Low self-esteem
- Experimenting with drugs and alcohol
- Experience of trauma
  - Childhood / adolescent sexual abuse
Sexual Abuse of Children

• Sexual contact with a child is always coercive because children cannot give informed consent

• Child-sexual abuse: adult sexual contact with a child

• Incest: with a relative
  • Brother-sister and first cousin incest is most common
  • Father-daughter reported more and has greater negative impact

• Pedophilia or molestation: with a non-relative
Sexual Abuse of Children

• 20 – 25% of girls

• 5 – 10% of boys

• Children are most vulnerable between the ages of 7 and 13

• 75% of females who have sex under age 14 report being victims of rape or sexual abuse
Effects of childhood sexual abuse on adolescents

- Lower self-esteem
- Difficulties with trust
- Academic difficulties
- Higher rates of anxiety, eating disorders, and depression
- Engage in more risk behaviors
- Have multiple sexual partners
- Become pregnant as teens

Treatment helps!
Strategies to Promote Healthy Sexual Development for Vulnerable Children and Adolescents
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: Early Childhood

• Teach correct body parts

• Boys and girls are different

• Basics of where babies come from

• Discuss what is socially appropriate

• Boundaries (your body belongs to you)

• Make answers direct, honest, and at child’s level of understanding

Who should do this?
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: Early Childhood

- Teach correct body parts
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- Discuss what is socially appropriate
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Who should do this?
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: Early Childhood

• Explain “okay” and “not okay” touches

• Boundaries (Your body belongs to you)

• Identify trusted adult
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: Childhood

- Discussion of how body grows

- Expand discussions of boundaries and safety information

- “Touching your own private parts can feel nice, but is something done in private”
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: School Age

• Make child aware of what to expect with puberty before changes happen

• Basics of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth

• Introduction to concept of contraceptives

• Masturbation is common and okay in private

• Provide dating scripts
Promoting Healthy Sexual Development: Adolescence

- Abstinence first
- Comprehensive sex education
- Access to contraceptives
- Understanding of consent

Rights, Respect, Responsibility
Positive Youth Development Approach to Sex Education

• Build 5 C’s
  • Confidence – self-worth
  • Character – responsibility, values
  • Connection – sense of belonging
  • Competence – knowledge and skills
  • Contribution – participation
Positive Youth Development Approach to Sex Education

• Focus on relational skills and communication

• Acknowledge that sexuality is positive, normal, and enjoyable

• Provide opportunities for youth to advocate and make a difference

**Empower youth to advocate for themselves!**
Safer Sex = Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives (LARC)
Questions?
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