

Athletic Participation and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

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The Effects of Athletic Participation on Adolescent Sexual Debut. Moore, S., Barnett, R., Brennan, M., & Gibson, H. (2007).

Introduction

According to the CDC, approximately 34% of adolescents in the United States are currently sexually active (defined as having had sexual intercourse in the past three months) and 46.7% have had sex at least once (Grunbaum, Kann, Kinchen, Ross, Hawkins, Lowry, et al., 2004). Early initiation of sexual activity can lead to devastating consequences. Sexually active adolescents may experience unwanted pregnancy, contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI), or suffer difficulties in relationships with parents or peers. Identifying and understanding antecedent factors that might influence an adolescent's decisions to engage in sexual behavior is vital if we hope to protect adolescents from these consequences. An ecological model developed by Small and Luster (2004) proposed that the accumulation and interaction of various risk factors at the individual (intellectual ability, gender, self-esteem), familial (connection to parents, family structure, socio-economic status), and extrafamilial level (having a boyfriend/girlfriend, peer group, attachment to school) work to influence the sexual decisions made by adolescents. One factor in particular that may influence adolescent sexual behavior is sport participation. Sport is an extrafamilial factor that has been found to have both positive (Kirkcaldy, Shephard, & Siefen, 2002; Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius, & Presbrey, 2004) and negative (Baumert, Henderson, & Thompson, 1998; La Greca, Prinstein, & Fetter, 2001) effects on adolescent participants. Research designed to examine the impact of athletic participation specifically on sexual behavior is limited and inconclusive, but suggests that some link does exist (Lehman & Koerner, 2004; Savage & Holcomb, 1999). This study examined numerous factors at each of the ecological levels to determine their relationship with age of sexual debut and overall sexual activity. In particular, this study attempted to elucidate the relationship between sport participation and sexual activity.

Methodology

A self-completion questionnaire created for this study was administered in undergraduate general education classes to a sample of 437 participants aged 18-25 (29.3% male, 70.7% female). The questionnaire consisted of the following conceptual areas: athletic participation, Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), ecological variables, Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS), sexual activity, and sociodemographics. Due to exclusions based on age or involuntary sexual debut, 417 questionnaires were used for data analysis. Data were analyzed using a variety of tests, including descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses (Cross-tabs, t-tests, ANOVA) to examine possible relationships between the dependent variables and both independent and demographic variables, and multiple regressions to explore these relationships in a multivariate context.

Main Ideas

Sexual Debut

A total of 252 respondents (64.3%) reported already having their sexual debut. The mean age of sexual debut was 17.19 years; reported ages ranged from 13.00 to 24.00 years. ANOVA revealed significant differences in age of sexual debut by indices measuring Values and Risk Avoidance, with respondents reporting higher scores on these indices reported older ages of sexual debut. A significant difference in age of sexual debut was also found for the statement I felt like I received a good education in high school, with respondents indicating strong agreement reporting much older ages of sexual debut than those who said they felt neutral about the statement. A reduced multiple regression model was developed by entering all demographic (gender, race/ethnic origin, religious affiliation, athlete status) and independent (ecological variables, sensation seeking domains) variables and systematically removing the least significant until only the statistically significant variables remained. This model, which accounted for just over 14% of the variance in age of sexual debut ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .142$), revealed that Values, Risk Avoidance, and I felt like I received a good education in high school were all positively related to age of sexual debut; higher scores corresponded with later ages of sexual debut.

Sexual Activity

Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (A Lot) the frequency with which they engaged in a series of eight behaviors on a sexual activity continuum (kissing; French kissing; touching a partner's breast or having your breast touched by a partner; touching a partner's penis or having your penis touched by a partner; touching a partner's vagina or having your vagina touched by a partner; performing oral sex; receiving oral sex; sexual intercourse [vaginal penetration]). Responses to these items were combined to create an overall sexual activity scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$), with higher scores indicating higher overall level of sexual activity. Males reported significantly higher sexual activity scores than did females. ANOVA revealed that scores on Risk Avoidance, Values, and Parental Monitoring indices were negatively related to sexual activity score. Additionally, propensity for sensation seeking behavior, measured by total score on the BSSS, was positively related to sexual activity score; higher sensation seekers reported higher levels of sexual activity. A reduced regression model, accounting for approximately 28% of the variance in sexual activity ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .281$), revealed that Values, Risk Avoidance, and Parental Monitoring were all negatively related to sexual activity. Connection to School and Others was found to be significantly and positively related to sexual activity; higher scores on this index corresponded with higher sexual activity scores. Further, the sensation seeking domain of Disinhibition was also significantly and positively related to sexual activity; higher sensation seekers in this domain reported higher sexual activity scores. Lastly, current athlete status was significant, with current athletes reporting lower sexual activity scores than nonathletes.

Athlete Status

Respondents were categorized as being current athletes (respondents who were athletes in high school and currently participate in sport at the collegiate or club/intramural level – 29%), high school athletes (respondents who were athletes in high school and are no longer active in sport – 36.5%), or nonathletes (respondents who were not athletes in high school – 31.2%). ANOVA revealed significant differences in Connection to School and Others by athlete status group. Current athletes reported the highest scores on this index, followed by high school athletes and, lastly, nonathletes. A t-test examining sensation seeking and athlete status revealed that athletes (current and high school athletes combined) reported higher propensity for sensation seeking than did nonathletes. To explore possible differences in the variables

affecting athletes and nonathletes, a series of reduced multiple regression analyses were conducted with sexual activity as the dependent variable. While many variables were significant for athletes and nonathletes, numerous differences related to athlete status were also discovered.

- The first model was conducted by selecting only the nonathletes and included all demographic and independent variables. This model accounted for almost 24% of the variance in sexual activity score (Adj. $R^2 = .237$). Four variables were found to be statistically significant. Risk Avoidance and Parental Monitoring were negatively related to sexual activity; as scores on these items increased, sexual activity score decreased. Connection to School and Others and the sensation seeking domain Experience Seeking were positively related to sexual activity; as scores on these items increased, so did sexual activity score.
- The second model was by conducted selecting only the athletes and included the same independent and demographic variables as the nonathlete model. This model accounted for 30% of the variance in sexual activity score (Adj. $R^2 = .302$). Five variables were found to be statistically significant. Risk Avoidance and Values were negatively related to sexual activity; those reporting higher scores on these items reported lower sexual activity scores. Connection to School and Others and sensation seeking domain Disinhibition were positively related to sexual activity; those reporting higher scores on these items also reported higher sexual activity scores. Age was also positively related to sexual activity, with older respondents reporting higher sexual activity scores.
- The last model was again conducted by selecting only the athletes and included the initial independent and demographic variables, as well as additional sport participation variables. This model accounted for approximately 36% of the variance in sexual activity score (Adj. $R^2 = .366$). Eight variables were found to be statistically significant. Age was again positively related to sexual activity; older respondents reported higher sexual activity scores. The sensation seeking domain Disinhibition and the AIMS statement *I was part of the most popular group at school* were positively associated with sexual activity; as scores on these items increased, so did sexual activity score. Risk Avoidance, Values, and AIMS Social Identity were negatively associated with sexual activity; as scores on these times increased, sexual activity score decreased. Additionally, contact sport and team sport were negatively associated with sexual activity. Contact sport players reported generally lower sexual activity scores than noncontact sport players, while team sport participants reported generally lower sexual activity scores than individual sport participants.

Conclusion and Implications for Extension Programs

Results of this study support an ecological approach to adolescent sexual behavior, one in which numerous factors combine and interact to influence an adolescent's sexual decision making. Conclusions reached through this study have far-reaching implications for practitioners working with adolescents. First, this study clearly demonstrates that athletes and nonathletes are two distinct groups of students. Understanding this distinction may help school officials and youth workers more effectively reach both populations, specifically in the realm of sexual behavior. For example, athletes reported higher sensation seeking, which was related to increased sexual activity. Recognizing this fact allows practitioners working directly with youth to target students involved in sport, and to ensure that this drive for excitement is focused in healthy, structured activities rather than risky sexual behaviors or other risk behaviors, such as drug or alcohol use. Coaches, teachers, or other practitioners working with the student athlete population should emphasize the importance of sport participation and the pride they should have in their achievements. This emphasis could enhance some of the positive facets of athletic identity, which were associated with lower sexual activity scores. Secondly, it is important to note that influential factors identified through this research exist at the

individual (gender, personal risk avoidance, propensity for sensation seeking, athletic identity), familial (parental monitoring, parental values toward sex), and extrafamilial level (risk behaviors of close friends, school attachment, connection to school and others, sport participation). Thus, practitioners hoping to affect adolescent sexual behavior must work to address the whole environment, rather than the specific behavior. This recommendation echoes that forwarded by Brindis (2006), who advocated for more global youth development programs. Programs should include components addressing such issues as overall healthy decision making, commitment to school, and positive peer influence; each of these areas is supported by the results of this study. By positively impacting adolescents' environments more broadly, youth workers, school personnel, and extension agents can better hope to make a difference in their lives as a whole, and to improve their sexual decision making specifically.

Additional References

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