

Adolescent Reproductive and Relationship Health

Focus on Sexual Development, Connected Relationships, and Well-being

Adolescent sexual health has become a divisive topic for the past two generations. Establishing a brief, basic definition of adolescent sexual and relationship health focuses health providers and health policy leaders on important developmental tasks associated with positive physical and mental health outcomes: Optimal Health. The definition in the sidebar on the next page includes physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual components of holistic well-being. When communities and families acknowledge shared aspirations for their youth, they can be more cohesive with messages, expectations, programs, and support.

Equipping Parents

Parents provide the most valuable support system for adolescents, as demonstrated by research and observation. Many parents want to support their children by talking openly about values, sexual development, health risks, and relationships, but lack the skills and confidence to do so.

Youth who experience caring communication, connections, mentorship, and purpose from trusted adults are more likely to avoid bullying, coercion, and adverse risks and more likely to recover from difficult experiences without long-term mental and physical health complications. In addition to the many physical changes during puberty, studies of brain development and function reveal active maturation during adolescence that extends into young adulthood. Parents and community members who understand these changes are better able to support and communicate with children and youth.

The Institute for Women's Health meets this need through two programs designed to support youth by strengthening family connections, community bonds, and social norms: 1) The Parent/Child Communication Guide (Parent Guide) and 2) The Three Generation Strategy for Adolescent Health (AdGen3).

The Parent Guide

The Parent Guide contains eight lessons for parents to share with children of all ages to discuss topics such as family and friend relationships, self-worth, valuing others, and decision-making. Four additional lessons are for children ages 9 and up and address the sensitive topics of male and female puberty, reproduction, and sexual decision-making. Educational lessons and training modules are based on accurate information and shared goals, and delivered through their schools, faith groups, or community organizations. Improving the parent-child bond is a strong and viable health promotion strategy.

Parents are empowered because it:

- Provides parents, faith groups, and schools with accurate, age-appropriate, family-centered, plain language materials to discuss character development, puberty, reproduction, and sexual decision-making.
- Promotes multiple shared meals per week, learning activities, traditions, and religious participation as a family to promote “connectedness” or belonging, which has been shown to protect youth from stress, bullying, and adverse risks, including early sex and the use of illegal and/or harmful substances.
- Encourages parents to establish fair and consistent “house rules” that monitor social media, sleep patterns, healthy eating, friend groups, and activities of their children.
- Educates parents and family members to observe children and youth for signs of vulnerability to coercion, exploitation, and other forms of manipulation or dangerous circumstances.

Support for parent engagement occurs directly through the Parent Guide and community, school, and faith activities.

Defining Optimal Adolescent Sexual and Relationship Health

- Healthy pubertal development.
- Healthy brain, mental, emotional, and spiritual (moral) development.
- Healthy social and relational development through strong, safe friendships.
- Knowledge, attitudes, support, and self-efficacy for refusal skills.
- Respectful and non-violent dating relationships
- Avoidance of alcohol and substance use.
- Risks of early sexual involvement and benefits of delay: a, b, c, d.
- Awareness of sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, and coercion.
- Awareness of challenges related to teen pregnancy and benefits of secure attachment style.
- Delay of pregnancy and parenting until benchmarks of basic education, employment, faithful marriage, and preparation for parenting.
- Preparation for healthy, low-risk pregnancy and childbearing.
- Promote standards encouraging committed sexual relationships with a trusted mature life partner.
- Commit to a caring, faithful marriage characterized by a satisfying and pleasurable sexual relationship.

Training Providers

Addressing youth from the perspective of Optimal Health across the lifespan is the goal of The Three Generation Strategy for Adolescent Health (AdGen3), which addresses the teen, their family of origin, and their family of the future: three generations.

AdGen3 trains and supports health providers, psychologists, social workers, and educators with research related to youth behaviors and development. It offers effective interventions engaging adolescents and their parents. The purpose of AdGen3 is to transition research regarding teen brain development, parental engagement, positive youth development, and risk behaviors into strong clinical models supporting Optimal Health.

It specifically equips youth professionals with skills to engage parents as fundamental allies in their teens' achievement for Optimal Health, to communicate effectively, and to provide compassionate, health-affirming guidance.

Using the Three Generation Strategy for Adolescent Health, community professionals are trained in methods supporting youth and families by:

- Sharing current research on adolescent development and health.
- Partnering with parents and equipping them with skills to help youth make healthy choices and avoid health risks.
- Improving techniques to share health information, teach decision-making, and practice refusal skills.
- Strengthening prevention, detection, reporting, and accountability in the event of coercion, abuse, bullying, or exploitation.
- Reinforcing the importance of healthy relationships and relationship skills.



Adolescent Risks

Adolescents need to experience opportunities for risk-taking to practice decision-making, responsibility, rewards, consequences, and leadership. Those opportunities can be associated with positive or negative behaviors. In some cultures and traditions, youth development is celebrated by completing complex tasks or achieving age and religious landmarks through which the individual has increased responsibilities, accountability, and belonging as an emerging adult. When parental or community support fails to offer and celebrate reasonable risks, adolescents may engage in violence, substance use, sexual activity, and other negative risk behaviors. Families and communities can promote "Positive Risks" to promote youth development while mentoring and encouraging youth in healthy and productive settings.

Positive risk-taking can include any of the following:

- Wilderness adventures, camping, and survival skills-building.
- Encourage mastery of complex skills associated with adult work opportunities such as construction, mechanics, farming, and technology.
- Maintain cultural, family, and faith traditions, guiding and encouraging youth in preparation for adult careers, families, and societal responsibilities.
- Assign tasks and leadership roles inside educational, faith, and community settings, demonstrating optimism and support for developing adolescents as emerging adults.
- Celebrate youth risks that embrace athletic, leadership, and academic challenges.
- Encourage volunteerism to promote the well-being of others before self.
- Establish community activities, inviting family and friends to observe and congratulate music, drama, debate, and other performances.

Sexuality and Relationship Education in Schools and Communities

Optimal Health principles should be incorporated into all child and adolescent health information, especially education around relationships, puberty, reproduction, and sexual decision-making. Topics and discussions addressing holistic wellness consistent with the definition of optimal adolescent sexual and relationship health included in this section are best. Much of social media and some sex education programs misrepresent the significance of sex and the consequences of early sexual involvement. By focusing solely on the physical components of sexual activity, they neglect four of the five components of optimal sexual health, which are holistic and address physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.

Sexually explicit messaging that normalizes early sexual behaviors and multiple sexual partners increases the probability of adverse outcomes, especially for vulnerable and young adolescents who are at increased risk for coercion, abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, injury, and mental health concerns. Parents and communities should ensure that educational materials contain information and values consistent with healthy adolescent development. Parents should be prepared to discuss these important issues with their children.

Curricula and programs addressing sexual development and decisions should help adolescents

- Understand and accept their bodies, value and protect themselves, and recognize that healthy development and decisions during adolescence are essential to their future.
- Realize that returning to a risk-free lifestyle is a possible and healthy option, even if they have initiated sexual activity in the past.
- Recognize that everyone is unique, but all adolescents experience changes and stresses; they are not alone, and their parents, adult mentors, and peers understand.
- Provide home assignments with each lesson, encouraging and guiding parent and child discussions about relationships, puberty, reproduction, and families.
- Be informed about physical, hormonal, and brain development changes during puberty, with particular emphasis on awareness and understanding of the menstrual, hormonal, and fertility cycle.
- Equip adolescents to recognize and resist health threats such as sexually transmitted diseases, pressure to drink alcohol or try drugs, participate in violence, bullying or coercion, view pornography, or engage in sex.

Promoting Optimal Health with Social Norms.

When communities and environments value youth, they develop, articulate, and demonstrate social norms supporting healthy development. Key concepts include:

- Teaching the dignity, value, and respect for oneself and all human life.
- Teaching that personal choices should not harm other people or oneself.
- Valuing healthy family formation, childbearing, and safe, committed, and loving homes.
- Promoting messages of hope, encouragement, and opportunity, through positive influential voices, such as family, community, civil society and faith based organizations.
- Denouncing violence in every community setting and institution, including the media.
- Addressing and countering advertising, entertainment, and educational materials featuring an unhealthy self-image, distorted sexual expectations, alcohol use, substance use, pornography, transactional sex, or trafficking.
- Establishing and enforcing local policies and laws protecting adolescents from trafficking, exploitation, and abuse.

Curricula and programs addressing sexual development and decisions should help adolescents (Continued)

- Develop attitudes and skills to make wise and healthy decisions, refuse coercive pressures, build solid friendships and dating patterns, and prepare for a healthy marriage and future family.
- Understand the potential consequences of teen sex, which can include:
 - Physical: sexually transmitted infections (STDs), pregnancy, injury, and abuse.
 - Intellectual: distraction, decreased or discontinued academic engagement.
 - Emotional: increased anxiety, depression, poor/distorted self-concept, and non-suicidal self-harm.
 - Social: change in peer groups, peer perceptions, social expectations.
 - Spiritual: conflict with moral or religious beliefs regarding the significance, timing, and value of sex.
- Respect and protect themselves and the dignity and value of every human life.

The review and approval of community or school-based sex and relationship curricula should be conducted by a panel which is primarily comprised of local parents.

Preventing and Addressing Sexual Harm

Sexual abuse, forced marriage of girls and adolescents, trafficking, forced female genital mutilation (FGM), and intimate partner violence are among the greatest threats to girls and women globally. In many countries, it is a public health emergency. Families, communities, faith groups, and nations must be resolute to stop these violations of the body, the mind, and the future well-being of young women and girls.

The physical damage of early sexual involvement to the young female body is well documented. Most countries report that sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS occur in younger women several years earlier than their male counterparts, primarily due to transmission from older, dominating partners. These infections can result in short-term or long-term chronic disease, pain, malignancies, and infertility. Pregnancy during the adolescent years is frequently associated with increased premature delivery, complications during labor, vaginal fistulas, and recurrent infections.

Intellectual and emotional consequences of early sexual involvement include disruption of schooling and career training, higher rates of depression, unstable romantic relationships, and other chronic problems, which can contribute to or exacerbate Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The long-term personal, family, and community impacts are challenging to quantify and root causes and possible consequences are not adequately addressed by simply offering contraceptives and condoms.

As noted in women's movements over the past decade, even mature women in unequal power relationships report debilitating feelings of victimization and regret. Younger women are often more easily intimidated or coerced than mature women, and their distress may lead to poor self-esteem and patterns of abusive and unhealthy relationships.

Exploitation is harmful to all affected individuals; however, it is often more devastating to young people due to their biological and emotional immaturity. The developing brain has more difficulty understanding situations, identifying risks, directing protective responses, and dealing with stress and abuse, as well as recovering from violence, neglect, and other adverse pressures.

Violence, exploitation, coercion, intimidation, and lack of protection against these offenses is a public health tragedy.

The Institute for Women's Health strongly supports:

- Establishing and enforcing local policies and laws that protect children, adolescents, women, and other vulnerable populations from trafficking, exploitation, harassment, and abuse.
- Teaching the intrinsic dignity, value, and respect due to oneself and every human person.
- Robust and multi-pronged prevention efforts focused on multigenerational strategies aimed at both the potential victim and potential perpetrator.
- Denouncing violence through faith and community groups, schools, and media.
- Law enforcement processes that quickly respond to violence and consistently hold perpetrators accountable.
- Compassionate resources for treatment, protection, and recovery

The Institute for Women's Health recognizes that today's youth are tomorrow's leaders. Their healthy sexual and relationship development during adolescence strengthens their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being for the coming decades, and Optimal Health efforts improves the future prospects of a nation.

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