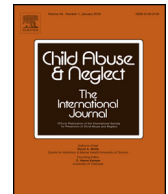




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Older opposite-sex romantic partners, sexual risk, and victimization in adolescence[☆]

Barbara A. Oudekerk^{*}, Lucy A. Guarnera, N. Dickon Reppucci^{*}

University of Virginia, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how age gaps among opposite-sex romantic partners related to sexual risk-taking and victimization by partners among 201 at-risk adolescents (60.2% female). We examined three questions: (a) is younger partner age, age gap between partners, or a combination of these two factors most strongly related to negative outcomes; (b) do age gaps relate to negative outcomes differently for male versus female adolescents; and (c) why do age gaps relate to negative outcomes? Results revealed that the wider the age gap between partners, the more likely adolescents were to engage in sex and the less likely they were to use protection against pregnancy and STIs. Wider age gaps were also associated with more frequent emotional and physical victimization and higher odds of unwanted sexual behavior. Findings did not differ significantly by gender or younger partner age. Analyses revealed that the wider the age gap, the more likely both partners were to engage in risky lifestyles (i.e., substance use and delinquency), and risky lifestyles – rather than poor negotiation or decision-making equality – helped to explain associations between age gaps and engagement in sexual intercourse and victimization experiences. Results suggest that relationships with age gaps tend to involve two partners who are engaging in deviant lifestyles overall, further corroborating the need to identify and provide services to these youth. Results also support movements toward considering partner age gaps rather than relying on a set *age of consent* when determining adolescents' legal competency to consent to sex.

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Older opposite-sex romantic partners, sexual risk, and victimization in adolescence

Romantic relationships between adolescents and older partners pose significant concerns for policymakers, law enforcement, and service providers. In the United States, laws restrict sexual activity between older partners and adolescents. Today the primary goal of such laws, often referred to as statutory rape laws, is to prevent adolescents from being sexually exploited by older partners (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [PRWORA, 1996](#)). Indeed, research supports the contention that adolescents dating older partners are more likely to experience negative sexual outcomes than adolescents dating similarly-age partners. Early research on partner age gaps revealed that children of teen mothers are

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^{*} Corresponding authors address: Department of Psychology, 102 Gilmer Hall, PO Box 400400, Charlottesville, VA 22203, USA.

often fathered by older males (Landry & Forrest, 1995; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997; Males & Chew, 1996). Involvement with older partners has also been linked to early initiation of sexual activity and decreased protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs; Abma, Driscoll, & Moore, 1998; Begley, Crosby, DiClemente, Wingood, & Rose, 2003; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997; Marín, Coyle, Gómez, Carvajal, & Kirby, 2000; Young & d'Arcy, 2005).

To date, research on partner age gaps has been limited in that most studies focus on links between sexual risks and older partners among *female* adolescents; furthermore, very few studies have examined *why* these links exist. Extending upon past work, this study included both male and female adolescents and investigated *for whom* and *why* age gaps are related to negative outcomes. In addition to examining sexual risks, this study tested whether adolescents experienced greater victimization by partners (i.e., unwanted sexual behavior, physical abuse, and emotional abuse) the wider the age gap between them and their partners. We aimed to inform statutory rape policy and practice, and more generally, to help service providers better understand which youth are most vulnerable to exploitation by older partners. We examined partner age gaps among a sample of low-income, at-risk adolescents to increase the likelihood that results would generalize to youth who are most likely to date older partners, experience unhealthy relationships outcomes, and come to the attention of service providers.

Do partner age gaps, younger partner age, or a combination of the two matter most?

Within the United States, laws deeming when adolescents can consent to sex vary widely (Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004). In some states (e.g., CA, IL), adolescents cannot consent to sex with partners of any age until they have reached a specified *age of consent*, ranging from ages 16 to 18 (Glosser et al., 2004). As a result, older teens and young adults can be convicted of a crime for engaging in sexual activity with partners who are as little as one year younger in age. In other states, however, age gap provisions base adolescents' legal competency to consent to sexual activity on (a) whether the younger partner has reached a certain minimum age (ranging from 12 to 18) and (b) whether the two partners are within a specified age difference from one another, typically two to four years (Glosser et al., 2004; Smith & Kercher, 2011).

The use of age gap provisions is in line with developmental research showing that adolescents begin to develop the cognitive capacity to *make* informed decisions early in adolescence, but that their ability to *carry out* these informed decisions varies across contexts due to diminished psychosocial maturity (Steinberg, Cauffman, Woolard, Graham, & Banich, 2009). That is, age gap provisions imply that the same adolescent might be competent to consent to sexual activity in certain relational contexts (i.e., with a similarly-aged partner) but not all relational contexts (i.e., with an older partner). Adolescents tend to choose romantic partners who will earn them status and acceptance among peers, including older partners who can represent maturity and autonomy (Collins, 2003; Gowen, Feldman, Diaz, & Yisrael, 2004; Scott, Reppucci, & Woolard, 1995). Older partners can also play the role of emotional or financial caretakers among low-income, at-risk youth (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Due to the inequalities and motivations at play, adolescents might be more susceptible to sexual risk-taking and more vulnerable to remaining in violent relationships with older partners than similarly-aged partners. To help legislators make decisions about age of consent standards and age gap provisions, research is needed to identify who are most at-risk for poor health outcomes – young adolescent partners, adolescents who date older partners, or a combination of the two (i.e., the possibility that the youngest adolescents might be the most susceptible to the negative influences associated with age gaps).

Do links between age gaps and negative outcomes differ by gender?

Researchers have called attention to how little is known about associations between age gaps and negative outcomes for male adolescents (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2005). Historically, statutory rape laws deemed that only female adolescents could be victims given the disproportionate burden of pregnancy placed on females (Michael M. v. Superior Court, 1981). Today male adolescents can legally be victims in all of the United States, yet female youth continue to comprise the vast majority (95%) of victims in statutory rape cases brought to the attention of law enforcement (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). Both male and female adolescents lack psychosocial maturity (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000), suggesting that both male and female adolescents are at risk for being exploited by older, influential romantic partners. Indeed, initial research conducted *within* samples of male adolescents suggests that larger age gaps are linked to early sex, unwanted sexual activity, and decreased protection against STIs (Manlove et al., 2005; Marín et al., 2000). Male adolescents sometimes report that sexual activity with older female partners was a positive experience (Bauserman & Rind, 1997); however, male youth might feel pressured to give positive reports about sexual activity with adult women given societal views of these relationships as sexual initiation rather than abuse (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). To our knowledge, the current study is the first to examine whether the links between age gaps and both sexual risk and victimization differ significantly for male versus female youth.

Why do partner age gaps relate to negative health outcomes?

One could argue that intimate relationships with older partners might foster positive outcomes. For example, older, more mature partners might be able to show younger partners how to access condoms or how to manage relational conflict

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