

Original article

# “That’s Nasty” to Curiosity: Early Adolescent Cognitions about Sexual Abstinence

Mary A. Ott, M.D.<sup>\*</sup>, and Elizabeth J. Pfeiffer, M.A.

*Section of Adolescent Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis, Indiana*

Manuscript received April 7, 2008; manuscript accepted October 27, 2008

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Effective sex education for early adolescents should make use of age-appropriate cultural models about sexual abstinence. However, little is known about how early adolescents view this topic. We describe developmental differences in cognitions about sexual abstinence among high-risk early adolescents.

**Methods:** After institutional review board approval and informed consent, we interviewed 22 11–14-year-olds, using a qualitative, two-stage interview. Participants were first asked a series of open-ended questions about sexual abstinence, and then asked to explain their answers. Interviews were transcribed, organized by age, and read in their entirety. Codes were developed from the literature, field notes, and transcripts. Key concepts were identified and models were developed with a focus on developmental change.

**Results:** We observed three distinct views of sexual abstinence, “That’s Nasty,” “Curious,” and Normative. All viewed abstinence as a starting point and sex as a transition to adulthood. “That’s Nasty” participants identified sex as distasteful, displayed limited understanding of sex, and viewed abstinence as appropriate for kids like themselves. Curious participants expressed a desire for information about sex, and a sense of missing something important. Normative participants viewed the transition from abstinence to sexual experience as part of a normal, albeit challenging, transition to adulthood.

**Conclusions:** Participants demonstrated differences in cognitions about sexual abstinence, related to age and development. The transition from viewing sex as distasteful to curiosity appears to be a time of both vulnerability and openness, and may provide an opportunity for intervention. © 2009 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

## Keywords:

Sexual abstinence; Adolescent behavior; Schema; Early adolescent; Sexual behavior; Transition; Cognition

Rigorous evaluations of abstinence education programs show no effects on adolescent sexual behavior [1–3]. These programs typically target early adolescence, and make use of adult cultural models of adolescent sexuality, such as presenting sex as unhealthy, and placing sex only within the context of marriage [4]. One reason for the lack of effectiveness may be that these programs fail to tap into early adolescents’ own cognitions and cultural models related to sex and abstinence. Sexual cognitions can be defined as the attitudes,

expectations, beliefs, and values related to sexual behavior [5]. Early adolescence is a time of developmental transition, and their sexual cognitions are likely different from those at older ages. A better understanding of these cognitions may lead to more effectively framing of sexually transmitted infection (STI) and pregnancy prevention messages.

We approach early adolescents’ cognitions about sexual abstinence through a cultural lens. Cultural models are shared cognitive structures through which human realities are constructed and interpreted [6]. Cultural models related to sex include romance, relationships, curiosity, and the enactment of sexual behavior [7–9]. Sexual scripts are a type of cultural model that define the who, what, when, and why of sexual behaviors [10]. Cultural models are felt to motivate behavior

<sup>\*</sup>Address correspondence to: Mary A. Ott, M.D., Department of Pediatrics, Indiana University, 575 North West Drive, Room XE070, Indianapolis, IN 46202.

E-mail address: [maott@iupui.edu](mailto:maott@iupui.edu)

through early learning and socialization, and their fit with an individual's current life conditions [10,11]. Framing sexual health promotion programs within existing cultural models of sexuality has the potential to increase their effectiveness and acceptability with the target population [12,13].

Early adolescence is a time of intense physical, cognitive, social, and psychological transition [14–16]. Transitions with direct impacts on sexual cognitions and behaviors include the acquisition of secondary sex characteristics, the onset of romantic relationships, and the development of sexual self-concept [17–19]. Early adolescents additionally have a distinctive peer culture [20] that is dynamic and developmental, evolving with experience and over time.

Limited data exist on the development of cognitions related to abstinence and sex among early adolescents. In a cohort of early adolescent urban females, developmental changes in abstinence values, sexual agency, and sexual self-esteem have been related to the initiation of noncoital sexual behaviors [5], and differences in sexual scripts have been associated with the presence of an older sibling [21].

Research on older adolescents suggests that abstinence is viewed as more than just not having sex, and concepts such as commitment and “doing the right thing” are important (see, e.g., [22]). Our group found differences between early and middle adolescents in perceptions of risks and benefits related to sex [23]. This analysis extends our previous work, describing differences within the early adolescent group in cognitions about sexual abstinence with a focus on shared meanings and developmental contexts.

## Methods

### *Participants*

As part of a larger, institutional review board (IRB)-approved qualitative study, we recruited 22 11–14-year-olds (16 females, 6 males) during routine visits at a community hospital pediatric clinic. The purpose of the larger study was to examine how early and middle adolescents viewed sexual abstinence. All participants were low-income and Medicaid eligible; most (18 of 22) were African American. The clinic serves a community with high rates of early sexual onset, adolescent pregnancy, and STIs. Most attend a large Midwestern urban district teaching an abstinence-focused curriculum. We chose this population because participants would likely find themselves in situations where sex was a possibility, and they would need to be actively making decisions about sexual abstinence. After parental permission and adolescent consent, adolescents were interviewed in a private room. Participants received \$10 gift cards; parents, \$5 gift cards.

### *Interviews*

Because we did not wish to be limited to a priori assumptions about how participants viewed sexual abstinence, we used an exploratory ethnographic interview to elicit social knowledge related to sexual abstinence among adolescents

[23,24]. Two-stage face-to-face interviews (lasting 30–45 minutes) were conducted by experienced interviewers, audiorecorded, and transcribed. In the first stage, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, starting with their understanding of the term “abstinence.” Examples include, “What is important about abstinence?” “Why do adolescents decide to be abstinent?” and “List some of the good (bad) things about abstinence.” Most early adolescent participants (15 of 22) were confused by the term “abstinence,” and the interviewer clarified abstinence as meaning not having sex. In the second stage, participants were asked to explain their responses. The interviewer listened for organization in the explanations, and tested hypotheses during the interview. The interviewer wrote field notes on the tone, process, and interactions in the interviews.

We also collected information on demographics, sexual experience, and whether participants perceived specific behaviors as abstinence. When assessing sexual experience, we only asked participants ages 14 years and older directly about sexual experience. State child abuse laws mandate reporting of consensual sexual behaviors among adolescents 13 years and younger, and we did not want to expose participants to this potential harm. Finally, participants were asked whether their view of abstinence included each of the following behaviors: kissing, petting, oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex, and masturbation. Participants who appeared uncomfortable with the questions were allowed to not answer.

### *Data analysis*

Interviews and field notes were closely read by both authors with an analytic goal to identify the shared cultural meaning and developmental contexts of sexual abstinence among early adolescents. Data were analyzed using a dual theoretical approach that drew from both cognitive anthropology [25], described above, and developmental perspectives. Textual data were organized, read, and analyzed by age. For each age group, all interviews and field notes were analyzed in one sitting. Authors looked for shared concepts and meaning systems, and examined how cognitions emerged and developed salience.

We observed three distinct views of sex and sexual abstinence, which we labeled, “That’s Nasty,” Curious, and Normative. These groups roughly, but not perfectly, correlated with age (see Table 2). We characterized each group's views of sex and abstinence, examining comfort level towards sex, their biologic and cultural understanding of sex, and reasons for abstinence. We were particularly interested in identifying cognitions that might represent motivations to remain abstinent, and assessed motivation using the following criteria. First, the cognition was consistent with the individual's behavior. Second, the participant clearly ascribed the motivation either to themselves, or to others, not themselves. For example, if a participant noted that their church forbade premarital sex, and identified themselves as religious, we would consider this as potentially motivating behavior. Third, we

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