

# The Roles of Partner Communication and Relationship Status in Adolescent Contraceptive Use

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Because of high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among adolescents, factors influ-

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encing adolescents' contraceptive use require close examination. This study explores how different types of partner communication relate to contraceptive use among adolescent girls and whether these associations vary by relationship status.

**Method:** Cross-sectional, self-report data from 253 sexually active 13- to 17-year-old girls were used to examine associations between partner communication, relationship status, and contraceptive consistency.

**Results:** In a multivariate analysis, partner communication specific to contraceptive use ( $RR = 1.3, p < .001$ ) and "steady" partnership status ( $RR = 0.65, p < .01$ ) were associated with hormonal contraceptive consistency. In interaction models, the impact of partner communication on hormonal consistency was greater in steady partnerships than in casual partnerships.

**Discussion:** Findings suggest that clinicians should ask about the nature of adolescent girls' relationships with their sexual partners when encouraging contraceptive use. Early communication with partners about sexual topics should be stressed, especially among girls in steady relationships. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2015) 29, 61-69.

## KEY WORDS

Contraceptive consistency, adolescents, partner sexual communication, adolescent behavior

In recent decades, contraceptive use among young people in the United States has improved substantially. Analyzing data from the 2006–2010 wave of the National Survey of Family Growth, researchers found overall increases in adolescents' use of any contraceptive method, as well as increases in the use of most

effective methods and dual contraceptive methods. Further, the majority of sexually active teenagers reported using a contraceptive method both at first sex and at most recent sex (Guttmacher Institute, 2012), representing a significant positive trend in contraceptive use since 1988 (Martinez, Copen, & Abma, 2011).

Although young people in the United States are using effective contraceptive methods more often than ever before (Guttmacher Institute, 2012), they remain less likely than their adult counterparts to use contraceptives accurately or consistently (Blanc, Tsui, Croft, & Trevitt, 2009). As a result, young people aged 15 to 24 years account for the majority of unintended pregnancies, as well as the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including chlamydia and gonorrhea (Finer & Zolna, 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Although any use of contraception is a preferable to nonuse, *consistent* use, particularly of condoms, is a key protective behavior that leads to long-term reductions in STIs, including human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency disorder, and unplanned pregnancies. Understanding factors that influence consistent contraceptive use can inform education and outreach efforts to ensure that young people have the supports and skills they need to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy and STIs.

Adolescent contraceptive behavior is influenced by myriad factors across various levels of influence (e.g., individual, family, peers, community, and culture; Kirby, 2007). Because contraceptive use takes place within the context of sexual relationships, understanding the interpersonal context, specifically the type of relationship and adolescents' communication with their sexual partners, is critical. Past research shows that adolescents distinguish between different types of sexual relationships (e.g., regular or steady, casual, friends, and "one-night stands"; Bauman & Berman, 2005; Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, & Boyer, 1996; Short, Catalozzi, Breitkopf, Auslander, & Rosenthal, 2013) and that the type of sexual relationship in which an adolescent is involved influences their contraceptive use. Some studies report better contraceptive use within more committed relationships (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2001; Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000), while others report lower levels of contraceptive use in more committed relationships (Kusunoki & Upchurch, 2011; Lescano, Vazquez, Brown, Litvin, & Pugatch, 2006). This mixed pattern of findings may be explained by differences in study methodology including variations in populations studied, measures of relationship type, and measures of contraceptive use.

Sexual communication between partners is another interpersonal factor that has received attention for its association with contraceptive use. A large body of research supports the claim that better communication between partners is related to greater contraceptive use

(Crosby et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2006; Kenyon, Sieving, Jerstad, Pettingell, & Skay, 2010). Understanding the content of adolescents' sexual communication with their partners could help identify the mechanisms underlying this association and thus inform future intervention aimed at increasing contraceptive use. However, studies exploring associations by the content of communication (often dichotomizing as "general" and "contraceptive-specific" communication) have yielded mixed results. In an early study, Tschann and Adler (1997) found that higher levels of contraceptive-specific communication led to more consistent contraceptive use; however, general sexual communication was not a significant predictor of contraceptive use. In another study with similar variables, Widman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little (2006) found the opposite—higher levels of general, but not contraceptive-specific, sexual communication between partners predicted contraceptive use. Differences in observed associations between sexual communication and contraceptive use may be due, at least in part, to the different relationship contexts in which adolescents' sexual communication takes place. Examining social influences on behavior, the Theory of Triadic Influence (TTI; Flay & Petraitis, 1994) suggests that individuals are most likely to act in accordance with the expectations of those with whom they have the strongest social bonds.

A hypothesis derived from TTI is that sexual communication between partners will have a more powerful influence on contraceptive use in committed relationships than in casual relationships. Research is needed to examine this hypothesis, to shed light on a mixed pattern of findings from previous research regarding relevant sexual communication content, and to more fully understand how the interpersonal context of adolescent relationships influences contraceptive use.

The purpose of the current study is to assess how different aspects of partner sexual communication relate to consistency of contraceptive use among adolescent girls and whether this association varies by relationship type. This study addresses several gaps in existing research on adolescent contraceptive use. First, we use topic-specific measures of partner sexual

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