



NATIONAL SEXUALITY RESOURCE CENTER



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NEW RESEARCH SHOWS POSITIVE SIDE TO ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AND CHALLENGES DOMINANT VIEW OF TEEN SEXUALITY AS PROBLEMATIC

Researchers find sexual experience during adolescence may be associated with positive perceptions of one's self as a sexual being and better sexual health and discuss implications of these findings for policies on sexuality education.

“Positive Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality: Part 1” is the title of the new special issue of *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC*. This peer-reviewed journal is published by the National Sexuality Research Center (NSRC) at San Francisco State University in partnership with University of California Press and is available exclusively online at www.SexualityResearch.net.

The special issue of the journal is the first of two parts containing original research from leaders in the field of adolescent sexuality. It is guest edited by Stephen T. Russell, who stated in a pre-publication interview that:

We are now at a point where we can conceptualize positive adolescent sexuality and sexual expression—not necessarily that sexual intercourse is good for teenagers, but to say the pervasive idea that sexual behavior is bad if you're a teen is becoming challenged. So much research is focused on negative experiences of first sexual experiences, yet some adolescents talk about pleasure, planned sex, sex associated with their own personal satisfaction. This pushes us beyond ideas like “Sex is bad.” and “How do we make sure it doesn't happen?” The reality is sex does happen. So we should be more concerned about how we help young people make healthy choices about sex.

Articles in “Positive Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality: Part 1” include:

Conceptualizing Positive Adolescent Sexuality Development, by Stephen T. Russell, stresses the importance of research for “advancing both academic and practical theories about the positive development of adolescent sexuality—what it is, how it unfolds, and the variable ways that it is experienced. We know little about the ways that young adolescents experience the emergence of their sexual and romantic feelings... We know very little about adolescents' abilities to navigate sexuality, and how these abilities affect their transition to adulthood and their capacity to form healthy and fulfilling relationships as young adults. These questions provide rich possibilities for investigation, with crucial implications for young people.”

The Social and Relationship Contexts and Cognitions Associated With Romantic and Sexual Experiences of Early-Adolescent Girls, by Lucia F. O'Sullivan, reports on her study of an ethnically diverse sample of 180 girls 12 to 14 years of age that examined the social context within which their sexuality develops and includes fascinating perceptions of

their sexual behavior and romantic relationships. The study found that for “early adolescent girls ‘first times’ do not come out of the blue.... Adolescents’ lives are typically characterized by a long trajectory of dramatically changing physical, social, romantic, and sexual experiences long before first sexual intercourse occurs.”

Female Sexual Subjectivity and Well-being: Comparing Late Adolescents

With Different Sexual Experiences, by Sharon Horne and Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck, reports on their study of 449 females, 16 to 20 years of age that compared their different patterns of sexual experiences against measures of well-being in the sexual domain. The measures included sexual subjectivity (i.e., sexual body-esteem, entitlement to pleasure, efficacy in achieving sexual pleasure, and sexual self-reflection) and sexual agency, with self-esteem, and happiness as indicators of general well being. The study showed overall that participants with more sexual experiences were more positive about self-perceptions of attractiveness and sexual desirability (i.e., higher in sexual subjectivity) and sexual agency and were equal in terms of general well being. These results imply that sexuality education programs should supplement a current focus on risk reduction with emphasis on positive outcomes of sexual exploration.

Pleasure, Empowerment, and Love: Factors Associated With a Positive First Coitus, by Andrew P. Smiler, L. Monique Ward, Allison Caruthers, and Ann Merriwether, reports that among 335 undergraduates positive first coital experiences were related to a more intentional (vs. spontaneous) first experience, prior exposure to parental messages about sexual freedom, less adherence to traditional gender roles, and greater body satisfaction. The authors argue that sexual health includes positive emotional experiences, feelings of empowerment, and feeling of love and is not simply an absence of risk. Their findings suggest that comprehensive sexual education programs that contain a greater balance between positive (i.e., pleasurable) and negative (i.e., risk) messages would better promote sexual health and facilitate positive sexual development.

Also included in the new issue are: “Teenage Pregnancy Policy in England” by Roger Ingham; a review of *Young People and Sexual Health: Individual, Social, and Policy Contexts* by Elizabeth Burtney and Mary Duffy; and, a review of David M. Halperin’s *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*.

Copies of the research articles or abstracts are available and interviews with the researchers can be arranged through Geoffrey Knox at 212-229-0540.

The National Sexuality Resource Center gathers and disseminates the latest accurate information and research on sexual health, education, and rights. NSRC initiates constructive dialogues—both online and face-to-face—on sexuality to promote social justice and to improve the quality of life in the United States. <http://nsrc.sfsu.edu>.

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