Adolescents and Sex:
The Educator’s Reaction and Responsibility

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The middle school years can be and typically are some of the most challenging that life has to offer. Most educators understand the types of issues and temptations that middle school students are faced with daily, but few actually have the appropriate knowledge to properly deal with them. These issues and temptations may include alcohol, drugs, smoking, gangs, and sex. Understanding each of these in terms of how they relate to pre-teens is critical in helping them make better choices. The main focus of this paper, however, will be sex in adolescents. Specifically concerned with this topic will be factors influencing adolescent sex and ways teachers can effectively deal with it a positive light.

The media is one of the greatest factors influencing adolescents today. It is no wonder students are so knowledgeable and eager about sex. On average, youth of today spend about seven and a half hours per day with media which comes out to about three thousand hours per year. Of those three thousand hours, approximately two thousand are sexual references. Within those two thousand hours there are almost no references to birth control or STD’s. Students who see more sex portrayed on television are more likely to engage in intercourse than those who do not.\(^1\) In a recent study, researchers found that on daytime television the ratio of unmarried to married couples was 24:1 which only reinforces to our students that sexual activity is okay outside of marriage. On top of television, students are constantly consumed with film, music, videos, internet, and magazines.\(^2\) These will be discussed in a later section. It is clear to see that the media heavily influences students and sways their beliefs.

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\(^1\) Angela Miu, “Relationships Between Adolescent Sexual Outcomes And Exposure To Sex In Media: Robustness To Propensity-Based Analysis.” *Developmental Psychology* 47.2 (2011): 585.

Another factor that influences student’s decisions to partake in sexual activity has to do with parenting and neighborhoods. It is mostly known that neighborhoods with higher crime rates, heavy violence, and physical decay play a large role in students making poor choices. This is in regard to sex as well as drug use, alcohol use, smoking, and gangs. Students who come from these neighborhoods tend to have little stability and rules. They have been exposed to more than a student from an upscale neighborhood and thus get involved in these activities that they regularly see or hear about earlier. Consequently, these students that engage in sex earlier are more likely to have multiple partners which leads to a greater likelihood of contracting STD’s and these adolescents are at a higher risk for teen pregnancy.

Some exploration of parental involvement has been done to determine just how effective parents really are. Girls who have stricter parental supervision are more likely to remain abstinent. Also, students whose parents know most or all of their friends are likely to refrain from sex as well. This goes for boys and girls alike. Girls whose moms talk to them about sexual issues are less likely to become active, but on the other hand boys that have talks with their mothers are more likely to partake in sexual activity. Oddly enough, discussions about birth control with boys and girls have little impact on whether or not they choose to have sex. I found this last statistic to be unexpected and interesting.

Boys and girls both have to deal with the constant pressures during adolescence about sex, but girls are often faced with a great deal more than boys. Today there is an obsession with oversexualizing girls to the point of turning them into women at age twelve. One study showed

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4 Roche, 34.
examples of merchandise exclusively for “tweens” (ages 7-12) that included: tight fitting shirts reading “who needs brains when you’ve got these” or “future porn star”, thongs with clovers on them reading “feeling lucky?”, and playboy bunny merchandise. These “tweens” are also reading magazines with articles entitled “hallway makeout: do’s and don’ts”, “your total turn him on guide”, and “boy bait: 41 moves he can’t resist”. A great example of the type of music these girls are listening to according to one study is “Lolipop” by Lil Wayne. Looking at this list, it is so easy to see why girls feel the need to have sex early. They are surrounded by it! Society is constantly telling “tweens” that sex is what will make them successful or popular or loved. Girls are stereotyped in the media and within department stores as objects to be used by men instead of being seen as humans with thoughts, feelings, interests, talents, and most importantly brains. A lot of girls that get caught up in trying to fit into societies mold tend to focus more on self objectification and looking good for others thus foregoing focus on academics. Basically, these girls look to the media for advice on what is standard of women and learn that a girl’s worth is determined by how hot, thin, and sexy she is.

Sex education classes have been a controversial academic topic for years. Some believe they are beneficial to students and others argue that they do not belong in school. It is hard to take a concrete stance without research and evidence. According to one study, sex education classes do increase understanding of information dealing with sex knowledge but little impact on sexual guilt or sexual concerns. Guilt here has to do with masturbation, not sex. There was nothing mentioned about students being guilty for having sex but they still felt guilty about

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6 Curry, 8.
masturbation because it is portrayed as something bad. This too is a controversial subject in trying to decide how much students should know about masturbation and the extent to which promoting it may impact their decisions to have sex. Abstinence-Until-Marriage intervention courses revealed an increase in knowledge about HIV/STD’s, personal beliefs about importance of abstinence, and intentions to remain abstinent in the future. Though these programs raised awareness, they did not reduce the likelihood of sexual initiation. Strangely though, they did reduce the frequency and number of partners in those who were already experienced. This was an unexpected result from the study.\(^7\) The information on these programs still needs to be explored and further tested because the findings are not yet concrete.

An interesting characteristic of the U.S.A. regarding adolescent sex is that we tend to focus more on those who engage in sex and pay little attention to those who choose to abstain from it. We could learn a lot from these students who choose to remain abstinent that could be used to persuade others to as well. These students face media and peer pressure and still choose not to have sex. Why? According to a study, the three greatest factors in remaining abstinent are fear based postponement, emotionality and confusion, and conservative values.\(^8\) It is well known that abstinence only is the one way to ensure 100% protection, but it is an unrealistic expectation. Studying these abstinent students will certainly give a basis as to ways in dealing with active students, but it will not completely eliminate the problem.

As a future teacher I will be faced with issues regarding adolescent sex often. Students are becoming older at younger ages and these problems are all but going away. The information


\(^8\) Blinn-Pike, 298.
within this paper will help me to understand the pressures these students face on a daily basis. For me personally, this information is imperative to know about the way most adolescents operate and think. I never experienced any of this as an adolescent, in fact I was not even thinking about it at that point in my life. Honestly, I don’t remember it ever being a topic for discussion amongst my peers because the people I associated with were very much like me, extremely naïve and innocent. I know that students like this make up an ever decreasing portion among the adolescent population.

As a teacher, I would consider promoting extra-curricular activities. They have been proven to at least postpone the onset of sexual activity in young students. They also promote good self esteem, confidence, and leadership skills. All of these play roles in better decision making. Specifically for girls in my classes, I will be very careful with the terminology I use to describe them so not to stereotype or portray in a way that promotes gender roles or gender superiority. I honestly do not know how exactly I would deal with potential situations involving adolescent sex, but I do believe that this information will at least be helpful for me to understand, empathize, and brainstorm.

It is clear that adolescent sex is an ever present issue within middle schools and must be dealt with as best as possible. Though the negative influences on students to practice sex are overwhelming, educators must still find ways to carefully, respectfully, and successfully send students the correct messages about the choices they are making and the behaviors they are engaging in. As mentioned previously, some ways to combat this include rigorous coursework, intervention courses, proper knowledge, and avoiding gender stereotyping. This is definitely an area that must be dealt with using great care due to the possible negative reactions from students and parents alike. It is tough to say that there is one clear solution, but educators must not
simply let adolescent sex slide under the radar and ignore it. The information above will greatly help me in my future teaching when these issues do arise. I may not have the perfect solution at first, but I will have a basis on which to begin finding the perfect solution that best helps my students to understand and make better choices.
Bibliography


