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# “It’s a choice, simple as that”: Youth reasoning for sexual abstinence or activity

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## **Abstract**

This investigation was designed to fill gaps in the extant literature by examining reasons given by youth for refraining from or engaging in sexual intercourse, in addition to their perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of premarital intercourse. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 103 graduating seniors; 60 self-identified as sexually abstinent and 43 as sexually active. Survey indices were used to assess parent–youth relationships, and parent and peer attitudes toward premarital sex, religiosity, and dating patterns; open-ended questions were used to assess reasons for either engaging in or refraining from sexual intercourse, and to identify benefits and problems associated with both sexual participation and abstinence. The abstinent youth also described strategies employed for avoiding premarital sexual intercourse. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** sexual decision-making, sexual abstinence, sexuality, youth sexuality, premarital intercourse

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## Introduction

In *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Patricia Hersch (1998) argues that contemporary adolescents navigate social and environmental contexts that are, for most adults, foreign and unfamiliar. Although “Adults remember the feelings of being a teenager ... the world of the past was much more clearly defined, and more exact expectations were in place for everyone” (Hersch 1998, p. 393). She also points out that with which most of us are already too familiar: “... kids today are growing up among themselves, out of the range of adult vision” (Hersch 1998, p. 12). Because of this, it is imperative that parents, educators and service providers understand factors that compel youth to either engage in or avoid certain behaviors, particularly with regard to participation in activities that may challenge optimal development and well-being.

Most studies on youth sexuality focus exclusively on the risks associated with sexual activity. Much of this work suggests that youth who practice unsafe sex are at risk for a host of health-compromising outcomes including unintended pregnancy and the contraction of numerous and potentially life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. Moreover, although studies have examined, to a limited extent, why youth *avoid* sexual activity, the reasons youth engage in sexual activity remains largely unexplored. Such an oversight is problematic for effective intervention. According to Ott *et al.* (2006, p. 84), research focusing exclusively on the “... dangers of sexual behaviors, such as ‘abstinence-only’ programs ...” fails to capture the full range of youths’ experiences, and thus, limits effective programming—particularly the prevention of unintended pregnancy and STDs among youth who are sexually active.

Given gaps in the literature, the purpose of this exploratory investigation was threefold. First, we sought to compare sexually abstinent and active youth on key variables identified in the literature as influencing youth’s sexual activity. Second, this research was intended to identify reasons youth either engage in or avoid sexual intercourse. Third, as part of this research, we hoped to identify the benefits and disadvantages of sexual intercourse as perceived by *both* sexually abstinent and active youth, and to identify strategies abstinent youth use to avoid sexual intercourse. It was our hope that results of this investigation would begin to fill gaps in the literature, and would provide

valuable information for service provision and programmatic intervention. A brief review of the extant literature that informs the present study is presented.

### **Literature review**

In the USA, the median age of first intercourse is 16.9 years for males and 17.4 years for females (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2002); and, over the past decade, the percentage of 9th–12th graders reporting having had sexual intercourse decreased from 54% in 1991 to 46% in 2001 (National Campaign to Prevent Adolescent Pregnancy 2003). However, unsafe sexual behavior among adolescents who are already sexually active has not been markedly reduced (Paradise *et al.* 2001). For instance, although youths' knowledge of conception, sexual practices and contraception has improved, it is unclear the extent to which this knowledge has translated into behavioral change – as the rate of sexually transmitted diseases has continued to *increase* (Keller *et al.* 1996, Grunseit *et al.* 1997). Ozer *et al.* (1998) note that 25% of sexually active youth become infected with STDs each year, with an alarming rate of increase among females 15–19 years of age.

It is also important to point out that the birth rate among American youth declined between 1991 and 2002 (from 117 to 86 pregnancies per 1000). Still, rates in the USA are higher than in any other industrialized countries (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2002; Child Trends 2003a). Some (Darroch *et al.* 2001) argue that differences in youth birth rates are a function of American teenagers' less effective and consistent use of contraception, not to an earlier sexual debut.

Aside from sexual intercourse, youth clearly engage in a number of other sexual activities. Fifty-five percent of males and 54% of females aged 15–19 years have engaged in oral sex with a member of the opposite sex, and 11% of both males and females in the same age group have engaged in anal sex with a member of the opposite sex (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2005). Many youth do not consider non-coital sexual behavior as “having sex” (Gates and Sonenstein 2000, Woody *et al.* 2000). Yet oral and anal sex may result in adverse health consequences (Horan *et al.* 1998). For instance, the rate of youth contracting Chlamydia has increased over the past

five years for both adolescent boys and girls; engagement in oral sex has contributed to the increase (Child Trends 2003b).

### ***Sexually active youth***

A substantial body of knowledge exists focusing exclusively on *sexually active youth*; a brief review of this literature informs the present study. With regard to family structure variables, youth from single-parent homes and those whose parents have limited education and material resources are more likely to be sexually active than their like-aged peers and are at greater risk of an unplanned pregnancy (Eyre and Millstein 1999, Miller *et al.* 1997, 2001). Youth with older, sexually active siblings, especially those with older sisters who have experienced an adolescent pregnancy, are also at an increased risk of early sexual activity and pregnancy (East 1996, Widmer 1997). Further, youth reared in environments characterized by poverty and high rates of crime and residential turnover tend to engage in sexual intercourse earlier than their peers, to use contraceptive less frequently, and to have higher pregnancy rates (Upchurch *et al.* 1999, Miller *et al.* 2001).

Moving beyond demographic variables, family processes associated with youthful sexual activity have also received considerable attention. Parent-adolescent closeness and connectedness (Jaccard *et al.* 1996), parental warmth and involvement (Scaramella *et al.* 1998), and parental supervision (i.e. monitoring) and control (Luster and Small 1994, Small and Luster 1994, Whitbeck *et al.* 1994, Upchurch *et al.* 1999) are associated with postponement of sexual intercourse and more consistent contraceptive use.

Additional research suggests that exposure to traumatic child or adolescent events, especially sexual abuse (Luster and Small 1997, Miller *et al.* 2001), is associated with earlier sexual debut. Younger age of intercourse initiation is associated with a greater likelihood of having involuntary or unwanted sex (Moore *et al.* 1998), having multiple sex partners (Smith 1997), using contraception less effectively and consistently (Manning *et al.* 2000), and having an unplanned pregnancy (Manlove *et al.* 2000). Finally, youth who experiment with alcohol and drugs (Perkins *et al.* 1998, Whitbeck *et al.* 1999), those with poor academic and school performance (Bingham and Crockett 1996, Cooper *et al.* 2003) and those whose peers have sexually liberal attitudes or who are sexually active (Christopher *et al.* 1993) are more

likely to engage in sexual intercourse and to fail to use contraception effectively or consistently, thus placing themselves at risk for an unintended pregnancy or STD.

Clearly, a host of personal, familial, and environmental factors contribute to initiation of sexual activity among youth. Despite a wealth of knowledge available about sexually active youth, sexually abstinent youth have been largely neglected in the scholarly literature. Simply stated, they "... have not received the same amount of attention as their sexually active peers" (Blinn-Pike 1999, p. 296).

### ***Sexually abstinent youth***

Most investigations of youth sexuality emphasize activity, not abstinence (Crockett *et al.* 1996, Small and Luster 1994). Due to the limited attention afforded sexual abstinence among youth, little is known about *why* these young people choose abstinence or *what* they do to remain abstinent (Casper 1990, Chilman 1990). Yet, such information could provide valuable direction and guidance for parents, educators, and practitioners in their efforts to mitigate health risks associated with early sexual activity. Although gaps exist in the literature on sexually abstinent youth, the past five years has witnessed a growing interest in this population. Several studies are informative and have contributed to the development of the present investigation.

In 1999, Blinn-Pike described results of an investigation in which she compared young (average age 14 years), sexually active youth with their abstinent peers in an attempt to identify predictors of sexual abstinence and illuminate reasons given by youth for remaining abstinent. Fear of pregnancy and contracting an STD, including AIDS, were the most important reasons for not engaging in sexual activity. Conservative sexual values and religiosity were predictors of abstinence. In an 18-month follow-up study, Blinn-Pike *et al.* (2004) found that youth who remained abstinent were significantly *less* likely to report regular use of alcohol and significantly *more* likely to be male; female youth were more likely than their male counterparts to no longer be abstinent. Important also is the fact that youth gave *fewer* reasons for remaining abstinent in the follow-up study than when first interviewed 18 months prior. Compared with their earlier reports, abstinent youth were significantly *less likely* to give the following reasons for their abstinence at the 18-month follow-up: not ready for sex,

waiting until I am older, parents would be upset, too embarrassed to have sex, too embarrassed to use birth control or condoms, personal belief that it is wrong to have sex before marriage, and personal desire to wait until marriage. Finally, living in a suburban environment, in a two-parent family, and having a better educated father did *not* discriminate between sexually active and abstinent youth. Blinn-Pike *et al.* (2004, p. 508) conclude by stating: “Over 18 months, abstinent early adolescents showed (a) a liberalization in their attitudes toward premarital sex, (b) a reduction in their fear of AIDS, and (c) increased readiness for sex.”

In a unique mixed-method investigation, Oman *et al.* (2003) used youth and parent demographic factors, youth assets, and community constructs to develop age-group specific profiles of abstinent youth. A majority (86%) of the 13–14 year olds were abstinent. Having positive peer role models was “... most significant predictor of abstinence” (Oman *et al.* 2003, p. 85) within this age group. Beyond peer influences, parental demographic variables (i.e. two-parent home, parental education and family income) also predicted abstinence for the youngest youth in the study. Fifty-five percent of the 15–17 year olds were abstinent. Variables most significant in predicting abstinence for them, in order of importance, included religion, peer role models, and future aspirations. Not surprisingly, fewer (32%) of the oldest youth (ages 18 and 19 years) were sexually abstinent. Like their slightly younger peers, religion was the most important variable predicting abstinence. In contrast, however, community involvement and neighborhood safety were also significant predictors of sexual abstinence among the older youth. Oman *et al.* (2003, p. 89) concluded:

When the desired outcome is youth sexual abstinence, having good peer role models may be the *single most important factor* for younger teenagers, and religious involvement may be the most important factor for teenagers 15 years of age and older. (emphasis added)

Yet, additional data complicate such a succinct statement.

Specifically, in a more recent investigation, Maguen and Armistead (2006) examined the influence of parental and peer variables as predictors of abstinence among both younger and older African-American females. For the younger youth (i.e. those aged 12–15 years), perceived

*parental attitudes* was the only significant predictor of abstinence; peer variables were *insignificant*. Among the older youth (i.e. those aged 16–19 years), an adolescent's best friend having had sex was a significant predictor of sexual debut. Still, parental attitudes and quality of the parent–adolescent relationship were significant predictors of sexual behavior, *above and beyond* peer variable influences.

On the other hand, although Maguen and Armistead (2006) did not include religion as a predictor of abstinence in their investigation, others have with results consistent with those reported by Oman *et al.* (2003) noted earlier. Benda and Corwyn (1999) found that sexually abstinent 13–17 year olds were more likely to hold conservative attitudes and to be more religious than their sexually active peers. Further, Paradise *et al.* (2001) noted that religious beliefs was a primary justification among sexually abstinent youth for not engaging in premarital sex. Other reasons included: “It's not the right time,” “I'm not old enough,” and “I want to wait until I'm married.” To some extent, these results incur more questions than answers. Specifically, one is left wondering what these youth considered the “*right time*” for sexual activity, their views on *age appropriateness* for sexual involvement, and *why* these youth wanted to wait for sexual activity until marriage.

In a unique investigation, Siebenbruner *et al.* (2007) examined correlates of sexual behavior among sexually abstinent youth and those who engaged in either high-risk (HRT) or low-risk (LRT) sexual behaviors. This study is noteworthy not only because of the classification of youth into both high (e.g. multiple partners) and low sexual risk-taking categories, but also because it was longitudinal in nature (i.e. youth were followed from birth through age 16 years) and data were collected from multiple sources (i.e. youth, primary caregivers, and teachers). Although spatial limitations preclude full discussion of this research, several results are noteworthy. First, at age 16 years, both HRT and LRT youth had more advanced romantic relationships and were more likely to use substances (i.e. drug use among HRT youth and alcohol use among LRT youth) than sexually abstinent youth. Second, LRT youth were more mature in physical appearance than sexually abstinent (SA) youth at age 13 years. Third, HRT youth were characterized by “deviance-proneness,” whereas LRT youth engaged in “somewhat more problem behavior (e.g. alcohol use) than SAs, they did not engage in drug use to the degree of HRTs” (Siebenbruner *et al.*, 2007, p. 200). Finally, with regard to family demographic variables,

mothers of sexually abstinent youth had higher levels of education at the time of their children's births compared with LRT youth, and a significant proportion of mothers of HRT youth were single at the time of their children's births.

### **Summary**

Human sexuality is marked by its richness and diversity; examination of human sexuality often involves exploration of complex cognitive constructs, diverse family and social contexts, and multiple behavioral outcomes. When studying youth, the picture is further complicated due to rapid and substantial cognitive, social, emotional, and physical developments which characterize the second decade of life. Adolescence is a period of growth and exploration. Although substantial research has focused on sexually active youth, much is left unexplored with regard to sexually *abstinent* youth. Significant gaps in understanding about this unique population exist. Of the data that are available, contradictions are evident. Further, few have sought to examine reasons given by sexually active youth to engage in sexual intercourse, and none have examined *strategies* used by abstinent youth to resist pressures to engage in such.

### **Theoretical orientation**

According to Siebenbruner *et al.* (2007, p. 198), one thing is clear: "The prediction of sexual behavior ... involves multiple individual and social factors." We agree. This exploratory investigation was thus grounded in a holistic theoretical approach. Ecological systems theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner 1989) presents human development as a reciprocal and life-long process of interaction between person and environment. The theory incorporates four unique "systems" (i.e. micro-systems, meso-systems, exo-systems, and macro-systems) that can be visualized as hierarchically organized to encompass the developing person. The *micro-system* is comprised of patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting. For an American adolescent, common micro-systems include family, peer, school, and church or religious groups. It is the people within these groupings, not the physical

settings *per se*, whose *patterns* of interactions with and expectations for the developing person exert the greatest influence on developmental outcomes. The *meso-system* comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more micro-systems, such as the interactions between school and home, home and peer group, or school and church. The *exo-system* embodies patterns between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person (e.g. parent's place of work) and one of which does (e.g. home). Finally, the *macro-system* consists of the overarching pattern of micro-systems, meso-systems, and exo-systems; the macro-system is a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broad social context. Together, these four systems comprise the environmental contexts of development according to EST.

Two additional features of the model are significant. First, EST emphasizes the dimension of *time* in affecting developmental trajectories. Change and constancy through time influence individuals and the environments within which they are embedded. Second, within EST individual characteristics are given credibility and validation; between-person variability is expected. Two people living in similar neighborhoods, having similar family dynamics, sharing similar ethnic or racial backgrounds, with similar economic challenges and opportunities, are nonetheless individuals, with person-specific attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Personal attributes evoke reactions from others and involve an active orientation toward and interaction with the environment.

Based on the available literature and our own understanding of youth development, we believed that youth would provide a myriad of reasons for either engaging in or refraining from sexual activity. Their reasoning, we hypothesized, would be grounded in their experiences with family, peers, religious institutions, and various other "micro-systems," in addition to the linkages *between* these systems (e.g. peer values and behaviors weighed against parental values). Moreover, we also recognize inter-individual variability, as does EST, and believed it likely that youth with similar "micro-systems" might nonetheless provide strikingly different reasons for either engaging in or refraining from sexual activity. Finally, given cognitive advances characteristic of the second decade of life, we believed it probable that youth would indicate *change through time* in how they thought about, and reasoned through, their own sexual behavior or abstinence. Thus, due

to its holistic scope, and recognition of developmental change and inter-individual variability, EST was deemed the most appropriate theoretical perspective from which to conceptualize this study.

### **Purpose and significance**

This exploratory investigation compared sexually abstinent and sexually active youth on a number of key variables identified in the literature as influencing sexual behavior. A secondary goal was to delineate reasons why youth choose to engage in *or* refrain from sexual activity. Finally, we sought greater clarification of youths' thinking and behavioral processes related to their sexual activity by examining what sexually abstinent and active youth believe are the benefits and disadvantages of sexual intercourse, and strategies used by abstinent youth to avoid pressure to engage in such.

This study is unique for a number of reasons. First, both sexually abstinent and sexually active youth were included. The bulk of research to date has focused almost exclusively on sexually active youth; few studies have combined both sexually active and abstinent youth for comparative purposes. Among the handful of studies that have taken this approach, none have asked *both groups of teens* to describe their reasons for either engaging in or refraining from sexual activity. Second, most of the available research on adolescent sexual abstinence is based exclusively on quantitative data. Although valuable information has resulted, such an approach negates the voice of youth. This study was designed to obtain both quantitative (i.e. survey) and qualitative data, based on the belief that each would complement the other and provide better understanding of the phenomena of interest. Finally, Blinn-Pike *et al.* (2004, p. 508) noted the "... critical need to continue to conduct research on how to promote sexual resilience in youth." The present study is aimed at addressing this gap in the literature and was designed to identify *strategies* used by sexually abstinent youth in order to avoid sexual engagement. Thus, it was believed that the results would have utility and application for parents, educators and service providers seeking avenues and techniques that would mitigate risk associated with adolescent sexual activity.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The final sample consisted of 103 participants; most participants ( $n = 70$ ) were female. Participants ranged in age from 16 years to 18 years (mean age = 17.2 years). The majority ( $n = 98$ ) were Caucasian and lived with both biological parents ( $n = 95$ ), although some also lived in single-parent families ( $n = 5$ ), or other family arrangements (e.g. parent and step-parent, grandparents) ( $n = 3$ ). Most participants reported that both their mothers ( $n = 57$ ) and their fathers ( $n = 93$ ) worked full-time. Although family income data were not collected, participants did report parental education. The majority of the participants indicated that both their mothers ( $n = 68$ ) and their fathers ( $n = 71$ ) had four years or more of college education.

### *Procedures*

The likelihood of youth engaging in sexual intercourse increases with age. Given the ultimate goal of this investigation—to compare sexually abstinent *and* sexually active youth on a number of key variables—we purposely targeted *older* youth for participation in this study. Participants were recruited from names of graduating seniors listed in major newspapers in two mid-sized Midwestern cities. Because the names of the parents were also published, the address and telephone number of each youth was obtained from public telephone directories. Two hundred and thirteen youth were originally contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the study. Fifty-eight percent agreed to participate; 97% of these returned surveys.

Introductory letters—one for the parent(s) and one for the youth—parent and child permission forms approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, and a questionnaire were mailed to each youth who agreed to participate. Instructions asked the youth to review all materials with his or her parent(s). If the parent(s) approved, they returned the parent permission slip and the youth assent form in a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the principal investigator. Each youth was then instructed to complete the survey, in private, and return it in a second, separate postage-paid envelope.

As part of the questionnaire, youth were asked to select one of the following four choices as most characteristic of themselves: (1) "I have not had sex and choose to wait until marriage to have sex," (2) "I have not had sex but believe it is okay, in some situations, to have sex before marriage," (3) "I have had sex, but now want to wait until marriage to have sex again," or (4) "I have had sex and believe it is okay, in some situations, to have sex before marriage." (It is important to note that, although "sex" can and often does mean very different things to different people, "sex" was specifically defined as sexual intercourse for purposes of this investigation). The data reported in this manuscript focus on youth only in group one (i.e. those who had not had sex and chose to wait until marriage; referred to as "sexually abstinent") and group four (i.e. those who had engaged in sexual intercourse and who believed sex before marriage is okay; referred to as "sexually active"). The reasons for this are twofold. First, we were primarily interested in whether or not youth had chosen to have sex or not (i.e. actual behavior) and factors that may influence such choices. Second, there were very few youth who self-selected into either groups two ( $n = 11$ ) or three ( $n = 5$ ). Thus, youth in groups two and three were excluded from analysis.

### ***Quantitative data***

All participants completed surveys to assess parental warmth and support, parents', siblings' and peers' attitudes toward premarital sex, religiosity, dating patterns, sexual behavior appropriateness in various relationship stages, and informal sex education. A description of each instrument follows.

#### *Parental warmth and support*

This scale was adapted from instruments developed by Small and Luster (1994). It evaluated the adolescent's perception of the quality of his or her relationship with each parent. The items are: "I feel my mother is a good parent," "My mother cares about me," "My mother is fair when enforcing the rules," "My mother is there when I need her," and "My mother trusts me." The same questions are asked about

fathers. Items are scored on a five-point scale: Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Most of the time (4), or Always (5). The mother and father scores were combined to obtain the overall parental warmth and support. Scores could range from a high of 50, indicating a warm and supportive relationship with parents, to a low score of 10, indicating a cool and distant relationship with parents.

### *Attitudes toward premarital sex*

Youth were asked to evaluate their parents', siblings', and peers' opinions regarding premarital sex. For instance, youth responded to the following question for each parent:

My father/mother believes that premarital sex: (a) is my decision, and I can choose to have sex if I want (score = 1), (b) is only OK in some situations, with a serious dating partner or if I am engaged (score = 2), (c) is absolutely wrong, and that I should wait to have sex until marriage (score = 3), or (d) I don't know how this person feels about me participating in premarital sex.

The total *parental opinion* score was computed by adding the father and mother scores. Participants responded to the same questions, with reference to their siblings and peers. Higher scores indicated more restrictive attitudes.

### *Religiosity*

Religiosity was measured by two items: "How often do you attend religious services or religious activities?" and "How often do you do any of these things: pray, read scriptures, think about your spiritual life, and/or talk to others about your religious beliefs?" Items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from Never (1) to Almost everyday (5). Thus, total religiosity scores could range from a low of two to a high of 10.

### *Dating patterns*

To assess participants' most recent dating patterns, participants were asked to respond to the following question: "In the past two years, how much have you dated?" Response choices included: "I have not dated in the past two years," "I have had a few casual dates, but no serious relationships," "I have had many casual dates, but no serious relationships," "I have had casual dates and one or more serious relationships," or "I have had only steady or serious relationships."

### *Sexual behavior appropriateness and stage of relationship*

Youth were asked if behaviors – (1) kissing or French kissing, (2) petting with or without clothes on, (3) giving or receiving oral sex, or (4) sexual intercourse – were appropriate at various stages of a relationship – (1) casual acquaintance, (2) dating friend, (3) serious dating partner, or (4) engaged partner. The presence of a behavior at any stage was scored one, its absence was scored zero. Total scores were obtained for each stage of relationship and could range from zero to four.

### *Informal sex education*

Youth were asked if they received sex information or education on eight different topics (e.g. sexual anatomy, birth control). Each item was scored as one if selected or zero if not selected from any of six sources (i.e. mother, father, sibling, teacher, friend, or media). They also indicated the extent of information received (a little = 1, some = 2, or a lot = 3) and their feelings about the information (very positive = 5, mostly positive = 4, neutral = 3, a little negative = 2, or very negative = 1). Scores were calculated for Total Information (number of topics plus how much), and for Feelings about Sex Information (score of one to five).

### **Qualitative data**

All youth also responded to a series of open-ended questions. Depending on whether participants self-selected as sexually abstinent or active, they responded to different open-ended questions. Specifically,

sexually *abstinent* youth were asked to explain the following: (1) the reasons they had chosen abstinence before marriage, (2) the benefits or advantages of choosing abstinence, and (3) possible problems or disadvantages of choosing abstinence. These youth also described *strategies* they used to remain sexually abstinent. Their sexually *active* counterparts were asked to explain: (1) the reasons they believed it was okay to engage in sex before marriage, (2) the benefits or advantages of premarital sex, and (3) the potential disadvantages or problems associated with premarital sex.

## Data analysis

### *Qualitative data*

Thematic analysis (Aronson 1994, Boyatzis 1998) was used to analyze the text-based data obtained from the open-ended survey questions. The process involved several steps. First, all text-based data is read thoroughly. Second, an initial set of codes, reflecting the primary thoughts, ideas or concepts, are created. In the present investigation, two coders read all open-ended questions and responses twice to get an overall feel for the data. On the third reading, coders developed initial codes (or categories) and classified all respondents' comments into them. Third, categories are collapsed by combining those with similar content. Finally, data within each theme are analyzed for possible sub-themes (i.e. ideas or concepts related to the larger theme or category).

Because multiple coders were analyzing the data, several "rules" were developed to assist in coding accuracy and consistency. These included the following:

1. Code only one instance of the category regardless of the number of times it is mentioned. For example, if a youth said "God helped me to stay abstinent, and my religious beliefs support for abstinence," only one instance of the category "Religious Belief" was coded.
2. If a one sentence response contained words or phrases relevant to more than one category, one instance of each category was coded. For example, if the youth said "I have several reasons for

abstinence. My parents would be upset. I don't think sex before marriage is right, and I don't want to get pregnant." One instance of three categories (i.e. Parent Disapproval, Personal Belief In Abstinence, and Fear of Pregnancy) was coded.

3. Only the dominant theme was coded in a response if the response was tangentially related to other categories. For example, if the youth said "One way I stay abstinent is by hanging out with my friends from church," this response was coded as "Having Abstinent Friends," and not coded as "Religious Belief."

When the final themes/categories for each question were determined, then two coders re-analyzed all data and compared answers. Interrater reliability was calculated as the number of "agrees" (i.e. the number of times that both coders placed a response in the same category) minus the number of "disagrees" (i.e. when coders placed a single response into different categories), divided by the number of agrees. Consensus was achieved when raters discussed disagreements, revised the definition of a category, and then recoded the data. Interrater reliability on the categories ranged from 0.78 to 0.94.

## Results

### *Quantitative data*

Among the final sample of 103 youth, most ( $n = 60$ ) self-identified as sexually *abstinent* ( $n = 46$  females,  $n = 14$  males), while 43 self-identified as sexually active ( $n = 27$  females,  $n = 16$  males). The two groups were not significantly different on any of the demographic variables included (i.e. age, parental education, parental employment, ethnicity, residence).

### *Parenting, religiosity, dating patterns, and sex education*

A series of *t*-tests were computed to examine differences between the two groups on the key variables of interest. With regard to the parenting variables, abstinent youth reported significantly more parental warmth and support than their sexually active peers (mean = 44.8 versus mean = 42.7;  $t = 1.6$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); they also reported that

their parents stressed sexual abstinence more so than the parents of the sexually active youth (mean = 5.5 versus mean = 4.1;  $t = 5.9$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The sexually abstinent youth further reported that their parents (mean = 5.5 versus mean = 4.1;  $t = 5.9$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), siblings (mean = 2.4 versus mean = 1.6;  $t = 5.0$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), and friends (mean = 4.1 versus mean = 2.9;  $t = 4.9$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) had more restrictive/conservative attitudes toward premarital sex than did their sexually active counterparts. Also, the abstinent youth were significantly more religious than their sexually active peers (mean = 8.9 versus mean = 6.2;  $t = 7.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

In addition, we were also interested in the youths' most recent dating patterns. Most abstinent ( $n = 25$  or 42%) and active ( $n = 17$  or 39%) youth reported they had *not dated* or *had a few casual dates* only in the previous two years. The next most common type of dating pattern, for youth in both groups, was *casual dating with no serious relationships* (abstinent,  $n = 24$  or 40%; active,  $n = 12$  or 28%). The biggest difference between the two groups was with regard to the percentages of each reporting *only steady or serious relationships* (abstinent,  $n = 8$  or 13% versus active,  $n = 11$  or 26%). However, due to sample size, analysis could not be run to determine whether these differences were statistically significant.

Several group differences emerged with regard to the primary sources of and feelings toward receiving *sex education and information*. Specifically, the sexually *abstinent* youth reported receiving significantly *less* sex education information from siblings (mean = 5.7 versus mean = 17.1;  $t = 2.5$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and peers (mean = 11.9 versus mean = 17.9;  $t = 1.9$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) than did their sexually active counterparts. Additionally, the sexually *abstinent* youth reported feeling significantly *more positive* about sexual education information received from mothers (mean = 3.4 versus mean = 2.5;  $t = 3.4$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and significantly *less positive* about sex information received from peers (mean = 2.4 versus mean = 3.0;  $t = 2.1$ ,  $p < 0.04$ ) and from the media (mean = 1.8 versus mean = 2.6;  $t = 3.1$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ).

We also examined youths' perceptions of "appropriate" sexual behaviors at various stages of dating relationships. Sexually *active* youth believed that intimate physical activity was significantly *more appropriate* in nearly all types of relationships than did their sexually abstinent peers. In only four instances were the differences between the two groups not statistically significant (i.e. engaging in oral sex with a

casual acquaintance, fondling/petting a casual acquaintance, and engaging in sexual intercourse with a casual acquaintance or friend). It is important to point out that many sexually *abstinent* youth believed that *oral sex was appropriate* in various types of relationships, including with a casual acquaintance ( $n = 1$ ), with a friend one was dating ( $n = 4$  or 7%), with a steady/serious dating partner ( $n = 14$  or 23%), and with a fiancé' ( $n = 20$  or 33%).

### *Variable associations*

Correlational analyses were run to examine patterns of association among the variables of interest, separately, for the sexually abstinent and active youth. Among the sexually *abstinent* youth, several noteworthy associations emerged. First, religion was significantly associated with both parental ( $r = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ) and peer ( $r = 0.39, p < 0.003$ ) nonpermissive opinions toward premarital sex. A significant *negative* pattern also emerged between dating patterns and peers' opinions toward premarital sex ( $r = -0.28, p < 0.05$ ). Specifically, abstinent youth reporting more steady or serious dating relationships over the past two years also reported having peers who were *less* conservative in their opinions about premarital sex. Sexually *active* youth with steady or serious dating relationships also reported that their peers held *less* conservative opinions about premarital sex ( $r = -0.43, p < 0.004$ ). Finally, sexually active youth who reported greater warmth and support from parents also reported feeling more positive about informal sex information received ( $r = 0.34, p < 0.03$ ).

### **Qualitative data**

Qualitative data were collected to supplement the survey information. As noted above, youth responded to slightly different questions, depending on self-selection as either sexually abstinent or active. Results of analyses are described below.

#### *Sexually abstinent youth*

*Reasons for abstinence.* Four primary themes emerged explaining the avoidance of sexual intercourse among the abstinent youth. First, many ( $n = 30$  or 50%) noted that their abstinence was largely based

on *religious values*. One youth explained: "I have chosen to not have sex before marriage because doing that would be displeasing to God." Others concurred. One, for instance, reported, "It is clearly a command from God's Word not to have sex before marriage. Being a born again Christian, I want to honor God and follow Him alone." And another stated "God designed sex for marriage only!" Second, and equally prominent, many ( $n = 30$ ) also described remaining abstinent due to fear of STDs and pregnancy. "I don't want to be stuck with a disease or die for a moment's pleasure. HIV and AIDS are no joking matter," explained one young woman. And another said "I am very afraid that I would become pregnant or catch a life-threatening disease."

Third, abstinent youth explained their belief that sex should only occur within a *committed, marital relationship* ( $n = 21$  or 35%). This theme differed from that associated with religion as these youth appeared to make a decision of abstinence based on *personal values*, not religious mandate. One youth expressed her desire to "... be able to know that on my wedding day, I am committing everything to my husband—including my sexuality." Her views were reiterated with the following comment from a peer: "I wait because I am not ready yet and I have not found the person I want to be with for the rest of my life." And a young man explained: "I don't think it is absolutely wrong for people to have sex before marriage"; however, "I just think that the more physical you get, the bigger the commitment in other areas [in the relationship] you need. Having sex, for me, would definitely require a marriage-sized commitment."

Finally, a smaller number of youth ( $n = 16$  or 27%) reported that *parental beliefs* and *values* influenced their decisions to remain abstinent. Comments such as "My parents strongly disapprove of it and would be deeply disappointed if I did" were not uncommon. Some simply learned from parents that "it [premarital sex] is wrong."

*Benefits of abstinence.* The benefits of abstinence paralleled the reasons these youth had chosen to remain sexually abstinent. For instance, one of the most common benefits was that, in remaining sexually abstinent, *pregnancy and STDs* ( $n = 47$  or 78%) were avoided. A sizeable number also reported that, in remaining sexually abstinent, their *marital relationships would be stronger* and more fulfilling on both an emotional and a physical level ( $n = 26$  or 43%). Comments such as "My future husband will know that I love him because

I waited for him” and “Choosing abstinence before marriage makes one’s relationship with one’s wife or husband more special than if one had already had sex with earlier partners” were noted. Three individuals made reference to research reports shared by religious leaders indicating “... the best sexual fulfillment is in marriage, not before.”

The next most prevalent theme involved *guilt*. That is, many of these youth associated abstinence with “self-respect” because it allowed them to be “guilt free.” One youth reported “Self esteem increases from resisting temptation,” and another believed that “... many people respect those who are abstinent and some wish they could be that way.” A peer simply remarked “It [sexual abstinence] is an accomplishment.” Guilt was typically mentioned in context of the youths’ religious beliefs and values. They described avoiding sex because of their desire to please God; not doing so would create tremendous guilt and shame. Data analyses revealed a final theme: *avoidance of emotional pain* ( $n = 11$  or 18%). Several youth described situations in which their friends or associates had been emotionally hurt after being sexually intimate. By remaining abstinent, they avoided such risks.

*Disadvantages or potential problems associated with abstinence.* As part of understanding reasons for abstinence, we asked the youth to describe potential problems or disadvantages experienced because of this choice. The majority (85%) reported few, if any, disadvantages or problems associated with abstinence. Most said simply “No problems,” or “I have not run into any problems yet,” or “My friends accept my decision.” Being teased or ridiculed by peers, pressured by dating partners, or experiencing sexual tension, were the primary difficulties encountered but these were mentioned only by a few.

*Strategies for remaining abstinent.* A goal of this investigation was to identify strategies youth employed to remain sexually abstinent. Data analyses revealed several prominent strategies. *Personal choice and commitment* was noted by many ( $n = 28$  or 47%) as the key to remaining abstinent. They described having strong beliefs in abstinence, making a choice to remain abstinent, and standing firm in their decisions. To illustrate, one young man stated: “I make my own decisions—I may be influenced by various sources, but it’s ultimately my choice based upon the information I have.” This was a common feeling, and evident in the remarks of another who stated:

It is a choice — simple as that. You have to know your boundaries. When you know to say “no” and are bound and determined to stick with your decision, it really won’t be hard to say “no” when you are tempted.

In addition to making a choice and “sticking with it,” many youth also noted that they were strong individuals who would not compromise their values for social acceptance. “I don’t believe societal standards need to be conformed to—it’s just another way people attempt to feel that they belong—that doesn’t matter to me,” explained one; and a peer similarly stated: “Seven words: I don’t care what other people think.”

An equal number of youth ( $n = 28$ ) described *avoiding people, places, and things, that encouraged sexual activity* as a strategy for remaining abstinent. “I don’t drink alcohol or do drugs so I am able to think clearly,” noted one young man. And another would not “... listen to music, watch movies, read books or magazines, or hang out with people that encourage sex.” However, several admitted that avoiding sexual pressure was not easy. One individual said, “Sexual desire is harder than most temptations.” However, she continued “... I try to avoid the situations at all. If that means not dating—I don’t date.” In addition to *avoiding* certain people and situations, these youth also reported that their informal support systems consisted of others with *similar beliefs and values*. Many described surrounding themselves “... with friends I trust with similar values.”

Numerous participants ( $n = 16$  or 27%) explained how they *recognized the risks of sexual activity and focused on the rewards of abstinence*. These youth described focusing on future educational, career and family goals, and believing that premarital sex incurred risks (e.g. pregnancy, STDs, emotional turmoil) that they were not willing to take. Along with this, they also focused on the rewards that would come from abstinence. One man said: “I just think of how happier my life will be if I wait.” And a female explained: “I remind myself that sex will be so much more special, excited, and uninhibited (free of worry and guilt) in marriage—and that it will be worth it.” Finally, 16 youth also reported receiving *help from God* in order to avoid sexual pressure and temptation. Comments such as “God has given me the courage and perseverance to abstain” and “God helps me overcome any temptation” were noted.

### *Sexually active youth*

*Reasons for engaging in premarital sex.* In analyzing the youths' reasons for engaging in premarital sex, three primary themes were identified. First, many ( $n = 25$  or 58%) reported engaging in premarital sex because it was *an expression of love, devotion, and commitment*. One participant expressed her belief that "Sex is the deepest physical connection between two people and should be taken seriously with someone you are in love with." Similarly, several described the emotional connection shared between two people through physical intimacy as "a beautiful and amazing" experience. Within this theme of love and commitment, a prominent subtheme emerged. Several ( $n = 11$ ) noted that love and commitment *did not require a marriage certificate*. To illustrate, one youth explained: "I believe a loving, steady relationship should be a prerequisite to sex, however, marriage is no longer a sacred institution and really doesn't provide that much more stability than a serious courtship." She continued: "The key is maturity — not marriage!" A like-minded peer added "Sex is a sign of love. It is perfectly possible for two people to love each other before marriage." And another expressed her opinion by asking a rhetorical question: "Some people will never get married. Are they supposed to never have sex?"

Second, like their abstinent peers, these youth also noted that premarital sex was *a personal choice* ( $n = 12$  or 28%). This theme is nicely illustrated by the comment of one youth who remarked: "I believe premarital sex is a personal decision and no one can tell you when it is or isn't the right time." Along with these comments, numerous youth also expressed the need to be non-judgmental in the choices individuals make regarding premarital sex. "I think that it is each person's individual choice," explained one youth, who then continued: "If they are able to accept the consequences of their actions, then it is not my place to judge them." And another stated: "I have no right to judge others, and their reasons for having sex may be very good."

Finally, several ( $n = 5$  or 12%) participated in sexual activity because it was *fun and enjoyable*. To illustrate, one young woman reported that she had sex because, "... I enjoy it and I love being able to do this fun thing with my boyfriend."

*Benefits of premarital sex.* First, these youth felt strongly that physical intimacy *enhanced and strengthened relationships* ( $n = 23$  or 54%). Many explained that sexual intimacy allowed individuals to share emotions of love, which in turn “deepens the relationship and brings you closer together.” Premarital sex was also described as a “healthy expression of love and trust” for a partner, and “... can make a great relationship even better.” A large number of youth ( $n = 17$  or 40%) also believed that premarital sex allowed individuals to test their *sexual compatibility*, particularly when planning for marriage. One youth nicely summed up the views of several peers by stating: “Marriage is nothing to be rushed into; couples should know what they’re getting into. They need to know if they’re compatible.” A smaller percentage of youth ( $n = 11$  or 26%) felt that *physical pleasure* was an “obvious advantage.” Simply stated, “People enjoy doing it – seize the day!” Finally, a handful ( $n = 5$  or 11%) also reported the advantage of gaining *sexual knowledge and experience*. One young man succinctly noted: “There is a very large want to be an experienced lover.”

*Disadvantages or potential problems associated with premarital sex.* The most prevalent theme to emerge involved *physical risks* associated with sexual intercourse, including unintended pregnancy and STDs ( $n = 29$  or 48%). Interestingly, in recognizing these potential problems, one youth noted: “... but marriage doesn’t necessarily safeguard against sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy.” The second most prevalent theme involved the potential *emotional risks* associated with sexual activity ( $n = 22$  or 37%). They recognized that even serious relationships were not necessarily permanent. And in fact, couples often break-up or “... one person could leave [the relationship] and emotions could be stirred.” Similarly, they referenced the potential for *regret* after being physically intimate with a partner because “You can never take back your virginity.” Although much less common, several ( $n = 4$  or 7%) also believed that premarital sex could jeopardize a person’s *reputation*.

Interestingly, although we did not seek solutions on how to mitigate risks associated with premarital sex, some youth provided suggestions nonetheless. Several ( $n = 9$  or 15%) reported that both physical and emotional risks could be avoided if youth were careful, educated, and approached their intimate relationships responsibly.

While acknowledging potential problems, some simply remarked “You just have to be careful.” Others expounded by explaining what “being careful” consisted of. The most common advice, so to speak, involved education. They argued that pregnancy and STDs were obvious risks; however, “... it is not difficult to protect [oneself].” And one explained: “As for birth control, human error is the number one cause for malfunction.” The necessity of knowing “... all the options available concerning birth control” was stated by another who felt that many youth “had misconceptions [about contraception].” Others focused on how emotional risks could be avoided by knowing one’s partner and approaching intimate relationships responsibly. To illustrate, one young woman believed that “... people abuse sexual relationships too much. I don’t believe you should have sex unless you consider your relationship very special and intend for it to last a long time.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation was two-fold. First, we sought to illuminate patterns associated with sexual decision-making among sexually abstinent youth and their sexually active peers. A secondary goal was to identify strategies employed by abstinent youth to avoid participation in premarital sexual activity. According to EST (Bronfenbrenner 1989), development is not only bi-directional (i.e. individual’s influence their social environments, which in turn influence them) but also multi-dimensional. That is, social contexts contribute to developmental outcomes; more proximal settings (e.g. family and peers groups) provide direct and thus more significant influence than do more distal settings (e.g. religious or political institutions, the media). EST also recognizes *personal attributes* as vitally important in determining the manner in which each individual approaches, interacts with, and interprets ongoing social dynamics within their physical and social environment.

As expected based on EST, youth in this investigation described sexual decision making as significantly influenced by both personal values and beliefs, and larger social contexts. Regardless of whether or not the youth were sexually active, *personal choice* was paramount in their sexual decision-making. It is important to note that both groups emphasized sexual activity as an expression of love and emotional

connectedness within committed intimate relationships; however, one group associated commitment with legal marriage, while the other offered a broader perspective on the components of relationship “commitment” (i.e. legal document not necessary). Along these same lines, both groups believed that the decision to either engage in or refrain from sexual intercourse would enhance their intimate relationships. Again, however, differences emerged. The abstinent youth believed that *virginity* until marriage was a sign of love and devotion to one’s future spouse that would enhance their marriages; the active youth believed that *sexual participation* was a sign of devotion, an expression of commitment, and a way to “test the relationship” for potential marital compatibility. Again, both groups expressed a desire for strong, successful intimate relationships; their decision-making on how to achieve such differed tremendously.

The role of family and peer groups also emerged prominently, particularly with regard to sexual decision-making among the abstinent youth. These youth often noted that their values about premarital sex were strongly influenced by parental beliefs, and further that they surrounded themselves with like-minded peers. They also *avoided* associations with people who encouraged (or approved of) premarital sex and situations (e.g. dating, drinking alcohol) that might jeopardize their virginity. It was no surprise to learn that religious views (part of the macro-system in EST) also figured prominently in the abstinent youths’ sexual decision-making. Sexual intercourse outside marriage was strongly associated with *guilt*, largely based on religious teachings. Briefly stated, these youth appeared to closely *monitor* their social environments so that consistent messages of abstinence interacted on multiple levels to reinforce personal beliefs and values. Many parents, educators, and mental health professionals believe that, in general, youth sexual abstinence is unrealistic in contemporary American society (Shriver *et al.* 2002, Steinberg 2002, Levin 2005). In general, many tend to believe that abstinence is a worthy goal but largely impractical. This viewpoint may be overly cynical. Abstinence is an achievable goal for many, as evident in this investigation, particularly if abstinence is their choice and if the youth are supported in that decision by individuals comprising their social networks (Moore and Sugland 2001).

In contrast to their sexually abstinent peers, the sexually *active* youth rarely mentioned friends or family; none reported believing that

premarital sex was acceptable, for instance, because their inner circle of support approved of or encouraged such. However, individuals gravitate toward those who hold similar values and beliefs, likes and dislikes; this is well established and undisputable (Rose 2002, Samter 2003, Brown 2004). Thus, one might speculate with confidence that the social environments of the sexually active youth also reinforced their personal beliefs – that is, that premarital sex is *not* “wrong,” particularly within emotionally intimate relationships in which precautions are taken to avoid (to the extent possible) both physical and emotional harm. (It is also important to note that, although certainly not the majority view, some sexually active youth expressed attitudes toward sexual activity that appeared to lack mature, responsible decision-making that would entail precautionary measures.)

These data provide cause for concern for parents, educators and practitioners alike; concern is identified on behalf of not only the sexually active youth, but also among their sexually abstinent counterparts. Among the sexually active youth, specifically, two issues are worthy of discussion. First, the sexually active youth spoke frequently about the need to protect oneself (e.g. by using condoms or other forms of contraception). However, research clearly indicates that *knowledge* about contraception does not necessarily translate into *use* (Hacker *et al.* 2000, Forehand *et al.* 2005). Given the data at hand, it is impossible to determine the frequency with which the sexually active youth used contraception. However, this leads to the second issue of concern. According to the seminal review of contraceptive use by Morrison (1985), youth sexual activity is typically *unplanned* and *infrequent*, and thus youth rarely prepare (e.g. carry condoms) for sexual encounters. Moreover, sexually active youth are most likely to use contraception effectively and consistently when involved in *long-term* relationships (Cooper *et al.* 1999). However, few of the sexually active youth in this study ( $n = 11$ ) indicated serious or steady relationship dating patterns over *the previous two years*. Yet, all self-selected as sexually active. Unfortunately, we did not ask the youth to indicate age of sexual debut, frequency of sexual activity, or to describe the type of relationships (e.g. dating, serious/steady) in which they engage in sexual activities – only whether or not various sexual activities were deemed “appropriate” in various types of relationships. Given the data at hand, it is reasonable to speculate that sexual activity, including intercourse, occurred for some of these youth with individuals *other than* serious/

steady dating partners. And, given the extant literature, it is reasonable to assume that contraceptive use is sporadic, at best.

Regarding the sexually abstinent youth, concerns also exist. First, decisions regarding premarital sexual abstinence are not necessarily permanent; individuals change their minds, situations arise that tempt experimentation, and beliefs and values become modified through time. This is clearly evident not only in the longitudinal investigation noted earlier by Blinn- Pike *et al.* (2004) but also in a recent examination of the retraction of virginity pledges among youth. Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Rosenbaum (2006) compared youths' reports of virginity pledges and sexual histories at two points in time. She writes: "Among wave 1 virginity pledgers, 53% denied having made a pledge at wave 2 ... pledgers who subsequently initiated sexual activity were 3 times as likely to deny having made a pledge as those who did not initiate sexual activity" (Rosenbaum 2006, p. 1098). Coupled with the reality that even youth who take virginity pledges sometimes experience sexual debut prior to marriage, is the concern that pledgers who have premarital intercourse are *less likely* than non-pledgers to use contraception (Arnett 2007).

Furthermore, among the sexually abstinent youth (and their sexually active peers), having steady or serious dating partners was significantly associated with having friends who were *more liberal* in their premarital sexual attitudes. The work of Siebenbruner *et al.* (2007) is informative here. In their study, one of the primary distinguishing features between the sexually abstinent youth and those who engaged in both high and low sexual risk-taking was formation of romantic relationships. Clearly, having a steady or serious dating relationship may be key to initiation of premarital sex among some youth who vow abstinence. Finally, we were surprised to learn that numerous sexually *abstinent* youth believed oral sex was appropriate in various types of relationships. Because these youth self-selected as "abstinent," it appears that some do not consider oral sex as "having sex." Taken together, these data indicate the need to educate all youth, abstinent and otherwise, on risks associated with sexual practices (including oral sex), as is the need to help youth anticipate the "unexpected" by taking precautionary steps.

The abstinent youth also provided information regarding strategies used to avoid sexual intercourse. Making a personal choice of abstinence and committing to that is critical; personal decisions of

abstinence appeared to promote and enhance all other strategies noted by the youth. That is, youth who were committed to abstinence used *behavioral strategies* to avoid certain situations and people that did not support abstinence. They also employed *cognitive strategies* by focusing on future goals and perceived rewards of abstinence, while simultaneously recognizing and emphasizing risks associated with sexual activity that could jeopardize long-term plans. This information suggests that sexually abstinent youth employ a host of strategies, on multiple levels (e.g. behavioral, cognitive) to maintain their abstinence.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

The generalizability of these findings are limited on several accounts. First, data were collected at one point in time only, and therefore we were unable to track changes in beliefs, attitudes, and decision-making through time. The need for longitudinal research that allows for examination of *processes and trends* across time is warranted. Second, our study included older youth only. This was a deliberate decision because older youth have had more time to either engage in sexual intercourse or remain sexually abstinent. Thus, although this study fills a gap in the literature, we recognize that the decision-making patterns of younger youth were not captured. Third, our sample included primarily white, non-Hispanic youth with educated parents. Future research designed to explore decision-making processes among a more ethnically and socio-demographically diverse sample would provide additional insight. Fourth, although not pre-planned, our study was overwhelmingly represented by female youth. Future investigations that are more gender balanced would provide greater opportunities for young males to express their attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual decision-making and, more importantly, allow for cross-sex comparisons. Finally, this investigation, as well as others (Gates and Sonnenstein 2000, Woody *et al.* 2000) suggests that many youth do not consider oral sex as “sex,” and thus may not recognize the health risks associated with participation in such. Future research focused on youths’ beliefs regarding behaviors that comprise “sex” is lacking and the need for such is evident.

## Conclusion

In the final chapter of her book, Hersch writes:

It is a popular notion that adolescents careen out of control, are hypnotized by peer pressure or manipulated by demons for six years or so, and then if they don't get messed up or hurt or killed, they become sensible adults. That's ridiculous ... [youth] are trying the best they can in the present world to do what is right for them. Many of the things that adults judge as mindless or immoral acts are actually based on careful consideration ... (1998, p. 365)

Given the results of this investigation, we would have to agree. The majority of participants in this study described sexual decision-making and intention based on information at hand, personal experiences or those of friends or family members, and acquired knowledge. We feel this study provides insight and valuable information regarding youths' sexual decision-making, while simultaneously offering avenues for continued research on this important topic.

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