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Annenberg Research Helps Explain Early Sexual Initiation in Adolescents
Findings point to lack of self-control but not sensation seeking
Cognitive training could reduce the risk

In a study published in *Developmental Psychology*, researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center and Children's Hospital of Philadelphia have identified two components of weak self-control that predict early sexual initiation in urban adolescents. In a study of 347 Philadelphia youth followed for four years, the researchers found that two forms of weak self-control, the tendency to act without thinking and to be impatient when waiting for rewards, predicted early initiation. Both of these tendencies were related to a limitation in the ability to hold thoughts in mind, a basic cognitive skill that can be trained. Contrary to what many researchers have found, sensation seeking was not related to early sexual initiation when the other two forms of weak self-control were held constant.

"The results are important for understanding how to intervene to help adolescents avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, which are more common for youth who initiate sex early," noted Dan Romer, Director of the Adolescent Communication Institute at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC).

The researchers studied a cognitive ability known as working memory ability. This ability enables individuals to consider different alternatives when making decisions. They found that youth who initiated sex at the ages of 13 to 15 had relatively weaker working memory ability and that this weakness was reflected in their more impulsive tendencies. Growing evidence indicates that this ability can be trained in children and that it can reduce impulsive tendencies. Thus, the findings of this study suggest potential interventions that can reduce the impulsive tendencies that place adolescents at risk of early sexual initiation and other health compromising outcomes.

The findings also suggest that the risk for early sexual initiation among adolescents from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds could be lowered with working memory training.

Their elevated risk for early sexual initiation in the study was entirely accounted for by individual differences in working memory and the two types of impulsivity.

“The potential to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds with working memory training presents an appealing option to boost their self-control,” noted Atika Khurana, a post-doctoral fellow at APPC, who is first author of the study. “Such interventions will likely provide other benefits, such as better attentional focus, improvements in school performance and better decision-making skills to avoid other potential risks to healthy development.”

The youth in this study were first assessed when they were 8-10 years old and were followed annually for five years. The study examined sexual initiation in the cohort between the third and fourth years of the project. Nearly 7% of the youth reported having initiated sexual activity at ages 12 to 14. This increased to 16% a year later when the average age of the sample was 14 years.

Past research has found that development of working memory is especially sensitive to the child’s home and neighborhood environment. Growing up in poor neighborhoods, for instance, can have a detrimental impact on children’s working memory development. Other research has also found that children who exhibit weak self-control are at greater risk for poor developmental outcomes. However, the mechanisms underlying the effects of impulsivity and potential points of intervention have been less clear. The present research identifies more precisely the dimensions of impulsivity (acting without thinking and inability to delay gratification) that place children at risk of early sex and the potential for working memory training to reduce these forms of impulsivity.

The research was supported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse; however the conclusions of the paper are solely those of the authors.

The study was recently published online in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2012-05093-001/>