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## Fast Facts

1. Dating plays a part in adolescents' healthy development, and the majority of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders have dated at some point.<sup>1,3</sup>
2. Adolescents who have sexual intercourse early are less likely to use contraception, putting them at greater risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).<sup>6</sup>
3. Many teens are engaging in sexual behaviors other than vaginal intercourse; nearly half have had oral sex, and slightly more than one in 10 has had anal sex.<sup>8</sup>
4. The proportion of teens who have ever had sexual intercourse has declined since the early 1990s.<sup>6,9</sup>
5. Some adolescents engage in high-risk sexual behaviors, such as having multiple sexual partners or having sexual intercourse under the influence of drugs or alcohol.<sup>5,9</sup>
6. New media play important roles in adolescents' dating and sexual relationships; more than one third of adolescents have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages via text, instant message (IM), or e-mail.<sup>11</sup>

## Dating and Sexual Relationships

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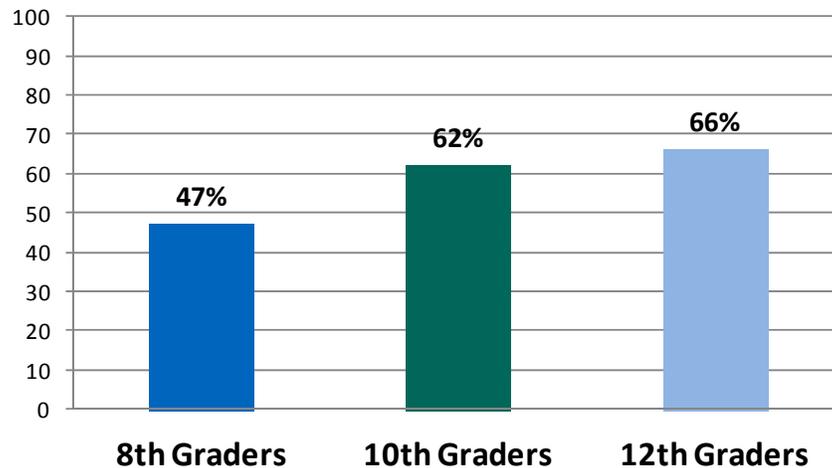


Dating during adolescence is an important stage in people's lives. In spending time with a current or potential girlfriend or boyfriend, adolescents are developing their romantic and sexual identities, which set the stage for their adult relationships.<sup>1-3</sup> Dating during adolescence is common, although research suggests that the terms "hanging out" or "going with someone" have replaced the term "dating" for many adolescents.<sup>4,5</sup> This *Adolescent Health Highlight* presents key research findings about the prevalence of and trends in adolescents' dating and sexual relationships; discusses dating and sexual behaviors that may put adolescents at risk for negative outcomes; examines how these behaviors vary by gender, age, and race/ethnicity; and considers individual, family, and media influences on adolescents' sexual behaviors.

### Dating trends among adolescents

Dating during adolescence is common. In 2011, 47 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 62 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 66 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported that they ever date (see Figure 1). Recently, dating among older adolescents (i.e., those in 12<sup>th</sup> grade) has declined somewhat,<sup>7</sup> a drop that might reflect a change in terminology as well as a possible change in behavior.<sup>1,7</sup>

**FIGURE 1:** Percent of high school students who ever date, 2011



Source: Child Trends. (2013). *Child Trends Databank: Dating*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

*Each year, roughly 10 percent of high school students, both males and females, report experiencing dating violence.*

Dating varies across racial/ethnic groups. For example, research finds that white adolescents are generally more likely to be in dating relationships than are black and Hispanic adolescents.<sup>5,10</sup> Additionally, among adolescent females who date, white adolescents tend to be in longer-term, more serious relationships than black adolescents.<sup>10</sup>

The nature of dating relationships changes as adolescents get older—moving from mixed-sex group outings, to pairing off within a group, to going out one-on-one as a couple.<sup>1,3</sup> Positive experiences in these relationships, such as receiving support and affection, contribute to healthy self-esteem and promote communication and conflict management skills. However, other dating experiences, including having multiple very short-term relationships and being in relationships with high levels of aggression, can be problematic for adolescents. For example, poor quality romantic relationships are linked to alcohol and drug use, poor academic performance, and poor emotional health.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Violence in dating relationships among adolescents**

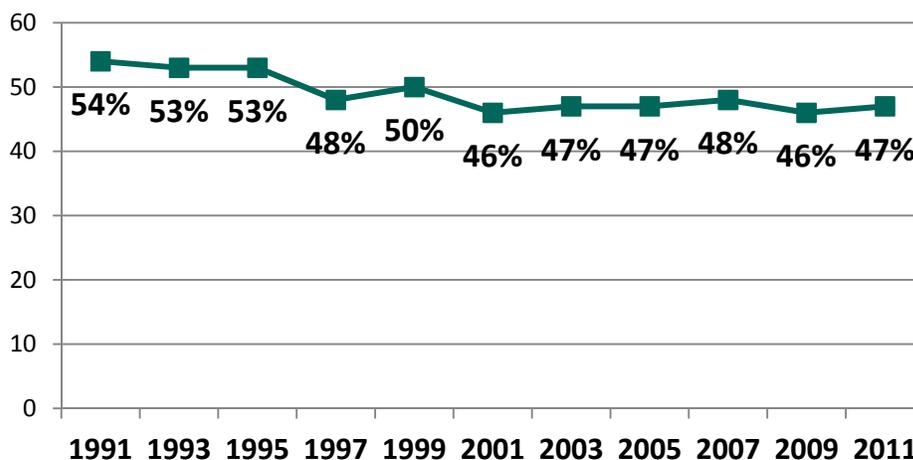
Unfortunately, sometimes violence occurs in adolescent dating relationships. Each year, roughly 10 percent of high school students, both males and females, report experiencing dating violence (i.e., having been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend).<sup>9</sup> These adolescents report lower self-esteem, lower emotional well-being, and more suicidal thoughts and attempts, and show more disordered eating patterns than do adolescents who were not victims of dating violence.<sup>12</sup> Black and Hispanic adolescents are more likely than white adolescents to experience violence in a dating relationship.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Sexual initiation during the adolescent years—and why it is good to wait**

It is not uncommon for adolescents in dating relationships to have sexual intercourse. In 2011, 47 percent of high school students reported ever having had sexual intercourse, down from 54 percent in the early 1990s (see Figure 2). The likelihood of sexual intercourse

increased with each school grade level (from 33 percent in 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 63 percent in 12<sup>th</sup> grade).<sup>13</sup>

**FIGURE 2:** Percent of high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse, 1991 to 2011



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). *1991-2011 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey data*.

The decline, since the 1990s, in the percentage of high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse is good news. Waiting until an older age to first have sex is linked to greater contraceptive use, fewer lifetime sexual partners, and a reduced risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).<sup>6,14,15</sup> Additionally, adolescents who are older when they first have sexual intercourse are less likely to report that their first sexual experience was unwanted.<sup>6</sup> Adolescents who wait to have sex do so for a variety of reasons, including that they “haven’t found the right person yet,” that (primarily premarital) sexual intercourse was “against religion or morals,” and that they “don’t want to get (a female) pregnant.”<sup>6</sup>

**Relationship status when adolescents first have sexual intercourse**

A person’s first sexual experience typically occurs in a dating relationship, and most sexually active adolescents report that they first had sexual intercourse in a steady, serious relationship.<sup>1,6</sup> However, a small proportion of adolescents have sex for the first time in a casual relationship. Between 2006 and 2010, 16 percent of female and 28 percent of male 15- to 19-year-olds reported that they had sexual intercourse for the first time with someone they had just met or with whom they were “just friends.”<sup>6</sup> These adolescents are less likely to use contraception, which places them at a higher risk of pregnancy and STDs.<sup>16</sup>

**Sexual risk taking among adolescents**

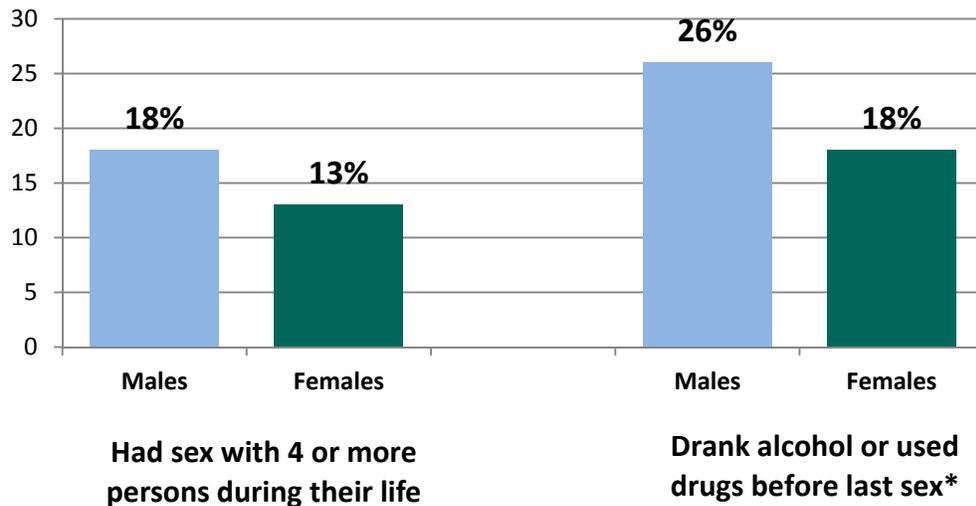
Some adolescents engage in sexual behaviors—such as having multiple sexual partners or having sexual intercourse under the influence of drugs or alcohol—that put them at higher risk of getting pregnant or acquiring STDs.<sup>17-19</sup> In 2011, according to a national survey of high school students, 18 percent of male and 13 percent of female students reported having had four or more sexual partners in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Further, 26 percent of sexually active male

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students and 18 percent of sexually active female students reported that they used drugs or alcohol the last time they had sexual intercourse (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 3: Percent of high school students engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, 2011**



*The majority of sexually active high school students report using contraception. In 2011, 60 percent reported using a condom and 23 percent reported using the birth control pill, an injectable, an implant, the ring, or an IUD the last time they had sex.*

\*Among students who had sex during the past three months.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). Youth risk behavior surveillance-United States, 2011. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 61(4).

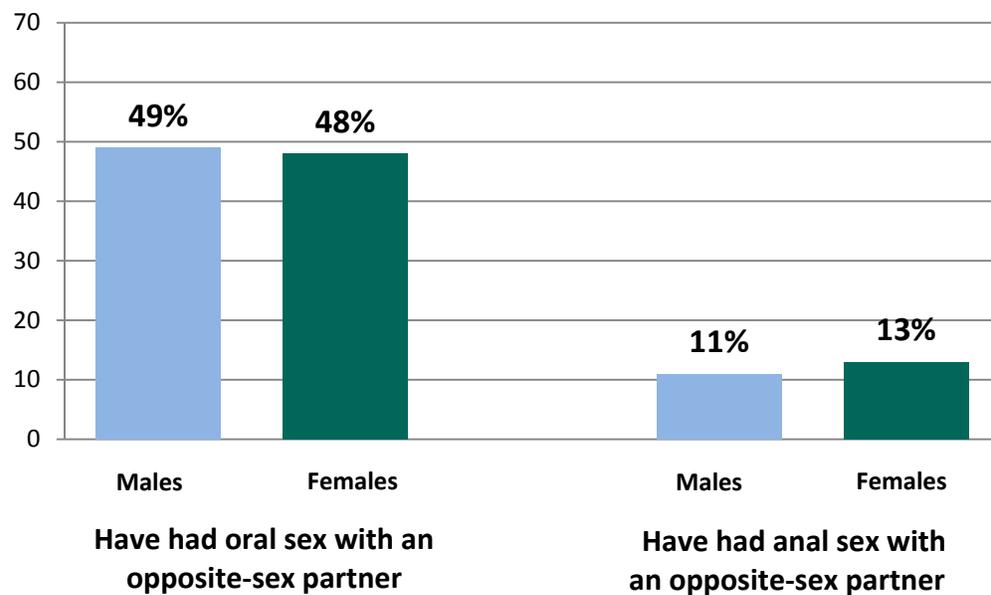
However, most sexually active adolescents do report using contraception. In 2011, 60 percent of high school students reported having used a condom the last time they had sex, while 23 percent reported having used the birth control pill, an injectable, an implant, the ring, or an IUD.<sup>9</sup>

**Other sexual activities among adolescents that pose risks**

Many adolescents engage in sexual behaviors other than vaginal intercourse. For example, in 2007-2010, 49 percent of males and 48 percent of females ages 15-19 reported that they had engaged in oral sex with an opposite sex partner (see Figure 4).<sup>20</sup> This often occurs prior to initiating sexual intercourse: among adolescents who had oral sex, 48 percent of females and 51 percent of males did so before they had sexual intercourse.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, between 2007 and 2010, 11 percent of male adolescents and 13 percent of female adolescents reported that they had engaged in anal sex with someone of the opposite sex (see Figure 4).<sup>20</sup> Oral sex and anal sex do not put adolescents at risk of pregnancy; however, unless precautions are taken, they can put youth at increased risk of STDs, particularly since the use of condoms or other barrier methods remains lower for oral and anal sex than for vaginal sex.<sup>8</sup>

*Among all adolescents who had oral sex, 48 percent of females and 51 percent of males did so before they had sexual intercourse.*

**FIGURE 4: Percent of 15- to 19-year olds engaging in oral sex or anal sex with an opposite-sex partner, 2007–2010**



*Two-and-a-half percent of males and 11 percent of females ages 15-19 reported a sexual experience with a same-sex partner.*

Source: Copen, C. E., Chandra, A., & Martinez, G. (2012). Prevalence and timing of oral sex with opposite-sex partners among females and males aged 15-24 years: United States, 2007-2010: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some adolescents engage in these sexual behaviors with same-sex partners. In 2006-2008 (no newer data have been released), 2.5 percent of males and 11 percent of females ages 15-19 reported a sexual experience with a same-sex partner.<sup>8</sup> The more-reported same-sex sexual behavior among females may be due, in part, to differences in question wording (reporting on oral or anal sex for males and oral sex or “any sexual experience” for females).

**Group differences in dating and sexual behaviors**

Dating and sexual behaviors differ across population groups, including by age, race/ethnicity, and gender. As adolescents age and gain independence, their social and romantic relationships change and they typically spend increasing amounts of time in romantic relationships.<sup>1,3</sup> Additionally, the older adolescents are, the more likely they are to have sexual intercourse and engage in other sexual behaviors that put them at risk for STDs and pregnancy.<sup>9,20</sup> Black adolescents, male and female, are more likely to have sexual intercourse prior to age 13 than are Hispanic adolescents, who, in turn, are more likely to do so than are white adolescents. Black adolescents are also the most likely to have had at least four sexual partners in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Males are more likely than are females to have had four or more partners and to have used drugs or alcohol the last time they had sexual intercourse (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

**Influence of individual and family characteristics on adolescents’ sexual behaviors**

Individual and family characteristics are linked to adolescents’ sexual behaviors. For example, adolescents who come from poor families, who have difficulty in school, and who use drugs or alcohol are more likely than other adolescents to be sexually active, to have casual sexual relationships, and to have multiple sex partners.<sup>14,21,22</sup> Adolescents who grew

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*Positive parent-adolescent relationships are marked by closeness, open communication about sex and other topics, and parental rule-setting and monitoring.*

up with two parents in the house, who expect to go far in school, and who avoid delinquency are less likely to be sexually active or to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors.<sup>6,14</sup>

Family dynamics can also matter. Adolescents who have positive relationships with their parents—characterized by closeness, open communication, and parental monitoring—are less likely to have sexual intercourse at an early age, and when they do have sex, are more likely to use contraception.<sup>14</sup> They are also less likely to be violent in a dating relationship.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Media’s roles in shaping dating and sexual behavior**

Adolescents spend more time using traditional media, such as television, and new media, such as social networking sites, than engaging in any other activity.<sup>24</sup> Thus, media have the potential to shape the beliefs and behaviors of adolescents, including those about dating and sex.

Exposure to sexual content in television has been linked to risky sexual behavior. For example, one study found that adolescents who watched television shows with high levels of sexual content were more likely to become sexually involved and to become pregnant or get a girlfriend pregnant.<sup>25</sup> One possible explanation the authors give for this finding is that such shows seldom incorporate any information on the risks, responsibilities, and consequences of sexual behavior.

Television, however, is just one part of an ever-expanding media environment. The majority of adolescents have access to electronic devices (e.g., cell phones, computers) that allow them to text and instant message, e-mail, blog, and access social networking websites. These technologies undoubtedly have their advantages in that they enable adolescents to communicate with family and friends more easily, as well as with their romantic and sexual partners. Additionally, connecting through social networking websites may have particular appeal to adolescents who feel isolated or marginalized, because these sites can enable them to “try out” relationships.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, these newer technologies have changed the way adolescents think about and experience sexual relationships. For example, recent data suggest that many adolescents engage in “sexting.” One national study found that 37 percent of adolescent females and 40 percent of adolescent males between the ages of 13 and 19 have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages via text, instant message, or e-mail.<sup>11</sup> Another study found that four percent of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have sent sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos or videos of themselves to someone else via text messaging.<sup>26</sup> Social networking websites such as Facebook are also being used increasingly to connect with potential dating and sexual partners and to share sexually explicit information.<sup>24</sup>

Notably, organizations concerned with youth health and well-being are beginning to use media strategies—often implemented through television, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and text messaging—to positively influence the sexual behavior of adolescents.<sup>24</sup> Although many of these strategies are relatively new and have not been evaluated rigorously, research suggests that the most promising of these strategies share certain characteristics: they are informed by theory; involve intended audiences in the campaign design; are tailored to those audiences; target high-risk adolescents; achieve high levels of message exposure; and encourage the adoption of new healthy behaviors, rather than stopping problem behaviors.<sup>24</sup>

*Efforts to promote responsible sexual behavior need to incorporate ways for adolescents to develop the vital emotional and interpersonal skills necessary for successful relationships.*

**A broader view of dating and sexual behaviors**

One reason for the continuing high rates of teenage childbearing and STDs in the United States may be that efforts to change the behavior of adolescents have often been too limited in scope. Ultimately, engaging in responsible sexual behavior is best considered in relation to other adolescent issues. Efforts to promote responsible sexual behavior need to incorporate ways for adolescents to develop the vital emotional and interpersonal skills necessary for successful relationships, as well as change some of the gender-stereotyped expectations about behavior.<sup>2</sup> For example, society still tends to hold adolescent females responsible for placing sexual limits in relationships.<sup>2</sup>

**Resources**

The Child Trends DataBank includes brief summaries on well-being indicators, including several that relate to adolescent dating and sexual relationships:

- Dating: <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=dating>
- Dating violence: <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=dating-violence>
- Sexually active teens: <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=sexually-active-teens>
- Sexually experienced teens: <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=sexually-experienced-teens>

The Childs Trends [LINKS](#) (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database summarizes evaluations of out-of-school time programs that work (or not) to enhance children's development. The LINKS Database is user-friendly and directed especially to policy makers, program providers, and funders.

- Programs related to the reduction of sexual activity can be found by selecting that box under Reproductive Health.
- Evaluations of programs proven to work (or not) in delaying the initiation of sexual intercourse, among other reproductive health measures, are summarized in the fact sheet [What works for adolescent reproductive health: Lessons from experimental evaluations of programs and interventions](#).

There are also several federal resources available that related to teen dating and sexual relationships:

- For information and resources on preventing dating violence, see <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/teendatingviolence2012-a.pdf>. Also, adolescents experiencing teen dating violence and those who care about them can call 1-866-331-9474, the National Dating Abuse Hotline. Callers will reach peer advocates who are trained to offer support, information, and advocacy to those involved in dating abuse relationships. Additional resources and a live chat feature are also available at the related website <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>.
- The timing and circumstances of sexual relationships are key determinants of adolescent pregnancy. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has named Teen Pregnancy as one of its 10 “winnable battles” (public health priorities with large-scale impact on health and with known, effective strategies to address them) (<http://www.cdc.gov/WinnableBattles/TeenPregnancy/index.html>).

*The Childs Trends LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database summarizes evaluations of out-of-school time programs that work (or do not) to enhance children's development.*

*Adolescents experiencing teen dating violence and those who care about them can call 1-866-331-9474, the National Dating Abuse Hotline.*

- The Office of Adolescent Health has compiled a database of evidence-based pregnancy prevention programs, including several that work for both genders and many that effectively build emotional and interpersonal skills ([http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen\\_pregnancy/db/tpp-searchable.html](http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/db/tpp-searchable.html)).
- For adolescents who are sexually active, federally-funded Title X family planning clinics offer low-cost STD testing and contraceptive services for qualifying patients. Adolescents and others can find a Title X funded clinic near their homes at [www.hhs.gov/opa](http://www.hhs.gov/opa) (“Find a Family Planning Clinic” on the right side of the page).

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