

TRENDS Child FACT SHEET

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LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES FOR TEENS WITH OLDER SEXUAL PARTNERS

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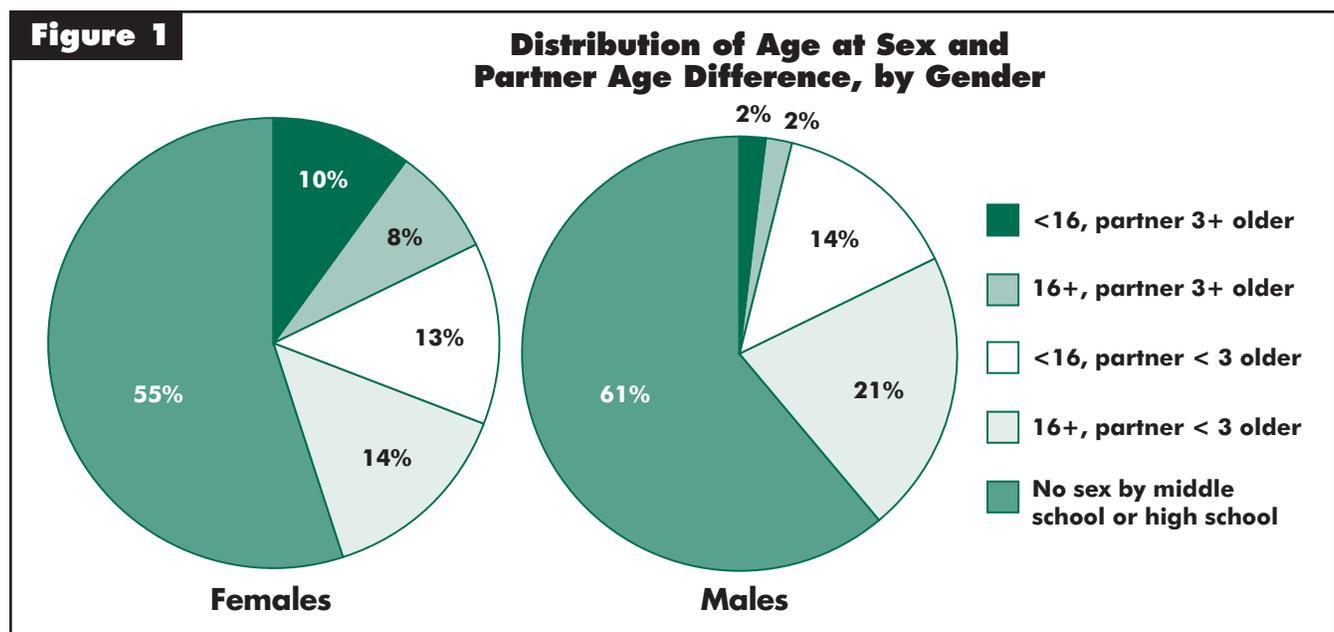
BACKGROUND

Existing research on the risks of having sex at a young age with an older partner has focused on poorer reproductive health outcomes in the adolescent years, but scant attention has been paid to the longer-term implications of these relationships. Using survey data from high school students, this Fact Sheet presents findings from recent Child Trends research examining whether having sexual intercourse before age 16 with a partner at least three years older was associated with becoming a teen or unmarried parent or acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (STD) by young adulthood (post-high school through the early twenties). Overall, the findings highlight the need for parents and programs to address and promote healthy sexual behaviors not only among young teens, but also among older teens and young adults.

FINDINGS

Almost one in five teen girls has had an older sexual partner.

- Nearly one-fifth (18 percent) of girls and 4 percent of boys reported having sex with an older partner (three or more years older) during middle school or high school. (See Figure 1.)
- A smaller but notable proportion of these teens had a combination of risk factors – 10 percent of girls and 2 percent of boys reported that they had sex at an early age (before age 16) with an older partner.
- The majority of teens in the survey (55 percent of girls and 61 percent of boys) reported that they had not yet had sexual intercourse by middle school or high school.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY FOR THIS *FACT SHEET*

This *Fact Sheet* is based on “Older Sexual Partners During Adolescence: Links to Reproductive Outcomes in Young Adulthood,” an article published in the March 2008 issue of *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. It was written by Suzanne Ryan, Kerry Franzetta, Jennifer Manlove, and Erin Schelar at Child Trends. The authors had analyzed data from a sample of students who were followed into adulthood, drawing on information from three waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative survey of U.S. adolescents who were in grades seven through twelve in 1995. The sample consisted of approximately 11,000 unmarried male and female teens who were sexually experienced by young adulthood in 2001-2002 (Wave 3). Using multivariate analysis (that is, examining multiple variables at the same time), the authors investigated whether having sexual intercourse before age 16 with a partner at least three years older was associated with becoming a teen or unmarried parent or acquiring an STD by young adulthood (post-high school through the early twenties).

Partner age and age at sex are linked with girls’ risks of acquiring an STD and having a baby outside of marriage in young adulthood.

- Girls who had an older sexual partner were more likely to acquire an STD and to have had a baby outside of marriage by young adulthood than were girls who had a similar-aged partner. (See Figure 2.)
- Having sex before age 16 was linked to an increased risk of girls contracting an STD in young adulthood.
- Neither having sex with an older partner nor having sex at an early age was linked with the risk of a teen birth for girls or for boys.

Among girls, the combination of having sex at an early age and having an older partner is linked to an especially high risk of acquiring an STD.

- Girls who had sex before age 16 with a partner at least three years older were twice as likely as were girls who delayed sex or had similar-aged partners to test positive for an STD in young adulthood.
- One potential explanation for this finding is that when young teen girls have an older sexual partner, there may be unequal power dynamics within the relationship that lead to less consistent condom use and, therefore, a greater risk of contracting STDs. The older partner usually has more perceived power and, consequently, has more say in decisions about condom use. Also, older partners have had more time in which to acquire an STD.

Figure 2

The Association Between Partner’s Age, Age at Sex, and the Combination of Age and Partner’s Age with Reproductive Health Outcomes

	STD		Nonmarital Birth		Teen Birth	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Older sexual partner	0	+	0	+	0	0
Sex before age 16	+	+	0	0	0	0
Sex before age 16 with an older partner	0	+	0	0	0	0

*A plus sign indicates a positive association between age and/or age difference and the outcome; a “0” indicates there is no association between age and/or age difference and the outcome.

Among boys, partner age does not affect the risk of acquiring an STD, but age at sexual experience does.

- Boys who had sex before age 16 were twice as likely to acquire an STD as were those who delayed having sex for the first time, regardless of their partner's age.

Other characteristics of teens' relationship histories are also related to reproductive health outcomes in young adulthood.

- Among the full study sample, teens had an average of two sexual partners during adolescence.
- Both boys and girls with a greater number of sexual partners in adolescence were at an increased risk of having or fathering a child outside of marriage in young adulthood.
 - For girls, this factor helps explain *why* having sex with older partners is a risk factor for having a baby outside of marriage. More precisely, part of the reason that partner age difference matters for girls' risk of having a nonmarital birth is that girls with older sexual partners also tend to have more sexual partners.
- Among all teens in the study sample, more than one-third (36 percent) of boys and one-quarter (27 percent) of girls reported that they had at least one nonromantic sexual partner during adolescence.
- Girls who reported that they had a nonromantic sexual partner during adolescence were more likely to contract an STD by young adulthood than were those who only had romantic sexual partners.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, our findings reveal that having sex at a young age and having older sexual partners are

linked to poorer reproductive health not only in adolescence, but also into young adulthood. The *combination* of having sex before age 16 with an older partner is particularly risky, especially in relation to STD outcomes among girls. For boys, however, partner age is not a significant risk factor for contracting an STD; instead, early sex is the key risk factor for this negative outcome.

These findings indicate a need for pregnancy and STD prevention programs to address the risks of having older sexual partners, as well as the continuing need to emphasize messages about the importance of delaying sexual initiation. Program providers and parents should pay particular attention to young girls who may have early sex with an older partner because these girls face an especially high risk of long-term negative reproductive health outcomes. Programs and parents should be aware of the potential power imbalance between teens and older partners and should help teach teens how to make healthy decisions about sex and contraception and, specifically, how to negotiate condom use if they are sexually active. In addition, it is critical for programs to look beyond the young teen population to address and promote healthy sexual behaviors and relationship choices among older teens and young adults, as well.

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