Beyond Abstinence and Risk: A New Paradigm for Adolescent Sexual Health
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Objectives

- Discuss adolescent sexual development
- Identify the contributions of the “Abstinence” and “Sex as Risk Taking” paradigms to healthcare practice
- Describe the alternative ABCD paradigm of adolescent sexuality
- Discuss and explore practical applications of ABCD paradigm in adolescent sexual and reproductive health promotion
Gender Identity and Role

Paradigm of Sexuality

Biological Sex

Sexual Attraction

Sexual Orientation

Sexual Behavior
Two Narrow Approaches to Adolescent Sexual Development

Over past three decades, two approaches have predominated in U.S. sexual health policy and practice:

- Abstinence-only
- Sex as risk taking
The Abstinence Paradigm

“You don’t need to know - unless in a committed carpooling relationship”

- Provides a code, not empowerment
- Gives no tools for navigating relationships
- Makes sex hard to discuss when it does happen
Adolescent Sexual Development

Finer LB, Philbin JM, 2014
The “Sex as Risk-Taking” Paradigm

- How many times have you driven in the past 3 months? 6 months?
- How many passengers have you carried?
- Did you wear a seat belt during your last drive?
- Front-passenger airbags?
- Have you ever driven while under the influence of alcohol or drugs?
The “Sex-as-Risk-Taking” Paradigm

- Sexual expression vs. sexual risk
- Instills fear and not sense of mastery or control
- Leaves out the relational contexts of sexuality
History-taking Template

- Sexual coercion and abuse
- Sexual orientation
- Sexual activity
  - Number of partners
  - Frequency
  - Sex practices
- STI history and risk assessment
- Pregnancy history and risk assessment
- Contraceptive behaviors
- Substance use
Medically-derived risk-assessment/prevention, screening, and treatment approach

Results in discussions that are based on:

- Narrow definitions of sexual health
- Focus on specific sexual behaviors as part of risk-assessment strategy instead of personal development and interpersonal relationships
What is Healthy Sexuality?
Explaining Differences in Outcomes

Policies, economics and culture play a role:

- US teens face greater disparities in access to socioeconomic resources
- Dutch teens have better access to sexual health education and services
- US and Dutch societies approach adolescent sexuality differently
Study: Examining Cultural Meanings of Adolescent Sexuality

For information on this study, see Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens and the Culture of Sex (University of Chicago Press) or visit works.bepress.com/amy_schalet
US and Dutch Cultural Approaches and Adolescent Sexuality
Dramatization

- Raging hormones
- Sex as risk taking
How to be Happy even though you have a Teenage Daughter

21 tips on how to survive your daughters' teenage years through nutrition and psychology

DON'T GET MAD...
GET THROUGH IT!

a parent's guide to surviving the teenage years without tearing your hair out...
Normalization

- Readiness and self-regulation
- Sex is preparation
“Double Dutch”

Dual Method Use = Condom + Hormonal Contraception

Rutgers WPF. January 2012
Battle of the Sexes

Schalet, A. Medscape General Medicine. 2004
Love Is Extraordinary

Schalet, A. Medscape General Medicine. 2004
Falling in Love Is Common

- Being in love is a common experience

- In national survey, 63% of Dutch youth say they are “very much” in love with their current sexual partner

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deGraaf H, Meijer S, Poelman J, Vanwesenbeeck I. *Seks onder je 25ste; Seksuele Gezondheid van Jongeren in Nederland Anno 2005*
[My mother] hasn’t asked me [whether I am having sex] and I haven’t told her…I’d rather her not ask me straight out.”

—16-year-old American girl

- Teens keep sex a secret
- Some parents prefer “not to know”
- Secrecy weighs especially on girls
“I wanted to tell my mother. I don’t know. It was on my mind. So I told her regardless of the consequences.”

—16-year-old Dutch girl

An open subject that is rendered negotiable

Parents may not always be completely comfortable with but they do not want it to lead to deception
Mit Liebe schenken.

mach’s mit.

machsmitmit.de
If you’re going to have sex, don’t get screwed.

STD. No matter how you do it, you can get it. Protect yourself. Protect your partner. Use a condom.
Wie im 7. Himmel.

mach's mit.

machsmitmit.de
Can Cultural Approaches to Adolescent Sexuality Change?
Conceptualizing a New Paradigm: ABCD2
Sexual Health is More Than the Mitigation of Risk and the Absence of Disease
A New Paradigm

- Adolescent sexuality development is a normal process encompassing interrelated biological and psychosocial aspects

- Sexuality development lies on a continuum through which youth progress in the context of relationships

- Adults play vital roles in providing resources and supporting the development of skills
Develop Autonomy of Sexual Self

- Own and control sexual decision-making process
- Recognize and articulate wishes and boundaries
- Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes
Autonomy of Sexual Self

- Research has found that:
  - Personal control and self-efficacy in sex negotiation are significantly associated with safer sex behavior.
  - Adolescents with a sense of control over their lives (in general and in sexual situations) more likely to abstain from sex or to use condoms when they engage in sexual intercourse.
Facilitate knowledge building

Normalize desires and arousals while emphasizing agency and ownership of sexual decision making
  - Examine their readiness for sex
  - Define and articulate boundaries
  - Promote preparation for sexual activity

Acknowledge the pleasurable aspects of sexual contact
Build Good Romantic Relationships

Validate adolescents’ need for intimacy
Assist in building egalitarian relationships suited to their life stage
Teach about *healthy* relationships, not just the avoidance of unhealthy relationships
Acknowledging the value of relationship-building and the virtues of intimate relationships

Encourage youth to discuss:

- Healthy relationship
- Communication
- Sex-related communication
- Conflict resolution
A New Paradigm

Foster Connectedness Between Adolescents and their Parents and Other Caregivers
Connectedness: The Parent Role

- Parents usually not primary source of information
- Many parents feel unsure about how best to approach the topic
- “The Big Talk”
- Communication about sex not very extensive
- Parent-teen conversations about sex often one-way
Fostering Connectedness

- Parental Involvement vs. “Parentectomy”:
  - Encourage honest and open communication if possible between caregiver and teen
    - Perspectives of relationships
    - Barriers
  - Encourage parents to communicate their values and beliefs but recognize that their children may have different perspectives and experiences
Connectingness: Pearls in Practice

Talking to adolescents:

- Examine patient’s perspective of relationship with caregiver
- Examine barriers for conversation with caregiver about romantic/sexual relationships
- Offer to be a resource to both parents and teens
Talking to caregivers:

- Acknowledge to caregiver talking about relationships is difficult, but healthy

- Help caregiver understand the importance of modeling healthy relationships
A New Paradigm

D^2

Recognize Diversity and Disparities
Poverty and lack of access to socioeconomic and health resources negatively affect many aspects of adolescent sexual health, including

- STD/HIV rates
- Pregnancy rates
- Contraceptive use
- Teens’ feelings of self-efficacy
Diversity and Disparities in Practice

- Recognize interactions between A-B-C & D²
- How do cultural, religious beliefs play into patient values around sexuality?
- How do social determinants shape patients experiences with clinicians?
- How do we create best practices for diverse populations?
ABCD²: Overall Practice Implications

- Normalize adolescent sexuality and normalize early
- Promote affirming discussions about sexual feelings and arousal, decision-making, responsibility, and relationships
- From “parentectomy” to parental involvement
Beyond Individual Practice

- Families
- Schools
- Media
- Faith communities
- Policy
Conclusions

- Sexual development is a natural part of adolescence

- Traditional clinical approach in the U.S. is primarily one of risk-assessment

- New paradigm needed to recognize healthy sexuality beyond abstinence and risk
References


- Schalet A. Must We Fear Adolescent Sexuality? Medscape General Medicine. 2004;6(4):44.
