Adolescents and Intimacy: Sexual Relationships

International Workshop on HIV Adolescence: Challenges and Solutions

Dr Saiqa Mullick
Friday, 6 Oct 2017
Johannesburg
No conflicts of interest to disclose
Adolescence... it’s ummm... like... a confusing time
Adolescents are made up of two very different age groups...

Of the global population, 1 in every 6 people is an adolescent, a young person aged between 10 and 19

While physical, psychological and social development extend from childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood, there is growing recognition that early adolescence (10-14 years) is an especially crucial phase.

Early adolescence: Age 10 – 14, exiting childhood and entering the first phase of adolescence

Older adolescents: Young people aged 15 – 19, a heterogeneous group diverse in character and circumstance

They are not a homogenous group

The WHO defines adolescents as young people between the ages of 12 and 19.

**FIGURE 3 The stages of adolescence (PAH classification)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>PRE-ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>EARLY ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>LATE ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>YOUTH</td>
<td>YOUNG ADULTHOOD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>PRE-ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>EARLY ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>LATE ADOLESCENCE</td>
<td>YOUTH</td>
<td>YOUNG ADULTHOOD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Domains of change that occur between ages 10 and 14, differentiated by sex, include:

- Physical development
- Biological changes (onset of puberty)
- Cognitive and emotional development
- Changes in social roles (among the poorest, a dramatic shift to adult responsibilities)

Source: Adapted from Breinbauer and Maddaleno (2005)

There are differences – physiological, social, cognitive, life experience, contextual, cultural

McCarthy, Katharine, Martha Brady, and Kelly Hallman. 2016. “Investing when it counts: Reviewing the evidence and charting a course of research and action for very young adolescents.” New York: Population Council
Adolescence really is a journey

**IMPLICATION:** In many ways adolescent development drives the changes in the disease burden between childhood to adulthood—for example, the increase with age in sexual and reproductive health problems, mental illness and injuries.

Adolescence is a time of transition and change, both physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Significant changes occur in the limbic system, impacting self-control, decision making, emotions, and risk-taking behaviours.

Young adolescents are only just starting this process while older adolescents are further along.

As adolescents grow older, they become more capable of building skills of inference...

Gradual process = different consideration needs to be given to early adolescence compared to later adolescence.


Amsel, E and Moshman, D. The Development of Logical and Hypothetical Reasoning in Adolescence. Weber State University & University of Nebraska-Lincoln. [nP]
And a 10-year old is very different
From a 19-year old…

• Ability to consent to a medical service or treatment
• Ability to ask for contraception or other SRHR services
• Age by which the individual can consent to sex (from as young as 12 to 18 and older)
• Legal age of marriage (differs across Africa)
• Logical reasoning within these two groups are at very different stages of development
It is also a time of navigating a multitude of risk factors...
Young lives are riddled with risk

Diseases of poverty
- Infectious and vaccine preventable diseases
- Under nutrition
- HIV
- Sexual and reproductive health

Injuries
- Unintentional injuries
- Violence

Non-communicable diseases
- Physical disorders
- Mental disorders
- Substance use disorders

Multi-burden
≥2500 diseases of poverty DALYs per 100,000 per year

Injury excess
≥2500 injuries
<2500 diseases of poverty DALYs per 100,000 per year

NCD predominant
<2500 injuries
<2500 diseases of poverty DALYs per 100,000 per year
In South Africa, the estimated number of new HIV infections per week among young women and girls (aged 15-24), is estimated at 1745.

Data Source: *L.Johnson (Thembisa Model) 2015/16
We can’t deny that adolescents are sexually active...
Sexual intercourse before age 15

Percentage of adolescents age 15-19 who have had sexual intercourse before age 15 from the most recent DHS/AIS survey

And sexual behaviour is different for males and females...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexually active (in the last 12 months)</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condom Use among sexually active (in the last 12 months)</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sexual partners (more than 2 in the past 12 months)</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condom Use among multiple sexual partners (more than 2 in the past 12 months)</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of sexual partners if ever had sexual intercourse</td>
<td>2 partners</td>
<td>6 partners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These intimate engagements can be risky

Girls younger than 15 years old in South Africa

- 25.6% Had 2 or more partners
- 15.1% Use alcohol before sex
- 12.1% Use drugs before sex
- 12.1% Had been pregnant


In Uganda 12% of girls ages 15-19 engaged in risky sex.

Younger adolescents are not excluded from risk

Girls aged 10 – 19 years old

- More than one third ever had sex
- Had sex before age 14 (1 in 10 girls)
- Had their own child
- Had an abortion at a hospital
- Had an abortion at a traditional healer

Adolescents have complex circumstances that often overlap

- Perinatally infected with HIV
- Married
- Sexually abused
- Suffering other abuse
- In school
- In university
- In partnership with older men
- Engaging in transactional sex
- LGBTQQIAP2
- OVC
- Out of school
- Forced to get FGM
- Diverse sexual orientation
- Forcibly sent to get FGM
- Forcibly made to get FGM
- Out of school

Forced to get FGM
- Out of school
- Forcibly sent to get FGM
- Forcibly made to get FGM

Forcibly sent to get FGM
- Out of school
- Forcibly made to get FGM

Forcibly made to get FGM
- Out of school
These circumstances influence sexual behaviour and may expose them to even more significant risk.
Intimacy is a confusing concept... especially at this age

**Intimacy** is more than just *being close or two people belonging together*\(^1\) and not just *sexual activity*\(^1\) or a predictor of *sexual satisfaction*\(^2\)

**EQUAL FEELINGS OF TRUST, LOVE AND HONESTY**

The theoretical definition for intimacy: a quality of a relationship in which the individuals must have reciprocal feelings of trust and emotional closeness toward each other and are able to openly communicate thoughts and feelings with each other.

---

Emotional intimacy is vital in the construction of fulfilled sexuality\(^1\)

Greater intimacy leads to increased sexual satisfaction – there is no known relationship between intimacy and sexual desire\(^1\)

High quality, satisfactory relationships and *sexual intimacy* are good for physical and mental health\(^2\)

---

2. EW Dolan. *Study finds sexual intimacy is associated with longer telomere length in women.* PsyPost.
So, intimacy is good but how does it affect the fastest growing population?
First sexual encounters – not intimate for many young people

Forced sex

• In some settings, up to 45% of adolescent girls report that their first sexual experience was forced.¹

• A growing body of literature suggests that the younger the age of sexual debut, the more likely that the first sexual experience is coerced/forced.

• Sub-Saharan Africa—the prevalence of coerced and forced sexual initiation ranged from 5.3 to 46 %.²

• Violence prevents women from influencing the circumstances of sex, resulting in more frequent sex, and less condom use.³

Consent... it’s hard to understand if no-one explained it to you...

75% of young people were not taught about consent.
The age of consent varies across Africa and girls as young as 12 are seen as legally able to consent.
And marriage is not any different

Legal ages vary, but it doesn’t mean much... especially in conflict and poverty.

Image: Child bride in Malawi
Source: Mail and Guardian Online
15 million girls marry before the age of 18 each year

The equivalent of one every 2 seconds

- According to Plan International, 43% of girls in Kenya were married before they turned 18.
- In developing countries, one in every three girls is married before reaching age 18.
- One in nine is married under age 15.

Early marriage influences sexual behaviour

UGANDA: Girls aged 15 – 19 years old

Report ever having sex: 44%
Of ever married girls, report having sex: 100%
Of never married girls, report having sex: 29%

Early marriage results in early sex...

With an older partner - In most Sub-Saharan African countries, 2–6% of 15- to 19-year-old females who had sex in the past year, had a partner who was 10 or more years older.


Adolescent girls who are married early, are often the victims of intimate partner violence (IPV)…
Flip side of intimacy—IPV is a reality

Available data suggests that ever-married adolescent girls and young women aged 15–19 years are the most affected by spousal physical or sexual violence.

• In some settings, up to 45% of adolescent girls report that their first sexual experience was forced. Numerous studies demonstrate that partner violence increases the risk of HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies.

• In South Africa, among 15-26 year olds, agency is constrained once relationships are consented to, and men expect to control their partners using violent and non-violent methods.


Early adolescents also experience and perpetrate violence: 12 – 17

The GAP Year Project reports:

- Out of 349 boys
  - 72 (20.69%) reported to hitting their partner when they did something wrong.
  - 118 (33.91%) reported to forcing themselves onto someone they were interested in dating.
  - 8 boys (2.29%) have experienced violence from a partner.

- Out of 597 girls
  - 12 (2.01%) have experienced violence from a partner.
SEX does not always = intimacy

Adolescent

Sex Work

Forced Sex

Early Marriage

Rape

Survival Sex

Experimental Sex

Intimate Partner Violence

Transactional Sex
Even consensual sex is not necessarily intimate...

BUT

Intimacy increases sexual satisfaction.

2. EW Dolan. Study finds sexual intimacy is associated with longer telomere length in women. PsyPost.
Can it be measured?

- Some studies focus on **self-reported** communication behaviors such as self-disclosure and empathic responsiveness.
- Other studies examine spouses’ appraisal of their partners’ communication patterns to examine intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Young people in rural South Africa

- 18-19 years old described their relationships as being serious but some saw it as “passing time” - something temporary.
- Majority felt the need to complete secondary school and find a job before entering into a serious relationship.

**GAP Year (WitsRHI project) baseline data: girls and boys aged between 12 and 17 years old from schools in Cape Town**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Casual relationship</th>
<th>Serious relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>349 boys</td>
<td>62 (28.84%)</td>
<td>153 (71.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>594 girls</td>
<td>88 (29.14%)</td>
<td>214 (70.86%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beliefs, attitude, and worries about intimate and dating relationships

• Young women and young men are confused by new emotions they experience during puberty and are curious about changes they observe in social dynamics between the sexes.

• They sense that there is some code of behaviour for interactions between young men and women and may become frustrated and angry because they do not understand it.

• They are worried about being isolated and lonely if they do not have a boyfriend or girlfriend, but feel uncertain about how to behave around the opposite sex and how to become intimate with a partner.

Intimacy – what does it mean?

• A study conducted among participants aged 16-18 years old in Western Cape, South Africa, stressed the moments of intimacy and intimate behaviours being similar to adult discourses of intimacy.

• Adolescents valued and sought out opportunities to be alone together and to talk about themselves and their relationships.

• These opportunities gave them a strong mutual sense of closeness - being together, the physical activities of spending time together, preferably alone, and talking.

What are influencers of sexual behaviour?
Alcohol, substance abuse and a little help from my peers

- Alcohol use among adolescents results in impaired judgment and is usually associated with high-risk sexual behaviors which include unprotected sex.


- In SSA the desire to impress friends or conform to perceived peer norms may be an important driver of sexual initiation or multiple partnerships among young people, especially among males.


- The GAP Year Project reported that 21.03% of girls felt pressure to have sex from either friends (69.85%) or partners (16.91%) or even relatives and parents (5.88%) - girls aged between 12 and 17 years
Young women mention a wide range of items that are exchanged and/or purchased with proceeds from transactional sex activities.

Come the 15th of the month (pay day for provincial government employees) he gives me his [bank/retail store] card to go and buy myself a new outfit or a pair of sneakers from Sportscene.” (an expensive sportswear store) (FGD 4, young women aged 16–24)

[He] can buy me something to wear when the two of us are going out ...he won’t want me to be seen looking snaaks (ugly) when I’m going with him, you see... (FGD 2, young women aged 16–18)

A literature review found that adolescents may not view initiating sex as problematic, focusing instead on the rewards they perceive sex brings and less on health concerns.

Adolescents are having sex... but beyond this, we (that’s the programmers, academics, researchers and everyone in this room) need to understand sex from an adolescent perspective...

Brace yourself...
Social media platforms increase adolescents’ connectedness with their peers and may facilitate their pursuit of sexual relationships.

A 2011 UNICEF study conducted with Mxit users across South Africa (85% 15–24 year olds) found that the most commonly reported topic of conversation was “love life and dating” (46%) (Beger, Hoveyda, & Sinha, 2011).

Several studies have identified the Internet as an STI risk environment among those seeking sexual partners online (O'Keeffe, & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Concerns have been raised that social media use may create opportunities for sexual experimentation and expose adolescents to sexually explicit material (Young, & Rice, 2011).
BWiseHealth.com reports that the most-read article by adolescent followers on the mobi-site is:

**Masturbation and Orgasm: Touch & play**
Social media... they can be loud!

Post 1:

does your mom's insurance know you like being 'choked' during sex? 😏

Post 2:

spice things up & fuck her w. a bread plastic 😏😌💪

Post 3:

All u see in the next 20 years is most girls suffering with knee problems...becoz they be on there knees a lot lately.

Posts taken from Facebook, September 2017 – User protected by anonymity
But also sincere...

Posts taken from Facebook, September 2017 – User protected by anonymity
And their feelings are very real

Not heartless just using my heart less❤️

I think we were meant to be but we did it wrong.💔😢

I just want something REAL with someone REAL❤️

you have no idea how worthless you made me feel❤️

Posts taken from Facebook, September 2017 – User protected by anonymity
Social Media... let me tell you my deepest secrets

- Facebook is used as a forum for disclosure that is independent of the psychosocial status of the individual - perceptions of privacy and the broader ramifications of disclosure are not considered significant by social media users.

- Adolescents who are often treated as adults, fail to have a mature understanding of the potential harm that disclosure could have on their wellbeing.

Summary

- Adolescents form a significant and growing population particularly in sub-Saharan Africa
- They are a diverse group with different vulnerabilities
- They engage in early sex and risky sex
- Their sex is not always consensual and not always intimate
- Intimacy is a complex construct
Conclusion

• There is widespread recognition that early adolescence has been neglected both in research and in action.

• Early adolescence is a critical period when understandings of gender equality become embedded, thus an opportunity to engage adolescents in critiquing ideas about gender equality and sexual rights.

• Social media and online adolescent behaviour is an online resource that could inform future research.

• Paucity of interventions and literature addressing intimacy in young relationships despite adolescents having sexual and reproductive rights.
Conclusion

• Social media and online adolescent behaviour is an online resource that could inform future research

• Paucity of interventions and literature addressing intimacy in young relationships despite adolescents having sexual and reproductive rights

• Need to address legal and rights frameworks that may drive risk for adolescents

• Need to find alternative ways to deal with sex education, healthy sex and sexuality, sexual and reproductive health - health promotion, risk reduction, and effective prevention
Acknowledgements

- Elmari Briedenhann
- Nakita Sheobalak
- Nadine Nanji
- Melanie Pleaner
- Matthew Chersich
- The adolescents that inspire us