

# Age of Sexual Consent

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# Overview

- Adolescent development from a psychological perspective
- Interpersonal relationships
- Factors that influence sexual decision making
- The Maltese context
- Recommendations

# The process of adolescence from a psychological perspective

Central tasks of adolescence:

1. Establishing independency
2. And identity formation

# Adolescent development, and change

Adolescence is characterised by change as developmental shifts lead to new sets of behaviours and abilities that enable the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Change comprises:

- Physical
- Cognitive
- Emotional
- Psychological and
- Social development

Adolescents change in the way how they experience themselves. Changes in the affective domain start as early as puberty, as research shows a significant positive correlation between pubertal maturation and sensation seeking, stronger drives, emotional intensity and risk taking.

# Developmental domains – specific maturational changes

This impacts developmental domains most specifically:

- Romantic motivation
- Sexual interest
- Increase in risk taking, novelty seeking, sensation seeking
- Throughout adolescence there is the development of cognitive and emotional growth; social skills and knowledge as well as the maturation of judgment.
- There is a wide range of individual differences with respect to these changes, and many adolescents show very subtle changes in the direction of sensation seeking.

# Striking a balance between monitoring and letting young people grow

- At this time, adolescents need the right amount of balance between monitoring, parental presence , and space to grow.
- Parents, teachers, mentors, carers, adults hold an important role in the world of adolescents as they provide guidance and support to adolescents.

# Change in interpersonal relationships

Peers take centre stage in adolescence:

- adolescents initially interact with friends and members of the other sex (usually in group context),
- dating begins,
- romantic relationships are formed

The new capacity for closeness and connection also puts them at risk for problems such as vulnerability to teenage pregnancy; sexually transmitted diseases and engaging in sex under the influence of drugs and alcohol (young females are significantly more likely to have unwanted sex due to alcohol or drug use (Miller, Cox and Saewyc, 2010)).

# Pressures and expectations in sexual behaviour

Research and sexual script theory suggest that:

1. Females have more negative sexual outcomes than males (Miller et al, 2010)
2. In romantic relationships, it is the norm for females to be younger than males (Manlove et al, 2005)

The sexual script theory describes how females are expected to silence their sexual needs and sexual rights; whereas males are expected to be directive and assertive thus they may not recognise force (Widman, Welsh, Mc.Nulty and Little 2006; Edinburgh, Saewyc and Levitt, 2006).

This could inform our thinking vis-a-vis the development of sexual education programmes, specifically on the theme of adolescent empowerment (decision making; use of contraception; recognition of force).

# Factors impacting early intercourse in adolescence

- Parental practices; specifically supervision and monitoring have been identified by a vast body of research as salient factors contributing to sexual behaviour of adolescents (Kalina et al, 2013; Vanwesenbeek et al, 2011).
- Parental supervision and monitoring may effectively delay the age at first sexual intercourse and increase the frequency of the use of contraception among adolescents.

*(Parental monitoring is defined as familiarity with the adolescents whereabouts and parental support is marked by warmth, responsiveness and child-centeredness (It is not control / invasion / intrusion)*

- Socio-Economic Status: Parents' low SES is related to the early onset of sexual intercourse, low use of contraception, high teenage pregnancy
- Lower levels of problem solving skills
- Lower levels of health promoting behaviour

# Possible predictors of early intercourse

- Family structure: Many studies show that living with a single parent is related to adolescents being more likely to have had an early sexual debut.
- Parents' permissive sexual attitudes are linked to earlier onset of intercourse and an increased risk of teen pregnancy
- Being a victim of traumatic childhood experiences, particularly sexual abuse are related to earlier onset of voluntary sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy and less use of contraceptives (Watson, Taft & Lee, 2007)

# The Maltese context

- There is enough evidence to show that a percentage of the adolescent population engage in sexual activity prior to the age of 18.
- Malta has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies (K. Part et al, 2013- refer to table) even if all the other EU countries have an age of sexual consent between 14 -16 (Cyprus is set at 17).
- Many suggest that most adolescents are not aware of legal issues (Miller, Cox and Saewyc, 2010)

# Age of sexual consent at 18.

- Although the age of consent at 18 was initially developed to protect young people from coerced sex, the same young people may also be criminalised under these laws.
- Today adolescents encounter significant different choices about dating than their parents' generation as dating has taken on new aspects (Crouter and Booth, 2014). The average age of people getting married has increased as young people are getting married later in life.
- How is this reflected in the law where people under 18 are allowed to marry and the age of sexual consent is 18?

# Recommendations

- Age of Sexual consent should
  - Protect vulnerable persons particularly children
  - reflect on the criminalisation of teen sex; possibly resulting in prosecution of 17, 18, 19 year olds
- Prioritise sexual and reproductive health on the public health agenda education targeting particularly adolescents living with a single parent / lack of parental monitoring /families in low SES
- Support parents to acquire parenting skills for more effective and positive parenting.
- Supporting victims of trauma through counselling / talking therapies
- Look closer at the Maltese context vis-à-vis sexual and reproductive health and identify areas of development.