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Adolescent Perceived Costs and Benefits Scale for Sexual Intercourse

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The Adolescent Perceived Costs and Benefits Scale for Sexual Intercourse (Small, Silverberg, & Kerns, 1993) was developed to measure the costs and benefits that adolescents perceive for engaging in nonmarital sexual intercourse. Adolescent sexual activity is often viewed as problematic because of its potential risk to the adolescent’s health and life prospects, as well as the possible negative consequences for the broader society. The present measure considers the adolescent as a decision maker and is based on the assumption that if we wish to understand why adolescents become sexually active, it is important to understand the positive and negative consequences adolescents associate with engaging in the behavior.

Description

The Adolescent Perceived Costs and Benefits Scale for Sexual Intercourse consists of two independent subscales of 10 items each. The Perceived Costs subscale assesses the perceived costs associated with engaging in sexual intercourse; the Perceived Benefits subscale assesses the perceived benefits of sexual activity. Each item is responded to using a 4-point Likert-type format. Responses range from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). The scale is based on current research and theory on adolescent development, which views the adolescent as a decision maker and recognizes the importance of understanding the meanings that adolescents ascribe to behavior.

The scale was developed over a multiyear period and involved extensive interviews with a diverse sample of adolescents. It underwent a number of refinements as a result of pilot testing. A parallel measure for assessing adolescents’ perceptions of the costs and benefit of using alcohol is also available (see Philipp, 1993; Small et al., 1993).

Response Mode and Timing

Respondents are asked to indicate the number corresponding to their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the items. This can be done by circling the appropriate response or filling it in on a machine-scorable answer sheet. Each subscale takes approximately 3 to 5 minutes to complete.

Scoring

For each subscale a total perceived costs or benefits score is obtained by summing the 10 individual items. Scores can range from 0 to 30 with a higher score reflecting higher perceived costs or benefits. Individual items can also be examined to gain insight into the primary or modal reasons particular groups of adolescents perceive for engaging or not engaging in sexual intercourse.

Reliability

Internal reliability, as determined by Cronbach’s alpha, was .86 for both the perceived costs and the perceived benefits subscales based on a sample of 2,444 male and female adolescents. Based on a sample of 124 male and female adolescents, the subscales had a test-retest reliability over a 2-week period of .70 and .65 for the cost and benefits scales respectively.

Validity

As expected, Small et al. (1993) found that adolescents who were not sexually active perceived significantly more costs for engaging in sexual intercourse than their sexually active peers. The correlation between sexual intercourse status and perceived costs was $r = .32$. Females perceived more costs ($M = 17.30$) than males ($M = 14.80$), and the correlation between sexual activity status and the perceived benefits subscale was small but significant ($r = .11$). Overall, sexually active teens perceived more benefits than adolescents who were not sexually active. However, although the perceived benefits scores for the nonsexually active teens remained stable across grade levels, after the 9th grade there was a decrease in the perceived benefits scores of teens who were sexually active. Small et al. suggested two possible explanations for this finding. First, with experience sexually active teens may come to realize that many of their beliefs regarding the benefits of sexual intercourse do not hold true. Second, at younger ages, when sexual intercourse is generally less acceptable, teens must first believe there are many benefits for sexual intercourse before becoming sexually active. At older ages, when sexual activity is more acceptable, there is less of a need to be convinced of the value of the behavior before engaging in it.
In unpublished data, Small (1996) found that the regularity of birth control use among sexually active teens was positively correlated (r = .24) with the perceived costs subscale but was not correlated with the perceived benefits subscale. In addition, adolescents who reported more supportive and positive relations with their parents perceived more costs for engaging in sexual intercourse than adolescents who had a poorer relationship with their parents.

Small (1991) found that adolescents who intended to go on to college were more likely than their non-college-bound peers to report that fear of pregnancy was a primary reason for not having sexual intercourse. Consistent with the literature on adolescent peer influence, as the age of the adolescent increased, fewer agreed that peer pressure was a major reason why a teen would engage in sexual intercourse. Similarly, older teens were much more likely than younger teens to report that curiosity (i.e., “Teens have sex to see what it’s like”) was a reason for having sexual intercourse.

References


Exhibit

Adolescent Perceived Costs and Benefits Scale for Sexual Intercourse

Perceived Costs Subscale

Why Teenagers Don’t Have Sexual Intercourse

Instructions: Below are some of the reasons that teens give for NOT having sexual intercourse. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each reason. If you’re not sure, give your best guess.

1. Teenagers don’t have sex because they think it is morally wrong or against their religion.
2. Teenagers don’t have sex because they don’t want to get a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or a disease like AIDS.
3. Teenagers don’t have sex because their parent(s) don’t approve.
4. Teenagers don’t have sex because they don’t feel old enough to handle it.
5. Teenagers don't have sex because their friends won’t approve.
6. Teenagers don't have sex because they or their partner might get pregnant.
7. Teenagers don't have sex because they aren’t in love with anyone yet.
8. Teenagers don’t have sex because they don’t need it to make them happy.
9. Teenagers don’t have sex because they would feel guilty.
10. Teenagers don’t have sex because they or their partner might get pregnant which might mess up their future plans for college, school or a career.

Responses: 0 = Strongly Agree  1 = Agree  2 = Disagree  3 = Strongly Disagree

Perceived Benefits Subscale

Why Teenagers Have Sexual Intercourse

Instructions: Below are some of the reasons that teens give for having sexual intercourse. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each reason. If you’re not sure, give your best guess.

1. Teenagers have sex because it helps them forget their problems.
2. Teenagers have sex because it makes them feel grown up.
3. Teenagers have sex because they want to get pregnant or become a parent.
4. Teenagers have sex as a way to get or keep a boyfriend or girlfriend.
5. Teenagers have sex because it makes them feel good.
6. Teenagers have sex because it makes them feel loved.
7. Teenagers have sex because they want to fit in with their friends.
8. Teenagers have sex because they want to see what it’s like.
9. Teenagers have sex because it makes them feel more confident and sure of themselves.
10. Teenagers have sex because people they admire or look up to make it seem like a “cool” thing to do.

Responses: 0 = Strongly Agree  1 = Agree  2 = Disagree  3 = Strongly Disagree