

# Early Adolescent Latinas and Non-Coital Sexual Behavior: Individual, Social, and Parental Variables

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**ABSTRACT:** Unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STI) are increasing at a faster rate among young, low income Latinas as compared to other low income groups of girls. However, little is known about the non-coital behavior that early adolescent girls may engage in, which puts them at risk for initiation of intercourse. This study examines the frequency of a particular non-coital behavior, being touched below the waist on top of clothes, and investigates how girls who engage in this behavior differ from those who do not with respect to individual (biologic and cognitive), social (peer norms and acculturation), and parental (single versus dual parent home) variables. Forty-four English-speaking Latinas completed an electronic survey assessing demographic and key study variables. The survey was conducted in a middle school computer lab before and after school, under adult supervision, as part of a larger study testing a pregnancy prevention program. Almost one third of the sample (31.8%) reported being touched below the waist with their clothes on. Those who reported this behavior differed from those who did not with respect to one individual (sexual agency) and one social variable (peer norms) ( $p < .05$ ). Study findings indicate that early adolescent Latinas are engaging in non-coital behavior that put them at risk for initiating intercourse. These findings argue for the power of peer norms in this age group.

**KEYWORDS:** pre-adolescent, non-coital, Latinas, sexual behavior

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## INTRODUCTION

Advancing knowledge about sexual behaviors and attitudes among early adolescents, aged ten to fourteen is a recent concern of clinicians, health care providers (HCP), and governing officials (Bruce and Joyce, 2006; UNICEF et al. 2002; Woodhead, Chung, and Joffe, 2009). Historically, the sexual behaviors and attitudes of older adolescents, aged fifteen to nineteen, have been used as the baseline for understanding the sexual health of all adolescent age groups (Bruce, 2007). However, early adolescents are cognitively distinct from older adolescents (Inhelder and Piaget, 2008), and it is unclear whether findings regarding older adolescents generalize to this age group. This is unfortunate because Dixon-Mueller (2008) asserts that early adolescents are not cognitively able to protect their reproductive health and are “too young” for initiation of intercourse.

Sexual initiation among early adolescents is on the rise in Latino communities (CDC, 2005; Guilamo-Ramos, Bouris, Jaccard, Lesesne, Gonzalez, and Kalogerogiannis, 2009). Sexual initiation that results in pregnancy among Latinas is increasing at a faster rate when compared to minority counterparts of similar socio-economic backgrounds (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura, 2007). This makes it particularly important to study early adolescent Latinas' involvement in non-coital sexual behaviors that typically precede initiation of intercourse, such as touching below the waist.

The purpose of this study is to examine the frequency of a non-coital sexual behavior that puts Latinas at risk for engaging in sexual intercourse and to identify variables that influence engaging in this sexual behavior. The specific research questions are:

1. What is the frequency of touching below the waist on top of clothes in a sample of low-income early adolescent Latinas?
2. Do girls who report touching below the waist differ from those who do not with respect to individual, social, and parental variables?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature suggests that a continuum of sexual behaviors arises during early adolescence beginning with kissing and culminating in initiation of intercourse (Clayton and Bokemeier, 1980; Porter, 2002; Smith and Udry, 1985). Although non-coital in nature, touching below the waist (“heavy petting”) is closer to the end of this continuum, making it a risky behavior (Jakobsen, 1997; Smith and Udry, 1985; Stanton et al., 1994). Investigating variables that predict risky behaviors along this continuum, like touching below the waist, will help researchers to design and target interventions that prevent sexual initiation in early adolescents (O'Donnell, Stueve, Wilson-Simmons, Dash, Agronick, and JeanBaptiste, 2006). The variables examined in this study fall into three classes: social, individual, and parental.

### *Individual: Biological and Cognitive Variables (Arousal & Agency)*

Various studies argue for the role of biological and cognitive variables in sexual initiation. Biological variables relate to the estrogen-androgen mediated process of puberty in adolescent females that shapes their interpretation of sexual roles and sexual interests (Smith, Udry, and Morris, 1985). Menarche, especially when it occurs at a younger age than the majority of one's peers, is associated with early sexual initiation (Belsky, Steinberg, Houts, and Halpern-Felsher, 2010; Cauffman & Steinberg, 1996; Smolak, Levine, and Gralen, 1993). Cognitive variables are implicated by O'Sullivan and Brooks-Gunn's (2005) findings that changes in sexual cognitions precede engagement in behavioral precursors to intercourse. However, it is unclear how pubertal changes impact the development of these cognitions. Cognitive variables are integral to a developing sexual self-concept and include sexual arousal and sexual agency (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, and McKeague, 2006). Sexual arousal and sexual agency are concepts that emerged from a factor analysis of O'Sullivan et al.'s (2006) Sexual Self Concept Inventory (SSCI), with sexual arousal changing over time and sexual agency remaining fairly stable. The items that comprise sexual arousal reflect sexual curiosity, ideas, actions, and interpersonal responses that make one feel sexy or sexually attractive (O'Sullivan et al., 2006). In contrast, the items that comprise sexual agency reflect opinions about when and with whom to have sex, as well as thoughts about the sexual experience (O'Sullivan et al.)

*Social: Peer Norms, Acculturation*

A number of studies argue for the influence of the social environment, specifically peer norms and acculturation, on the initiation of sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviors. Initiation of sexual intercourse among early adolescents is due in part to their perception of their peers' behavior (Buhi and Goodson, 2007; Kinsman, Romer, Furstenberg & Schwarz, 1998). These perceptions are referred to as descriptive peer norms (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren, 1990). Peer norms play a critical role in shaping both sexual attitudes and behavior (Wallace, Miller, and Forehand, 2008). The desire to be accepted within a social network whose members are perceived as sexually active drives early adolescents to initiate sexual behavior of their own (Kinsman et al., 1998; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, & Skay, 2006). In addition, Millstein and Moscicki (1995) report that adolescents who perceived their friends as engaging in risky sexual behavior believed they had less control over their own sexual behavior. Acculturation is another social variable related to sexual initiation among Latino adolescents (Afable-Munsuz & Brindis, 2006; Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Pena and Goldberg, 2005). Acculturation is a process in which individuals adapt their language, beliefs, attitudes, and values to that of the host culture (Clark and Hofstess, 1998; Ebin, Sneed, Morisky, Rotheram-Borus, Magnusson, and Malotte, 2001). Marin et al. (1987) suggest that language preference/use among Latinos is a significant indicator of their level of acculturation. Latina adolescents from predominantly English-speaking homes appear more prone to engage in sexual behavior than their counterparts who do not speak English at home, or who were born in a Spanish-speaking country (Lee and Hahm, 2010). Preference for speaking English and the greater use of English relative to Spanish have been found to predict sexual initiation (McDonald, Manlove, and Ikramullah, 2009) as well as condom use within this population (Ford and Norris, 1998).

*Parental: Single Versus Dual-Parent Home*

The presence of one or more parents is important to consider in addition to the influence of individual and social variables. For example, adolescents in a single-parent home appear to be at increased risk for early initiation of sexual intercourse (Miller et al., 2001; Moore and Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Newcomer and Udry (1984; 1987) argue that girls in single mother homes are more likely to become involved in sexual behavior than girls in two parent homes where the mother is married or is

cohabiting with her partner. Other research argues that two parent homes facilitate more supervision, thus giving the child less of an opportunity to initiate sexual intercourse (Miller et al. 1999).

**METHODS***Sample*

A purposive sample of 44 Latinas attending a middle school in the southeast area of Orlando was recruited for the study. All were English speaking with 74% at a high level of acculturation. Their median age was 12.02 years (with a range between 11 to 14 years). All participants were girls enrolled in an after-school program provided at the middle school. The middle school serves a predominately Latino, low income community, and 91.1% of the participants receive subsidized and/or free lunch.

*Procedure*

After obtaining parental consent, girls were invited to complete an on-line survey. Verbal assent was obtained, and each girl completed the survey in a school computer lab under adult supervision. The questions were split into two surveys to prevent boredom, and each participant received a \$10 gift card for each survey she completed. Each survey took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete.

*Survey*

The survey measured a variety of demographic and psychosocial variables related to involvement in sexual behavior, and also included measures of sexual intentions and behavior. All items were pre-tested in focus groups with middle school girls. Survey items were presented electronically with still and animated images inserted throughout the survey to maintain interest. Variables measured by survey items used in the analyses presented in this paper are described next.

**Demographic Items.** Demographic items include each participant's age in years, her country of origin, her years in the U.S., the Latino subgroup(s) that she identified with, her acculturation, and whether she receives a reduced or free lunch, and her sexual development in regard to puberty. Acculturation was measured using the Norris, Ford, and Bova (1996) brief (4 item) measure of acculturation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). Scale items assess use

of English relative to Spanish on a 5 point scale. Item responses are summed and averaged with scores above 3.0 considered indicative of a high level of acculturation. A score of 3.0 is equivalent to an equal use of Spanish and English across a range of activities (e.g., talking, thinking, reading). Scores above 3.0 correspond to a greater use of English relative to Spanish. Puberty was assessed by asking participants whether they had experienced a menstrual period (Have you had your period?). Response options included yes, no, and I don't want to answer.

**Agency and Arousal.** Items from O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlberg and McKeague's (2006) Sexual Self-Concept Inventory (SSCI) scale were used to measure agency and arousal in a sample of predominately young adolescent Latinas in New York. The SSCI includes seventeen items that measure sexual arousal and ten items that measure agency. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the SSCI was 0.91 in O'Sullivan et al's study sample, and validity was supported by correlations between the SSCI and scores on measures of sexual self-esteem and abstinence attitudes. For the current study, four items from O'Sullivan et al.'s (2006) arousal SSCI subscale and three items from their agency subscale were used. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this four item measure of arousal was .84. Responses to the four arousal items were summed to create an arousal score. However, the sexual arousal score was not normally distributed. Hence, these scores were dichotomized with a median split, creating a single low/high measure of sexual arousal. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the Sexual Agency items in the current study was poor (.54). Hence, each arousal item was treated as a separate measure of sexual agency. Responses to these items were also not normally distributed, and a decision was made to collapse the responses to form three categories: disagree (1), agree (2), strongly agree (3).

**Peer Norms.** Four items were used to measure peer norms. These items assessed descriptive norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005) by asking participants about the proportion of their friends perceived as engaging in: making-out, going to parties where the parents were not home, having a boyfriend, and having sex. These items were drawn from comments made by study participants during the pre-testing of other survey items. Response options for these items were combined to form three separate categories: 0 ("don't know"), 1 ("none", "a few", and "some"), and 2 ("about half", "more than half", and "almost all"). Analysis proceeded separately for each peer item.

**Single Versus Dual Parent Home.** Responses were structured to allow participants to respond for both same-sex and different-sex guardians. Response options to the question of "who is the woman/man raising you right now?" included: no woman, biological mother, adoptive mother, stepmother, foster mother, aunt, grandmother, sister, stepsister, female family friend, father's girlfriend, female cousin; biological father, adoptive father, stepfather, foster father, uncle, grandfather, brother, stepbrother, male family friend, mother's boyfriend, male cousin. For purposes of analysis, participants who identified two adults (excludes cousins and siblings) were categorized as being in a dual parent home and those who identified one guardian were categorized as being in a single parent home.

**Non-coital and Coital Sexual Behavior.** Sexual behavior was measured using Barnett's (2006) eleven item measure asking about involvement in specific sexual behaviors in the previous month, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse. Item response options range from 1 ("never") to 5 ("ten times or more") and can be calculated to create a total score. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for Barnett's measure was .92 in a sample of predominately non-Hispanic white Midwestern adolescents. The two items from Barnett's (2006) scale, being touched below the waist on top of clothes and sexual intercourse, were used in the analyses reported here.

## RESULTS

Almost one third of the sample (31.8%) reported being touched below the waist with their clothes on. As can be seen in Table 1, girls who did and did not engage in this behavior did not differ with respect to puberty, sexual arousal, acculturation, or the number of parents with whom they lived. However, these girls did appear to differ with respect to particular sexual agency ("I like to let them know when I like them."), and peer norms items ( $p < .05$ ). Girls who reported being touched below the waist on top of their clothes were significantly more likely to think that their friends went to parties where the parents were not home than girls who did not report being touched below the waist ( $p < .05$ ). Girls who reported being touched below the waist on top of their clothes were significantly more likely to not know whether their friends had had sex or to report that none or a few of their friends had had sex ( $p < .05$ ; see also Table 1).

Table 1

<b>Touching Below the Waist on Top of Clothes</b>	No (n=30)	Yes (n=14)
Puberty ( $p= .81$ )	(n= 30)	(n=14)
Low	46.7%	42.9%
High	53.3%	57.1%
Sexual Arousal ( $p= .14$ )	(n= 27)	(n=13)
Low	55.6%	30.8%
High	44.4%	69.2%
Sexual agency 1: "I decide when I have sex." ( $p= .15$ )	(n= 29)	(n=14)
Disagree	31.0%	7.1%
Agree	31.0%	28.6%
Strongly agree	37.9%	64.3%
Sexual agency 2: "I like to let them know when I like them." ( $p= .05$ )	(n= 28)	(n=14)
Disagree	39.3%	14.3%
Agree	32.1%	71.4%
Strongly Agree	28.6%	14.3%
Sexual agency 3: "Having sex means risk of being played." ( $p= .39$ )	(n= 28)	(n=13)
Disagree	53.6%	30.8%
Agree	25.0%	38.5%
Strongly Agree	21.4%	30.8%
Peer Norms: "Making out." <sup>a</sup>	(n=30)	(n=13)
Don't Know	20.0%	0%
None, Few, Some	36.7%	38.5%
Half, More than half, almost all	43.3%	61.5%
Peer Norms: "No parent parties." <sup>a</sup>	(n=28)	(n=13)
Don't Know	35.7%	7.7%
None, Few, Some	39.3%	38.5%
Half, More than half, almost all	25.0%	53.8%
Peer Norms: "Have a boyfriend." <sup>a</sup>	(n=28)	(n=13)
Don't Know	3.6%	0%
None, Few, Some	32.1%	23.1%
Half, More than half, almost all	64.3%	76.9%
Peer Norms: "Has sex." <sup>a</sup>	(n=28)	(n=13)
Don't Know	46.4%	7.7%
None, Few, Some	39.3%	69.2%
Half, More than half, almost all	14.3%	23.1%
Acculturation ( $p= 1.0$ )	(n=27)	(n=13)
Low	22.2%	23.1%
High	77.8%	76.9%
Dual Parent ( $p= .46$ )	(n=30)	(n=13)
Low	20.0%	30.8%
High	80.0%	69.2%

<sup>a</sup> Groups compared two response categories at a time using Fisher's Exact due to small expected frequencies.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the association between engaging in a particular risky non-coital behavior, being touched below the waist with one's clothes on and various individual, social, and parental variables. Findings from this study indicate that at least some low-income, early adolescent Latinas may be engaging in behaviors that put them at risk for early initiation of intercourse. Although this was a non-representative sample, the percentages of girls being touched below the waist is consistent with other findings from the literature that recognizes peer norms as an influential variable (De Rosa et al, 2010; Lewis, Mellins, and Brakis-Cott, 2006; Voisin and Neilands, 2010). Findings from DeRosa et al. (2010) posit that Latino adolescents who are friends with someone who has engaged in sexual behavior are likely to have engaged in sexual behavior themselves. Lewis et al. (2006) suggest that participating in non-coital activities is perceived as a normative behavior among Latinos in early adolescence as well. Voisin and Neilands' (2010) analysis supports the relevance of our finding to other studies as it suggests that risky sexual behavior is mediated by peer norms in non-Latino middle school adolescents.

We found support for the effects of both sexual agency, an individual variable, and peer norms, a social variable, on engaging in the touching below the waist behavior. However, the sample size was small, and some analyses may have been underpowered. Hence, we are reluctant to rule out the potential influences of other individual (e.g., sexual arousal) and parental variables (number of parents in the home). In addition to having a small sample size, our study is limited by a reliance on cross-sectional and self-report data. Hence, it is important to replicate these findings with larger samples and a longitudinal study design. Despite these limitations, our findings with respect to peer norms are consistent with the literature.

### *Practical Implications*

Information from our findings speaks to the importance that friends bear on young Latinas' sexual health. Recognizing early adolescent girls who are involved in non-coital sexual activities is imperative to constructing a comprehensive plan of care, particularly in the primary care setting. Therefore, primary care encounters (e.g., routine school physicals) should be used to identify younger pediatric patients at risk for early intercourse and its potential consequences, such as becoming pregnant or contracting an STI. Inquiring about an early

adolescent's perceptions of peer sexual behavior is an indirect way for the nurse to obtain information regarding an adolescent's level of risk for engaging in early sexual behavior. Obtaining information in this manner is also less threatening for these patients. Knowing the extent of peer interactions allows the nurse to tailor his/her interventions, enabling the nurse to be more effective in his/her efforts to help the early adolescent child maintain a healthy lifestyle.

## CONCLUSION

Additional analyses are needed with a larger sample before modifying the theoretical framework guiding this paper. It is possible that many of the hypothesized relationships might be empirically supported in a larger sample. These findings argue for the power of peer norms in this age group: girls who did not engage in touching below the waist believed that their friends were less involved with risky situations (parties where parents are not home) or sexual behavior than girls who did engage in this behavior.

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