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

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Objectives

- 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 (No Sex) Paradigm

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

- Makes sex an “either or” thing
- Provides a code, not empowerment
- Gives no tools for navigating relationships
- Makes sex hard to discuss when it does happen
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

- Does not distinguish healthy sexual expression from sexual risk
- Instills fear, not sense of mastery/control
- Leaves out the relational contexts of sexuality
Sexual coercion and abuse
Sexual orientation
Sexual activity
  - Number of partners
  - Frequency of intercourse
  - Type of sex practices
STI history and risk assessment
Pregnancy history and risk assessment
Contraceptive behaviors
Substance use
“Sex as Risk” in Current Practice

- 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?
The U.S. vs. the Netherlands
Turning to the Research

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](http://works.bepress.com/amy_schalet)
Dramatization

- Raging hormones
- Sex as risk taking
Normalization

- Readiness and self-regulation
- Sex is preparation
Battle of the Sexes

Schalet, A. Medscape General Medicine. 2004
Relationship Between 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

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
Sex Is Negotiation

“"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 is rendered negotiable
► Parents may not always be completely comfortable with teen sex, but they do not want it to lead to deception
Mit Liebe schenken.

machs 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.
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.
A New Paradigm

Autonomy of Sexual Self

Knowing about anatomy, reproduction and contraception
Knowing about pleasure and enjoyment of sexual contact
Recognizing and articulating own wishes and boundaries
Owning and controlling sexual decision-making process
Anticipating and adequately preparing for sexual activity
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.
Acknowledge the pleasurable and enjoyable aspects of sexual contact

Normalize desires and arousals while emphasizing agency and ownership of sexual decision making
  ▶ Help youth examine their readiness for sex
  ▶ Define and articulate boundaries
  ▶ Promote preparation for sexual activity
Build Good Romantic Relationships

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

Encourage youth to discuss:

- What is a 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.
- Discussions about sexuality limited to one “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
  - Encourage parents to communicate their values and beliefs but recognize that their children may have different perspectives and experiences
Connectedness: 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
“A body goes through changes during the teen years. When you started dating, my hair turned gray. When you started driving, I got heart palpitations...”
Connectedness: Pearls in Practice

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

D²

Recognize Diversity and Disparities
Diversity and Disparities

Research has found that:

- 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
Recognizing Diversity and Disparities in Practice

- Recognizes 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?
Bring on Motherhood
ABCD$^2$: Overall Practice Implications

- Normalize adolescent sexuality

- Promote affirming discussions about sexual feelings and arousal, decision-making, responsibility, and relationships

- From “parentectomy to parental involvement
Beyond Individual Practice

- 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
FOAM
WEIGHT
SEX
IT'S NOT SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT
PERIOD
RUBBERS
SEAMEN
Provider Resources and Organizational Partners

- [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org) Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

- [www.adolescenthealth.org](http://www.adolescenthealth.org) Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine

- [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org) Planned Parenthood Federation of America

- [www.reproductiveaccess.org](http://www.reproductiveaccess.org) Reproductive Health Access Project

- [www.spence-chapin.org](http://www.spence-chapin.org) Spence-Chapin Adoption Services
Provider Resources and Organizational Partners

- [www.guttmacher.org](http://www.guttmacher.org) Guttmacher Institute
- [janefondacenter.emory.edu](http://janefondacenter.emory.edu) Jane Fonda Center at Emory University
- [www.msm.edu](http://www.msm.edu) Morehouse School of Medicine
- [www.naspag.org](http://www.naspag.org) North American Society of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology
- [www.prh.org](http://www.prh.org) Physicians for Reproductive Health
Provider Resources and Organizational Partners

- [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org) Advocates for Youth
- [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) American Academy of Pediatricians
- [www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom](http://www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom) American Civil Liberties Union Reproductive Freedom Project
- [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
- [www.arhp.org](http://www.arhp.org) Association of Reproductive Health Professionals
- [www.cahl.org](http://www.cahl.org) Center for Adolescent Health and the Law
- [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org) Gay and Lesbian Medical Association