

Female Teens and Sexual Consent: How Conversations on Consent Affect Teens' Sexual Activity

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Background: Awareness has grown of the frequency and regularity that sexual violence occurs in the United States. Research on this topic has focused on college-aged females, not adolescents though they experience a high prevalence of sexual violence. Prevention strategies have focused on “consent education” which has been directed to this same population and ignored teens. This study gathered information on adolescent females’ exposure to sexual consent education and sexual activity to better inform recommendations and clinical practices for education on consent counseling for this population.

Methods: A convenience sample of patients attending a Title X funded health clinic in Denver, Colorado. Data was gathered from an anonymous online survey asking approximately 28 questions on the topic. We compared responses using median tests and Fisher-exact tests.

Results: 101 females, ages 14-24 participated in the survey. No significant difference between exposure to consent and no exposure to consent was found for age, sexual activity, age of first sexual activity, or number of partners. Parents and providers were the most common source of information with providers being the preferred source. Some differences were found between the groups in how they interpreted behaviors or indicators of consent.

Conclusion: The majority of adolescents are receiving information on consent, however, what that information contains is unclear and often incomplete. Adolescents are asking for consent information and the need for comprehensive and accurate consent education is necessary. Updating provider guidelines and disseminating consistent information throughout adolescents’ social networks would best meet the needs of this population.