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Adolescent Boys' Experiences of First Sex

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Abstract

There are limited contextual data regarding first sexual experiences of younger adolescent men. Yet these data that are needed to inform STI and early fatherhood prevention efforts, particularly in lower income communities. Using qualitative methods, 14 adolescent men (ages 14–16, all low income, most African American) from a mid-sized U.S. city were asked about relationships and sexual experiences in a one hour face-to-face semi-structured interview, with two follow-up interviews at 6–9 month intervals. Story-telling was encouraged. Descriptions of first sex were identified, and then analysed for narrative structure and shared concepts. The dominant narrative of first sex proceeded through three steps: (1) Preparation, which involved identification of a sexualised space, mentoring by an older man, and pre-planning; (2) the event, which involved looking for cues indicating sexual interest and consent from a female partner, feelings of fear/nervousness, and first sex itself; and (3) afterwards, which involved a return to prior activities, minimal verbal exchange and a general positive feeling, sometimes accompanied by later disappointment. Mentorship, initiation by the female, and idealising sex as a romantic experience, played important roles in constructing the context of first sex. These factors should be incorporated in harm-reduction interventions for young men in similar contexts.

Keywords

Adolescent; Young men; first sexual intercourse; African American

Introduction

First sexual experiences are considered particularly salient by both adolescents and researchers (Lewin 1982; Cooksey, Mott and Neubauer 2002; Rebello and Gomes 2009) (Traeen and Kvaalem 1996) (Holland et al. 2000). While detailed descriptions of young women's first sexual experiences are available (see, for example, Thompson (1990) or Tolman and colleagues (2003)) much less is known about adolescent boys.

Existing data provide a demographic portrait of adolescent boys' early sexual behaviours. Studies have examined individual factors such as ethnicity, school record, career ambition and substance abuse, family factors such as parental living arrangement, maternal education, parental communication and parental involvement; and peer factors such as peer pressure

and relationship status (Mott et al. 1996; Sieving, McNeely and Blum 2000; Eyre, Davis and Peacock 2001; Hawes, Wellings and Stephenson 2010). In a U.S. nationally representative study of 15–19 year old men, sexual experience was common (43% report ever having sex), but sexual activity in the last month was less so (14%); contraceptive use was also relatively common (87% reported some type of contraception at first sex, primarily condoms or a combination of another method and condoms) (Abma, Martinez and Copen 2010). Even though these studies describe contributing factors, they are not able to capture immediate context, motivation, and perceptions of early sexual experiences.

Yet available data suggest that these contexts, motivations and perceptions are important to sexual health prevention. Similar to very young women, experiences of coercion, wantedness and regret appear to be salient to young men's very early sexual experiences. While first sex for U.S. adolescent men was not frequently unwanted (5% reported unwanted sexual behaviours), many had mixed feelings, with 34% reporting that "part of me wanted it to happen at the time and part of me didn't" (Abma, Martinez and Copen 2010). In a British national survey, only 8% of young men reporting first intercourse between 18 and 24 years of age expressed regret, whereas 42% reporting very early first sexual intercourse (13–14 years) wished they waited longer (Wellings et al. 2001). Relationship contexts, such as whether the partner is known are additionally important. In a U.S. school-based study, young men who reported higher levels of caring, feelings of enmeshment and love were more likely to report sexual intercourse; those with higher levels of self-disclosure were more likely to have intercourse within a relationship (as opposed to a casual partner) (Giordano, Manning and Longmore 2010).

Individual and contextual influences on sex vary markedly from early through late adolescence. For example, the above British national survey described changes in sexual competence, operationalised as use of protection, consensuality, not under the influence of alcohol or peer pressure, and absence of regret, from early to middle adolescence; they found that 67% young men who reported first intercourse at 13–14 years as not ready, as compared to 38% by 17 years of age (Wellings et al. 2001). A more detailed understanding of the early sexual experiences of younger adolescent men is needed to inform STI and early fatherhood prevention efforts for this age group.

Qualitative studies can provide insights into some of these contexts, perceptions and motivations that are not apparent in surveys. An example is Eyre and colleague's work, in which African American 11th and 12th graders perceived sex as a set of interrelated games (Eyre et al. 1998). It is not clear, however, that younger men hold similar views. A retrospective study in which older adolescents looked back on first sex, male participants described feeling anxious, but generally perceived their sexual experience to be an empowering process by which their identity of masculinity is formed (Holland et al. 2000).

Much of the existing qualitative research focuses on sexually experienced mid-to late-adolescents. These qualitative studies have looked at the sexual messages that young men may receive from their dating partner (Morgan and Zurbriegen 2007), sequences of emotional and sexual progression in a relationship (Upadhyay, Hindin and Gultiano 2006), and the influence of close friends in conceptualising and socially constructing sexual roles and behaviours (Harper et al. 2004b). These studies highlight issues related to sexual communication. For example, our own work on condom use by younger adolescent boys demonstrated that communication about condoms was primarily non-verbal (Rosenberger et al. 2010). Less is known about younger men's first sexual experiences.

Narratives are one way to better understand complex behaviours, and have been used to understand young woman's first sexual experiences (see, for example Holland and

colleagues (2000) and Thompson (1990)), adolescents' construction of their identity (McLean 2005), and young men's experiences of masculinity (Holland et al. 2000). Narrative approaches build on adolescents' natural tendency to tell stories, and can give insights into decision-making and contextual influences that have not been previously considered (Robinson et al. 1998). An examination of how boys construct their stories of first sexual experiences can also provide insight into how they view themselves as partners and sexual agents. The purpose of this analysis was to examine narratives of first sex among young boys recruited from an urban area with high rates of early sexual onset and STIs.

Methods

Participants

Participants included fourteen 14–16 years old, who provided a narrative of their first ever sexual experience. Participants were recruited from a primary care clinic serving residents of low-income neighborhoods in Indianapolis, and were part of a larger longitudinal qualitative study of boys' relationship development and STI risk. The age range was chosen because a majority of the young men in these neighbourhoods become sexually experienced by the age of 16. Most participants (over 85%) were African American, and the remainder white of European descent, reflecting the demographic makeup of the clinic and surrounding community. Each man provided written consent and parents provided written permission. The study was approved by the institutional review board of Indiana University.

Procedures

Young men completed a brief structured questionnaire on sexual behaviour and a 1 hour face-to-face semi structured interview. Two follow-up interviews were conducted with each study participant at 6 months and 9 months from baseline. This strategy helped to reduce recall bias. All interviews were conducted by the same male interviewer and participants were reimbursed US\$20 per interview.

Interviews

The interview covered the boys' relationship and sexual experiences, and participants were asked open-ended questions, such as: "What are your thoughts and feelings about relationships and sex?" "Tell me about when you had sex: How did it happen? Where were you at? What happened?" "How did you feel after having sex?" In order to maximise detail and accuracy, participants were initially asked about their most recent sexual event, and then asked about prior sexual events. When participants mentioned their first ever sexual experiences, the interviewer asked them to elaborate on the context in which first sex occurred. The interviewer listened for shared content and meaning and asked participants to explain or elaborate on responses to these questions. Accounts of first ever sex were verified and further discussed in subsequent interviews.

Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed for similarities and differences in first ever sexual experiences. Our analysis drew from both narrative approaches and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998, McLean 2005, Floersch et al. 2010). First, all sections of interviews where first ever sex was mentioned were identified and selected. We note that all of the participants' self-identified first ever sexual experiences consisted of consensual heterosexual penetrative vaginal sex. Excerpts were read as a story, and we identified a common narrative structure. Within each narrative element, we then looked for shared concepts, or themes. Examples of shared concepts included pre-planning, mentoring, sexual spaces, and returning to previous activities. For each of these shared concepts, we

developed a list of properties and dimensions. Similar concepts were collapsed and differences resolved by discussion. The identified “dominant narrative” and key concepts were then tested against subsequently read interviews. Exceptions were identified and analysed.

Results

Overview – Dominant Narrative

Of the 14 accounts of first sex, 10 reported first sex before the study started, and 4 reported first sex during the study. Across participants, we observed a single dominant narrative in accounts of first sex (see figure 1). This dominant narrative included three main parts: preparation, the sexual event, and the afterwards.

Preparation

Despite the fact that all participants described their first sexual experience as “unexpected” or said that it “just happened”, all except one described elements of preparation. The first element of preparation was the identification or creation of a sexual space. A sexual space is a point in time at a particular location in which an individual creates an opportunity and expectation that sex could happen (Hensel et al. 2011). Key elements in participant’s narratives were lack of adult supervision and some degree of privacy. Usually the space was a bedroom, but it did not need to be. Participants described unsupervised house parties, a home (their own or a friend’s) when parents were expected to be away for a period of time, or a young adult sibling or cousin’s house. Parties, in particular, were recognised by participants as a time when sex was a possibility.

We labeled the second element of preparation “mentoring.” Mentoring was not a formal, recognised relationship, but rather a pattern of assistance by and advice from, an older man, such as a brother, cousin or friend. Mentors enabled the first sex to happen through several mechanisms. Several participants describe being “set up” by an older brother, cousin, or friend, with a girl that the mentor knew would be willing to have sex with the participant. These girls were often linked in some way to the mentor’s female partner (e.g. sister, cousin, friend). Chris describes being set up by a brother; Paul by a cousin:

“Well like we went to a party, I was with my brothers and everything... And we dancing and everything like that, then like we went back to her place ‘cause she had some sisters. So it was like a brother sister thing and we had sex.”

Chris, 14 year old, (African American)

“Cousin went to go get her, and it was late at night though and my mom was outta town.”

Paul, 16 year old (African American)

These descriptions often involved pairing off when parents and other family were not present. Several participants described how their mentor and the mentor’s female partner went to a different part of the house (e.g. a bedroom), leaving the participant and the girl in another room alone, providing an opportunity for first sex. Another mechanism for mentors was providing condoms for the participant before an event, in recognition of the possibility of sex. Paul described:

“I think it was like she [girlfriend] was here, but she was only here for like five minutes, and then I went in his [older brother] room and he gave it [a condom] to me.”

Paul, 16 year old (African American)

The third mechanism of mentoring was advice-giving. This happened at some point before first sex, ranging from months to hours. The mentor would provide the participant with information on how to initiate the sexual activity or getting the girl in the mood. For example, as James said:

“I mean like - - like say for instance, you are taking her bra off; I didn’t know how to do that or anything. Like and then I talked to my brother about it and he just told me to be careful and stuff like that and then he gave me condoms too.”

James, 14 year old (African American)

The final element of preparation was “pre-planning” by the participant. Several participants described anticipating that sex might be possible at a particular time and place (see above description of sexual space), and putting a condom in one’s pocket or wallet in anticipation of that possibility. Two participants described this:

“It’s like anytime I go to a party or whatever, before I go to the party I always take a shower and then do everything up and then I always put a condom in my pocket any time.”

Marcus, 15 year old (African American)

“For some strange reason I always carry a condom with me because you never know what’s going to happen especially when you go out to a party you always have a condom.”

Matt, 15 year old (African American)

A second aspect of pre-planning was talking to the potential partner days to weeks ahead of time about the possibility of having sex. These conversations often took the form of joking about sex, or the use of a hypothetical situation. Here James describes using sexual jokes:

“Because I always make [sexual] jokes with her or whatever and then it was just that night she [initiated sex].”

James, 15 year old (African American)

These early conversation appeared to be used by participants to assess interest and potential consent on the part of the participant. James specifically talked to his first partner ahead of time about consent and avoiding coercion or the appearance of rape. He asked her, if they did have sex, would she feel comfortable saying “no”.

Most episodes of first vaginal sex happened with a female partner that was reasonably well known to the participant. These included girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, and close friends who would become girlfriends. Despite the fact that the individual was known, only one participant reported setting up a specific appointment (time, location) with a specific person for first sex. Female partners were generally the same age or older. The remainder reported that sex “just happened”. We note that there was little to no discussion of alcohol or drug use in their narratives of first sex.

Event

The second part of first sex was the sexual event itself. As noted above, partners were generally known to the participant, and their perceptions of the event were that it was “unexpected” or “just happened.” The actual event (all except two narratives, see below for exceptions) was initiated by the female. Initiation was almost always non-verbal, but obvious. Participants described non-verbal cues such as the female partner leading the participant over to a bed, giving the participant a condom to use, or taking off their own and the participants’ underwear. Joe and James recount:

“She threw something at me and I threw it back and then she came over and hit me and then I tackled her, yeah... She kissed me... I was like great, we kissed so we started kissing... Yeah I was a little surprised. I was like hey, ah, okay and we kept kissing... She took her panties off and took my boxers off and that’s how it went down.”

Joe, 16 year old (African American)

“‘Cause like - - like we was kissing and then she started laying down and then like she was like pulling me, but she went like that, like it was like she was pulling me on top of her and stuff like that. So then I was like maybe she does want me to do it.”

James, 14 year old (African American)

Though in general no verbal exchange happened at the time of the sexual event, there were two exceptions. The first participant was invited by a girl and her cousin for group sex at her home, and the participant, Matt, describes what happened at a party:

“I could tell by the way she was looking at me and she just flat out said it. She said, ‘I want to have sex with you.’”

Matt, 16 year old (African American)

All participants except Aaron (see exception described below) described vaginal, or “regular,” sex for their first sexual experience. While most described kissing and some described hugging, there was no other foreplay. Most described using a condom. The events were quick, and most did not undress beyond taking off pants and panties. At least half of participants said they did not ejaculate.

First sex was viewed as a rite of passage for almost all participants. Most described high emotions related to the event. At least half described feeling “scared,” “jittery,” or “nervous.” As David and Jeffrey said:

“I mean first time. I was definitely scared then. First time I mean, jitters. First nerves. But got over it.”

David, 15 year old (African American)

“A little nervous and excited... I’m becomin’ a man - Because it’s something that never happened before.”

Jeffrey, 15 year old (African American)

Others could not put a name to their feelings, instead using descriptors such as “strange feelings,” “feeling different” or being at a loss of words to describe how they felt. For example, Alex described:

“It was like a whole different thing really, like I was numb... I don’t know. It was just like I wasn’t like usual, myself, like I wasn’t focusing on anything, I, just on her. And so, [it] wasn’t painful or anything, I was just like serious I guess. And I don’t know, I just, that was just it. You know, I don’t know, it’s like the, to explain it, I don’t really know. It just, just things happen I guess, and so, when someone has sex I guess. So I like, wasn’t knowing what I was doing really. Like I knew I was doing it, but I wasn’t like myself, so I guess.”

Alex, 16 year old (African American)

Afterwards

The final part of first sex was the afterwards. Their accounts were most remarkable for what did not occur after first sex. When details were provided, nearly all described going back to their previous activities with their partner – for some this was watching TV, others returned to the party and chatted with friends, others just left without saying much. As Jeffry described:

“We put our clothes back on... We just sit there, until her parents came back home... Nothin’, just started watching TV like nothin’ happened.”

Jeffry, 15 year old (African American)

When conversation happened, there was only small talk, and no one actually discussed what just happened. For example:

“Nothing. Like we talked a little bit and then we like left... Then like we just talked, we was talking about what school she went to and then we started talking about what we was gonna do...we gonna keep in touch with each other, then me and my brothers left.”

Chris, 14 year old (African American)

The small subset that described talking with their partner about what happened did so days afterwards, in writing and over the telephone, as illustrated by Jeffry and Paul:

“Over the phone she did, but she didn’t say nothing right there. She said did you like it? I go yeah. She started askin’ a whole bunch of questions. If it was good or whatever, or not.”

Jeffry, 15 year old (African American)

“Yeah, I mean, she be writin’ letters talkin’ about she wanna do it again and all that.”

Paul, 16 year old (African American)

When asked about their feelings after their first sexual encounter, all but one described the experience in a positive, or at least more positive than negative, manner. Joe describes an emotional high from first sex:

“It was a normal teenager thing. I just got some and was on kingdom road.”

Joe, 16 year old (African American)

However, a subset of men reported feeling “let down” or disappointed by their first sexual experience. Participants described romantic expectations, such as expecting that sex would deepen their emotional relationship, lead to long-term commitment, increase their feelings of love, and generally change their lives, making them feel different in some way. All who described these feelings of disappointment felt that their first sexual experience did not follow that of the “romantic ideal.” Alex describes the expectation that sex would lead to a deeper, more committed relationship, and Jeffry describes the expectation that he would be changed in some way.

“I thought it was like, you know, I thought I was going to have it like, sex like romantically...I knew it was just going to be just like me and her, like and probably, I don’t know, I probably like a romantic way we’re going to do it. But you know, I guess not.”

Alex, 16 year old (African American)

“When I was doing it, I was feeling good about myself, and then the next day, just like might not have even happened. Just like a regular day, the other day.” Jeffery, 15 year old (African American)

Several others rued the fact that their first sex was not with a special enough partner, and hypothesised that their feeling of disappointment were due to not being with the right person.

Exceptions

Gary’s and Aaron’s accounts of first sex markedly differed from the dominant narrative. Gary’s narrative focused on sex as a conquest, devoid of relational meaning. He described potential female partners for himself and male friends as “victims,” and described his first sexual experience as an “initiation” into his group. He approached first and subsequent sex as a transaction. Gary had specifically contacted his first female sexual partner through the internet that day, for the purposes of having sex. He described neither friendship nor romantic relationships with his first or subsequent female sexual partners, nor did he describe emotional or relational value to sex. However, even Gary reported feeling afraid before his first sexual experience:

“I was just looking for excuses not to do it because I was scared and I didn’t want to disappoint this girl.”

Gary, 14 year old (African American)

The second exception was Aaron, whose first sex was done during early adolescence as a dare during a party game. Aaron reported no preparation for the event. He describes his choice and feelings of desperation:

“We had to go in the closet and [have sex]... We was in there for like two minutes. That was the time they gave us and when the two minutes was up, we had to finish and that was mainly it... I just didn’t think it was right and they all said I had to do it or the person that didn’t wanna do it had to do something instead. I think they had to walk around the whole party naked so I had to do that or be embarrassed, so I ended up doing that [trying to have sex].”

Aaron, 15 year old (African American)

Although Aaron said that the young woman was a friend who also verbally consented to the game, he said that both were “scared”. He did not appear to know exactly what happened sexually, except that penetration did not occur. Aaron described a high degree of regret and sadness after the event, and reported that it ended his friendship. However, his story is also consistent with the above model, in that a lack of preparation, mentoring and readiness for sex on his part resulted in a very difficult experience.

Discussion

Data from this study contextualises the first sex for young men in terms of pre-planning, the event itself and the afterwards. In particular, this study adds to our understanding of first sex in an urban, low income, primarily African American population in the following ways.

Thoughts and feelings about first sex

Our findings are congruent with other studies that discuss young men’s perceptions of first sex as an initiation into adulthood and a general positive feeling post-sex (Holland et al. 2000, Ott, Pfeiffer and Fortenberry 2006, Ott and Pfeiffer 2009). However, our participants described mixed emotions, including anxiety and disappointment. Many also described the romantic expectations that sex would be a life-changing event and would result in a deeper

relationship with their partners. This is consistent with work with younger adolescents by Giordano, in which younger boys expressed a similar level of interest in an emotional relationship as girls (Giordano, Longmore and Manning 2006).

Pre-planning, Readiness, and communication

Almost all described some type of pre-planning, with most carrying a condom in the event something was to occur. Narratives of first sex from the United Kingdom also describe the phenomena of intercourse “just happening”, in which the adolescents do not specifically plan on intercourse, but it is not an unexpected outcome (Mitchell and Wellings 1998). Similar to men in our study, who were prepared for sex once the possibility was recognised, Mitchell described young men looking for clues that sex might occur, and carrying condoms, “just in case.”

These pre-planning activities speak to “readiness” for first sex. In a review of the literature on first sexual intercourse, readiness is described as a combination of physical adulthood and social adulthood, with components such as STI and pregnancy protection, autonomy of decision-making, and a consensual relationship (Hawes, Wellings and Stephenson 2010). The authors note that readiness does not perfectly map onto age, as younger adolescents may be ready, whereas older adolescents may not be ready. In our own work on abstinence and the transition to first sex, “readiness” was described by adolescents as physical maturity, age, individual readiness (a sense of self-respect, less susceptibility to peer pressure), and relationship readiness (closeness, being “in love”, and commitment) (Ott, Pfeiffer and Fortenberry 2006).

Communication was primarily non-verbal, similar to findings in other adolescent populations (Mitchell and Wellings 1998) (Rosenthal and Peart 1996). In a study of Australian adolescents, both boys and girls found that non-verbal strategies signaling an interest in sex to be most favored and most often used (Rosenthal and Peart 1996). Similar to our findings, these strategies included actions such as arranging to be alone and unsupervised, and showing the person that you had a condom (Rosenthal and Peart 1996). We come to a similar conclusion (Mitchell and Wellings 1998), in that it is likely that the new situation, high emotions and romantic expectations of participants, coupled with difficulties inherent in non-verbal communication, may have led to the mixed feelings and disappointment after first sex.

Power relationships and female partners as initiators

Similar to other studies, most boys in this subset engaged in a period of getting to know their prospective partners, where they communicated their romantic interest to a young woman and tested their partners’ stance and readiness for sex (Eyre et al. 1998). Though boys in our study were preparing to have intercourse they did not know when it would take place. In fact, narratives from young men reveal that young women were also engaging in pre-planning by defining where and when the first sex would take place, and making sure that parents were absent when intercourse happened. In most of our narratives, it was the female partner who initiated the sexual act through non-verbal and verbal cues. These findings contrast with studies which have portrayed young women as having a more passive role in defining sexual encounters (i.e. sex “just happens” – see, for example (Thompson 1990)). They are consistent, however, with research on younger adolescents’ relationships in which both men and women report that the female partner has more relationship power and influence (Giordano, Longmore and Manning 2006).

Role of social networks

A third important finding was the role that brothers and cousins played in giving advice, creating sexual opportunities and providing condoms for younger men before first intercourse. Observational studies have shown that discussions with adults are associated with safer sexual behaviour (Wellings et al. 2001), and intervention studies have found that adult involvement decreases sexual activity among high risk adolescents (Beier et al. 2000). However, adults are frequently unaware of young people's early relationships and sexual behaviours. It may be helpful to involve older siblings and cousins in harm-reduction interventions. For example, in our study, these older adolescents were well-positioned to coach younger siblings and cousins about readiness and decision making for sex.

Cultural models of sex and relationships among young African American men

Our study adds to our understanding of the development of African American male sexuality in two ways. First, although our study population was a primarily lower income African American urban population, narratives did not focus on sexual prowess, the exploitation of women or the "gamesmanship" of sex that has been described in older African American men (Eyre, Hoffman and Millstein 1998; Kerrigan et al. 2007; Singer et al. 2006). In our study, participants primarily had same age female partners, described feeling "nervous" about sex, and it was generally the female initiating their first sexual experiences. Our findings suggest that early to middle adolescence may be an important time period for interventions to focus on healthy relationships and positive models of masculinity.

Second, a positive feature of masculinity, particularly among African American men, is the importance of male friendships and kinship (Way 2004; Harper et al. 2004a). Consistent with this literature were our findings of the important mentorship role older brothers and cousins played in providing advice, assistance, and condoms. This finding supports preliminary work by Dolcini in friendship-based sexual risk reduction interventions (Dolcini et al. 2008).

While our study provides new findings about boys' first sexual experiences, it is not without its limitations. Though the use of a small sample and qualitative method allowed us to explore contexts, motivations and perceptions in-depth, it limits transferability to other populations. Our participants were mostly African American and all lower income from a mid-sized U.S. city. All first sexual experiences reported were of consensual heterosexual penetrative vaginal sex, and results may not be transferrable to same sex first sexual experiences. To reduce recall bias, our interviews focused on recent sexual activity. This may have introduced some degree of selection bias, in that the 14 participants describing their first ever sex may have had first sex more recently, or may have considered first sex of greater personal significance. Finally, while we had very rich descriptions of relationships and events leading up to first sex, we were not able to elicit much description of the event itself. Despite probing, there was a large amount of reluctance to talk about the sexual event, including foreplay, insertion, and ejaculation.

Implications

Findings from this study have several implications in designing intervention models young men. Consistent with international data, narratives demonstrate high levels of condom use at first sex. Given that these levels tend to drop over time and within relationships, sexual health promotion models should focus on maintaining these levels. Our findings suggest that these sexual health promotion models should go beyond educating about safe sex practices and also focus on healthy sexual relationships, including partner selection, relationship expectations, emotional maturity and communication about sex. The importance of "mentors" in our narratives reinforce the need to better understand and utilise a young

person's social networks in sexual health promotion, in particular the brothers, cousins and older female partners, to enhance safety and healthy sexual decision-making.

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Figure 1.
Adolescent Boys Experience of First Sex