

# Does Insecure Parental Attachment Influence Teenage Unprotected Sex?

Estrella Godinez

## *Faculty Introduction*

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*Dr. Amanda Venta*

Estrella Godinez reviewed a large literature base on the importance of parent-adolescent relationships for mental health and developed an innovative research question with significant public health implications. She proposed and completed this study with the support of the McNair Scholars program. Her study utilized data collected by members of the SHSU Youth and Family Studies Lab—where Estrella volunteered for two years—from high school students in Texas. Her aim was to examine the parent-adolescent relationship as a correlate of teenage unprotected sex. Her results indicate that adolescents engage in unprotected sex at high rates. Therefore, her manuscript comments on a significant public health risk behavior and links it to the potentially malleable family context.

## *Abstract*

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Empirical research shows that risky sexual behavior is common in adolescents, and younger teenagers are engaging in unprotected sex. The following research paper examines the existing literature on the topics of parent-adolescent relationships as predictors of risky behavior among adolescents. Prior research has shown a link between insecure parent-adolescent attachment and risky sexual behavior. The current study specifically built on this literature by examining parent-adolescent attachment as a correlate of unprotected sex. Results indicated adolescents who reported less secure attachments in their relationships with their parents, including lower trust and communication factors were more likely to engage in unprotected sex. Unprotected sex, sexually transmitted infections, and the unplanned pregnancies that may result, are a main concern for the health of adolescents. Future research should extend the findings of the current study by looking specifically at the kind of parent-adolescent communication about sexual health that can be most effective in preventing sexual risk taking. Further, schools may be able to reduce unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections by fostering trusting communication between teachers, counselors, and students.

The Centers for Disease Control ([CDC], 2016) report that 41% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 regularly engage in unprotected sex. Unprotected sex is defined as sexual intercourse without the use of any form of birth control (Office of Technology Assessment [OTA], 1991). Empirical research shows that risky sexual behavior is common in adolescents, with 72.2% of males and 46.7% of females initiating sexual activity at age 15 or younger (Smith, 1997). Sexual activity in adolescents has important consequences for those who do not use contraceptives, including a higher risk of unexpected pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STI). Indeed, only 28% of males and 19% of females who initiated sexual activity at age 15 or younger reported regular condom use (Smith, 1997). Teenage pregnancy is a well-documented public health concern, which can interfere with an adolescent's future educational goals. A study by Fergusson and colleagues (2000), showed that teenage girls younger than 18 who became pregnant were more likely to drop out of school, less likely to complete high school, and less likely to enroll in a university. Likewise, about half of the 20 million sexually transmitted infections diagnosed annually are adolescents as young as age 15 (CDC, 2016). The Centers for Disease Control (2016) also reports that more than 62 thousand youth in 2012 were living with HIV and half of them did not know they were infected. These studies indicate that adolescents engage in unprotected sex, which leads to significant public health problems, including disease and unplanned pregnancy (CDC, 2016). Increasing the use of contraceptives among teenagers is advocated as a means to reduce health problems that they face as a result of unprotected sexual activity (What Works, 2016).

Several studies have examined how parental presence relates to risky sexual behavior. In a study by Smith (1997), both adolescent boys and girls who did not have both biological parents in the household had sex at an earlier age than those who had both biological parents at home.

Reduced parental involvement and engagement are also predictors of risky sexual behavior among teens. According to Parkes, Henderson, Wight, and Nixon (2011), parenting can extend beyond helping teenagers avoid sexual risk, enhancing their capacity to have positive sexual relationships. In families where parents talk to their teenage children about contraceptive use, the teenagers report better communication and delayed intercourse (Parkes et al., 2011). Parental monitoring, like requiring children to ask for permission to go out, to notify parents of a change of plans, or to keep a curfew, increases condom use by teens during sex (Parkes et al., 2011). The restriction on intercourse was also associated with the expect-

tation from teenagers that sex will occur for the first time when they are in love instead of merely when finding someone sexually attractive (Parkes et al., 2011). In another study, Rodgers and McGuire (2012) showed the importance of parenting and exposure to violence as predictors of sexual risk-taking. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, and teen sexual coercion were significant predictors of sexual risk-taking in teens (Rodgers & McGuire, 2012). Parental warmth towards children and parental involvement were also predictors; teens felt confident about safe sexual activity when they perceived warmth, care, and monitoring from their parents (Rodgers & McGuire, 2012). Rodgers and McGuire (2012) reported that sexually experienced youth who felt as if their parents lacked warmth and were less knowledgeable about their behavior reported having more sexual partners and a higher likelihood of pregnancy.

Several studies have also looked specifically at how attachments between teenagers and their parents relate to risky sexual behavior. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980), the attachment relationship that parents form with their children at an

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early age affects the relationships they have with others across their lifespan (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Joeng et al., 2017). Secure attachment between caregiver and child develops when the caregiver reliably and sensitively looks after the child at an early age and the child seeks the caregiver for security. In contrast, insecure attachment occurs when a child cannot obtain reliable and sensitive caregiving (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Insecure attachment can manifest as preoccupation, with the searching for relationship with others that can fulfill the caregiver role (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Insecure attachment may also manifest as dismissal and avoidance, a form of insecurity that lacks intimacy where an individual avoids or dismisses close contact with others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Attachment insecurity can also lead to needy and anxious attachment behaviors (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Joeng et al., 2017)

Secure attachment is associated with open parental communication with teenagers and supportive experiences in the teenager-parent relationship, indeed, adolescence is a particularly important time during which both adolescents and parents navigate through honesty and communication in the presence of increased autonomy (Ying et al., 2015). Yu, Clemens, Yang, Li, and Stanton (2006) reported that youth who reported open parental

communication were less likely to engage in risk behaviors, including sexual risk-taking. Moreover, prior research shows that teenagers who have secure attachment relationships engage in less risky sexual behavior. In a study by Letcher and Slesnick (2014); adolescents who scored high in attachment anxiety participated in more frequent sexual activity and substance use compared to those who scored low on anxiety. In young adults as well, attachment insecurity (e.g., anxious attachment) has been linked with sexual risk-taking (Jones & Paulhus, 2012).

Against this background, the current study had two research aims. First, we sought to uncover whether parent-adolescent attachment related to teenage unprotected sex. Several prior studies have shown a link between insecure parent-adolescent attachment and risky sexual behavior (Letcher & Slesnick, 2014), but, to date, no study has specifically examined unprotected sex—a serious public health problem in adolescents. We expected that adolescents who report less secure attachment with their parents would be more likely to report having unprotected sex. Second, the current study sought to expand the existing literature by examining whether the relation between parent-adolescent attachment and teenage unprotected sex would be moderated by ethnicity. To our knowledge, this aim has not been explored in previous research. However, ethnic and racial minorities differ from white adolescents regarding the frequency of sexual risk taking (Silverman, 2013). Moreover, some evidence supports culture-specific parent-child communication about sex—particularly a hesitation to talk about sexual intercourse and birth control (Rhucharoenpornpanich & Chamrathirithong, 2012) in some cultures. Thus, the current study explored the role of race/ethnicity as a potential moderator. Specifically, we expected that adolescents who identify as white would report having less unprotected sex when they are securely attached to their parents. In ethnic/racial minority adolescents, we expected no relation between secure attachment and teenage unprotected sex.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A total of 142 students from a large public high school in the Southwestern United States were invited to complete a survey online for this study. Of the 142 students who received this invitation, 11 students were excluded because they did not complete the Adolescent Risk-Taking Questionnaire (ARTQ SELF) and 21 were excluded because they did not complete the Inventory of Peer and Parent Attachment (IPPA; five for maternal, five for paternal). The average age of participants was 16.49 years ( $SD = .721$ ),

ranging from 15 to 18. There were 60 white, 23 Asian, 7 mixed-race, 4 other, and 2 black students. Four students chose not to respond to the ethnicity question; 70.7% of respondents identified as female.

### *Measures*

Adolescent Risk Taking Questionnaire (ARTQ SELF; Gullone et al., 2000) was used as a measure of adolescent risk-taking behavior and the perceived risk of the behaviors. The measure's development initially generated 77 risk items such as "car racing" and "teasing people." The final ARTQ, given in this study, contained 22 risk behaviors answered on a Likert scale (never done, hardly ever done, done sometimes, done often, and done very often). The items of the ARTQ make up four factors including, "rebellious, thrill-seeking, reckless and antisocial behaviors." In the initial validation of the ARTQ, the measure showed adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability in a sample of 925 adolescents. In the current study, we utilized one item from the reckless scale—"having unprotected sex."

Inventory of Peer and Parent Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used as a measure of maternal and paternal attachment. The IPPA uses 25 items to assess attachment to mother and father. Each set of 25 items yields a total score that includes items related to communication, alienation, and trust. A sample item from the trust scale is "My father/mother respects my feelings." From the communication scale, a sample item is "My father/mother listens to what I have to say." Lastly, from the alienation scale, a sample item is "I feel angry with my father/mother."

### *Procedures*

Institutional Review Board and School District approvals were secured prior to data collection. Consent forms were handed out to all high school students in homeroom classes. Students took the consent forms home for parental review and signature. Those who wanted to participate returned completed consent forms to a secure area at the school. Students with parental consent received an email linking them to the data collection site, where data was collected anonymously. Students were asked to complete a series of questionnaires online. Surveys were completed within one sitting that took approximately two hours. Students were able to take the survey from any computer that they chose, at any time of day. Students did not receive compensation for their participation.

## **Results**

The current study sought to examine whether parent-adolescent attach-

ment related to teenage unprotected sex, hypothesizing that adolescents who report secure attachment to their parents would be less likely to have unprotected sex. In this sample, 3% of adolescents endorsed having had unprotected sex very often, 4% often, 7% sometimes, 10% hardly ever, and 76% never. Based on small cell sizes, this variable was re-coded into never (19.3%,  $n = 24$ ) and at least once (80.7 %,  $n = 76$ ). No relation between ethnicity and unprotected sex was observed via chi-square testing. The mean and standard deviation for maternal attachment and paternal attachment, in the whole sample ( $N = 100$ ), was as follows: maternal  $M = 88.64$ ,  $SD = 24.85$ ; paternal  $M = 83.30$ ,  $SD = 25.70$ .

To examine the relation between unprotected sex and maternal attachment, independent samples t-tests were used with unprotected sex as the group variable, and dependent variables of IPPA Mother Total Attachment, Mother Trust, Mother Communication, and Mother Alienation. Analyses indicated that individuals who had never had unprotected sex had higher Total Attachment ( $t(98) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .003$ ), Trust ( $t(98) = 3.14$ ,  $p = .002$ ), Communication ( $t(98) = 2.31$ ,  $p = .023$ ) and lower Alienation ( $t(98) = -2.26$ ,  $p = .026$ ) than their counterparts who reported having unprotected sex at least once. Independent samples t-test were again used with unprotected sex as a group variable, with dependent variables of IPPA Father Total Attachment, Father Trust, Father Communication, and Father Alienation. Results indicated that individuals who had never had unprotected sex had higher Total Attachment ( $t(93) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .045$ ), Trust ( $t(93) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .015$ ), Communication ( $t(93) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .291$ ), and lower Alienation ( $t(92) = -2.31$ ,  $p = .023$ ). No significant moderation between attachment and unprotected sex was noted by race/ethnicity.

## Discussion

For the current study, it was hypothesized that adolescents who had an insecure attachment style with their parents would be more likely to be involved in risky sexual behaviors, specifically unprotected sex. As expected, adolescents who had never engaged in this specific risky sexual behavior had higher total attachment with both parents. This finding is echoed by Parkes et al. (2009) who noted that adolescents who had a trusting relationship with both their mother and father were more likely to use contraceptives than those who did not trust either of their parents. Likewise, Parkes et al. (2011) reported that more involved parents who establish a curfew and are notified by their own teenagers about any changes in plans have teenagers who are more likely to use condoms in their sexual activities. Finally, prior research indicates that teens who perceive warmth from their parents feel more positively about safe sexual activity (Rodgers

& McGuire, 2012). The current study adds to this literature base by specifically identifying a link between protected sex and parental attachment.

Among the IPPA subscales, communication with mother was related to practicing safer sex, though no such relation was noted with paternal communication. Although the positive effects of parental communication have been documented (Yu et al., 2006; Ying et al., 2015), the absence of significant findings with regard to paternal communication was unexpected. One reason for the absence of a significant relation between contraceptive use and paternal communication may be that some of the adolescents lived in a single parent household with only their mother present (Smith, 1997), and thus, paternal communication was less important. Second, in the current study, there were more female participants than male; females may be more likely to rely on maternal communication for sexual education (Yu et al., 2006), rendering paternal communication less relevant.

In this study, ethnicity did not serve as a moderator for the relation between parental attachment and teenage unprotected sex. Due to the small sample size in this study, and the large number of racial/ethnic categories, few adolescents were assigned to each cell, limiting statistical power to obtain a significant value. Still, prior research suggests that unprotected sex is more common in ethnic minorities (Ellen, Aral & Madger, 1998), suggesting that future research with larger samples is needed.

Unprotected sex—and the sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies that result—are a main concern for the health of adolescents (Smith, 1997). The current study suggests that parental attachment, particularly maternal communication and other forms of support from both parents, may attenuate risk for unprotected sex. Future research should look specifically at the kind of communication most effective for talking to teenagers about sexual health. This would support families that are not already experiencing trusting, open communication about this topic. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether the relations identified in this study are causal in nature. Future research should involve alternate communication strategies for adolescent health. For instance, schools can benefit from this research regarding the importance of communication to reduce unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancies, and sexually-transmitted infections, and foster trusting communication between teachers, counselors, and students. ■

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### *Student Biography*

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Estrella Godinez is a psychology major who completed her undergraduate degree at Sam Houston State University in December 2017. In her last year as an undergraduate, she became part of the McNair Scholars program where she was paired with associate professor Dr. Amanda Venta. Estrella's interest in adolescent risk taking behaviors strengthened after looking at the relation with attachment. Estrella also presented this research as a poster at the 2017 annual convention of the Texas Psychological Association in Houston. She plans to pursue graduate studies in both Counseling and Clinical Psychology