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Early sexual intercourse: What's the problem? Sexual agency, social support, self-worth, and the age at first intercourse

In the context of the sexual liberalization sexually active male and female adolescents have become an ordinary part of our every day life. In most European societies satisfying sexual experiences beginning with mid-adolescence are generally seen as positive and are thus associated with sexual competence. In contrast to this, earlier sexual experiences are often considered problematic and are associated with “(sexual) deviance”. However, there are little empirical analyses or theoretical reflections on that subject. Based on a quantitative study of 695 young adults our research group at Potsdam University analysed the relationship between the age at first intercourse and different dimensions of “sexual agency” and self-worth.

Results indicate that an “early sexual debut” (14 years and younger) is neither significantly associated with problematic aspects of self in general, nor with problematic aspects of sexuality in early adulthood. Moreover, “early starters” report significant higher *self-esteem* and are more likely to see themselves as more *self-efficient* and socially integrated in terms of *social support*. In the sexual domain, they are more likely to see themselves as more *sexually self-determined* and seem to be advanced in communicating and realizing their sexual interests and needs. In contrast to the group of the “early starters”, young adults with late sexual experiences (18 years and older) and particularly the group without sexual intercourse experience psychological and social strain. In sum, these both groups report the lowest self-esteem, self-efficacy, and “sexual self-determination”. Additionally, these young adults report significant less social support and less satisfying relations with their peers and their parents.

In the context of social work, these findings suggest that the debate about “sexual deviance” and the problematisation of early sexual experiences is one-sided. It tends to focus on the morality of (sexual) life conduct, but it fails to cover the problems of adolescents in a central part of their life. The groups with the highest level of psycho-social problems in their development of sexual and romantic relationships are lost out of sight.