

Healthy adolescent sexual development:

**Research for more inclusive
policies and programmes**

Introduction

- Younger adolescents' (YA) SRHR

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Conclusions - “How young is too young?”

- Limitations
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INTRODUCTION

- Younger adolescents (aged 10 - 14 years) are typically overlooked in current research, particularly in low and middle-income countries.
- In South Africa, little is known about reproductive transitions among younger adolescents (YAs)
- Policy and programme commitments to address their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have expanded
- Programmes that provide information to adolescents and youth are usually narrow, many addressing only the human biology of pregnancy, or HIV, or emphasizing only abstinence until marriage.
 - For example, the need for sexuality education within the South African context has been reduced to mean the need for appropriate information about HIV and AIDS. Thus, sexuality education has become the educational response to the HIV pandemic (Francis, 2010).

STUDY OBJECTIVE

To investigate the experiences of young adolescents about pubertal and sexual development and assess the forms of support (information and services) they have when navigating the biological, psychological and social changes they go through during this phase.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

- This was a mixed method descriptive design: qualitative and quantitative survey.
- Gert Sibande district in Mpumalanga Province.
- **Qualitative component:** Sample consisted of 33 girl- and 30 boy-learners aged between 10 to 14 years.
- For the participatory group activities adolescents were divided into groups by gender (girls and boys) and age (10-12 years and 13-14 years), with each group comprising of 6 to 8 participants.
- 20 Individual interviews with both girls and boys
- **Quantitative component:** A cross-sectional survey with 696 adolescents aged 10 to 14 years from the eight schools.

Table 1: Socio-demographics of respondents

Demographic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Boy	315	45.9
Girl	371	54.1
Age group		
10 to 12 years	509	73.1
13 to 14 years	187	26.9
School grade		
Grade 4 to Grade 7	541	78.1
Grade 8 to Grade 9	152	21.9
School-type		
Primary School	300	43.2
Secondary School		

Study Findings

- Self-reported pubertal development
- Self-reported sexual milestones
- Navigating dating, love and mixed emotions
- Gendered depictions of sex
- Access to sexuality-related information and services
 - Sources of information

“How young is too young?”

Findings: Self-reported pubertal development

- We present analysis of adolescents' self-reported age of pubertal development in relation to pubic hair growth, breast development and onset of period for girls; pubic hair growth, break of voice and onset of wet dreams for boys.
- One-out-of-five **girls (21.8%)** and **boys (20.5%)** had not grown pubic hair.
- Less than **5%** of **girls** and **10%** of **boys**, self-reported growing pubic hair at below 10 years of age.
- Over **23% of girls** grew pubic hair at **12 years** and over **23% of boys** grew pubic hair at age **10 years**.
- Most female adolescents self-reported growing breasts at age **10 (35.4%)**, less than 1% at age 14. About **10.9% of girls** had not grown breasts, while **3.7%** started growing breasts at less than 10 years.

Findings: Self-reported pubertal development (2)

- About 21.3% of the boys had not developed a deep voice at the time of the study
- About 24.1% boys started having a deep voice at age 10
- About 19% developed a deep voice at age 11.
- **12.4.% of the boys** started having a **deep voice at age 12,**
- Less than 1% had a deep voice at age 14.

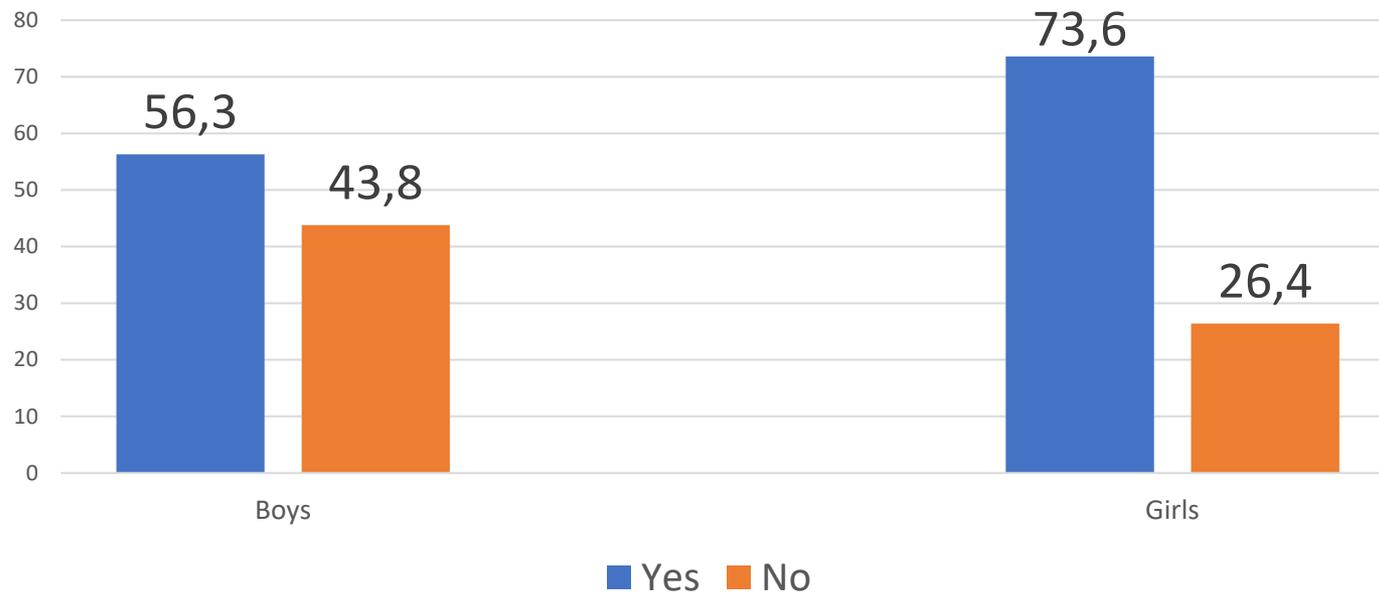
Findings: Self-reported pubertal development (3)

- At the time of the survey, majority of the girls 286 (**70.1%**) reported that they had not had first period
- Just over **10%** reported having their first period at younger than **12 years of age**.
- **19.4% of the girls** reported having first period between 12 and 13 years of age.

- Majority of **boys 156 (48.4%) had not had wet dreams** at the time of the study.
- Over **27%** reported having wet dreams at age ≤ 10 .
- **21%** reported having wet dreams at age 11 to 12 years

Findings: Self-reported sexual milestones (1)

Figure 1. Respondents' response on whether they started dating or not by sex (%)



Navigating dating, love and mixed emotions

Participants- struggled with their emotional development, particularly in dating relationships. The awareness of mixed emotions develops during the course of puberty, and this development is specific to personal and social emotions.

Participants wanted more knowledge on relationships.

Navigating dating, love and mixed emotions

- For example, in the extract below, the participant is asking the interviewer about romantic relationships, and in particular the meaning of love and how to decipher occasionally contradictory information about why individuals become attracted to others.
 - *Participant: In order for someone to love you, what do they see?*
 - *Researcher: There's a variety of ways and love might mean different things; sometimes they love you because you are pretty and some will love you because you are yourself, some love you because you have a nice body or light skinned*
 - *Participant: Some people ask for reasons why you like them*
 - *Researcher: Those reasons will provide the answers; some will say they love you because you have material things they like and some will love you because you add value to their lives*
 - *Participant: Some will tell you to not listen to what people say; you must build trust and have a family (**Female individual interview, 14, school C**)*

Gendered depictions of first sex

Adolescents contemplating the age of first sex, associated sex with a prohibitive perception that sex is **always only dangerous, linked to disease and a 'girl's problem'**.

Peers - the primary influencing agents in decision-making on first sex. Yet the peers' guidance was also framed through a 'danger, damage and disease' narrative. The discussion below illustrates common responses:

Interviewer: 'How would you advise a friend who is considering having sex?'

Participant 1: '[I would tell her] not to have sex with him.'

Participant 2: 'She's too young to have sex and she isn't ready for the challenges that come with it.'

Participant 3: 'If she falls pregnant, she is going to regret it.' **(girls group, 13-14)**

Participant 1: 'I would tell her not to [have sex] because she might fall pregnant.'

Participant 2: 'I would tell her that she shouldn't because once she is ill with STIs and pregnancy, she will be alone.'

Participant 3: 'I would tell her to use a condom.'
(boys group, 11 - 12)

Access to sexuality-related information

Barriers to accessing information: Prohibitive Messaging

Learners' spoke about how sexuality education in school focuses only on the dangers and the diseases related to sexual and reproductive health.

In the following extract, learners share their perceptions of teacher-led sexuality education as focused on admonishments about 'dire consequences' of early or unprotected sex.

Facilitator: 'What are you taught about sexuality in school?'

Mpho: 'They tell you about the risks involved with unprotected sex.'

*Nthabiseng: 'They tell you how falling pregnant can ruin your future by dropping out of school.'
(Girls group, ages 11 - 12, school C, myths and facts activity)*

Access to sexuality-related services

Safeguarding innocence – beliefs about childhood sexual innocence.

In many societies, particularly in Africa, sex issues are not discussed with adolescents. In fact, the idea of withholding sexuality information from young adolescents is seen as a way to preserve their innocence and purity. While well intentioned, this belief fuels negative responses to young adolescents' curiosity about sex and prevents them from accessing necessary SRH information and services.

Facilitator: 'Where can [girls and young women] go to get information and condoms?'

Malusi: 'Well, she can get condoms at the clinic, although they will ask her what she is doing with them.'

Buzwe: '...they never ask when older people take them, [but] they shout at young children so it won't be easy.'

(Boys group, ages 11 - 13, school B, community mapping activity)

Everyday Sexual Learning

Young adolescents' accounts of informal sexuality education: *agency*

- Acquired from peers, the media, family observations and through sexual play (e.g. games such as 'house-house').

In this theme learners are positioned very differently compared with the two themes described earlier. In the preceding themes, young adolescents are cast as passive recipients of cautionary messaging about sexuality, in which sociocultural beliefs about childhood innocence function to silence young adolescent sexuality.

Everyday Sexual Learning

Learners identified conversations with peers as an opportunity to share their SRH experiences and knowledge, thereby shaping their beliefs about various topics.

For example, issues such as puberty, age-disparate relationships between girls and older men

Mantombi: 'You shouldn't play with boys. You will bleed more [when you menstruate]'

(Girls group, ages 10 - 11, school C, Myths and Facts Activity)

Naledi: 'Blessers are old, they give you money and diseases and maybe a baby, [and] then they leave you.'

(Girls group, ages 11 - 12, school A, co-constructed story)

Everyday Sexual Learning

Another source of young adolescents' everyday sexual learning is **childhood play**, which was described as involving touching or other forms of contact with the opposite gender. One of the games most reported on was 'houses', in which children act out 'adult-like' gender-specific roles, similar to that of a traditional heterosexual family. The following quotes were derived from the individual interviews.

Zimasa: 'We played "houses"...it was a home that had a mother and father and we'd manage our home like parents do.' **(Girl age 10, individual interview)**

Musa: 'I played as the father because we did a lot of naughty things. We acted like adults and we kissed. We'd sleep on each other and act as if we were having sex.' **(Boy age 14, individual interview)**

Everyday Sexual Learning

Television, social media and the Internet were also mentioned as sources of sexual material (information). Young adolescents increasingly have access to pornography and sexually explicit photographs and text messages, and this becomes an important source from which they learn about sex and what it 'looks' like:

Facilitator: *'What health services can you go to to learn about sex?'*

Vuyo: *'I used to watch porn and it helped, at 12 midnight on Friday when everyone is sleeping [...] I heard people talking about it and I had to watch.'* (**Boys group, ages 13 - 14, school F, community mapping activity**)

CONCLUSIONS

At age 10 to 14 years, both boys and girls self-reported pubertal and sexual milestones indicating that they were making reproductive transitions that prepare them for adulthood roles. They were curious about sexuality and discussed SRH-related issues. These are normative aspects of adolescent development. Some were of the view that SRH information they received was not comprehensive – it did not focus on emotional and social issues in relationships.

SA needs interventions that address puberty and adolescent sexual development in early adolescence.

Young adolescents' reliance on media for sources of sexuality information should be supported through provision of credible information using the technologies that adolescents can access and which are not adult-driven.

Research Team: Ingrid Lynch, PhD; Mokhantšo Makoae, PhD; Lorenza Fluks, PhD; Roshin Essop, MACFS; Tsidiso Tolla, MPH; Tholang Mokhele, PhD (HSRC) & Benita Moolman, PhD (UCT)

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