

Protective Effects of Sports Participation on Girls' Sexual Behavior

Reducing sexual health risk behaviors that can result in unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, among adolescents is a public health concern in which the federal, state, and local governments as well as non-governmental organizations have already invested considerable resources. The impetus for this study comes from recent findings that participation in sports is associated with lower sexual health risk behaviors among adolescent girls (Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998; Sabo, Miller, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998). The significance of this issue lies not only in a socially desirable public health outcome, which is the reduction of unwanted pregnancy and exposure to STDs, but also in the widespread availability of participation in sports as the probable solution. Elucidating why and for whom the association between sports participation and risky sexual behavior holds can provide the scientific basis for prevention efforts.

To this end, we have examined the protective effects of sports participation on girls becoming sexually active and also on sexually active girls' tendency to engage in risky sexual behaviors in a nationally representative sample of Caucasian, African American, Latina, and Asian American high school students. Studying girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is important because known risk factors for sexual activity do not predict sexual health risk behaviors equally well across race/ethnicity (see Moore, Miller, Gleib, & Morrison, 1995; Perkins, Luster, Viaruelle, & Small 1998; Small & Luster, 1994). In this paper we focus on girls' participation in sport because earlier research has shown the protective effect of sports participation to be gender specific. The research of Miller et al. (1998) and Sabo et al. (1998) has shown that participation in sports is associated with lower incidences of risky sexual behaviors for girls but not for boys.

Our goal is to (1) examine the net impact of sports participation after controlling for variables known to predict adolescent girls' sexual activity; (2) study whether the impact of sports is similar for girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; and (3) separate the testing of the protective effect of sports participation on ever having had sexual intercourse from its effect on engaging in risky sexual activities.

Sexual Health Risk Behaviors

Risky sexual behaviors are those that increase the two main health risks for girls: unintended pregnancies and STDs. With the growing threat of the spread of HIV, condom use has come to be seen as a first line of defense both for unintended pregnancies and STDs, including HIV. Therefore, anything that increases the likelihood of engaging in sex and/or reducing the likelihood of condom use is a potential risk factor. Multiple sexual partners and co-occurrence of sexual activity with drug or alcohol use reduce the likelihood of using condoms (see Moore, Miller, Gleib, et al., 1995; Moore, Miller, Sugland, et al., 1995). Precocious sexual activity — that is, becoming sexually active at an earlier age than one's peers — increases sexual health risks not only because of longer exposure to sexual activity but also because it predicts the tendency to engage in other problem behaviors such as alcohol consumption as well as the co-occurrence of sex while using drugs and alcohol (Biglan, et al., 1990; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1999; Small & Luster, 1994). In summary, sexual health risk behaviors are early initiation of sexual activity, multiple sexual partners, frequent sexual activity, having sex while high on drugs or alcohol, and not using contraception consistently.

The relationship between adolescent girls' involvement with sports and lower levels of self-reported risky sexual behaviors was first widely publicized by the Women's Sports Foundation (Sabo et al., 1998). In a nationally representative sample of 11,000 students in grades 9 through 12 who