

Teens' Decisions about the Transition to Sex:  
Negotiating Competing Normative Systems

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## **Abstract**

Teenage sex has been constructed as a social problem in the U.S., not only because of the potential risks, such as teenage pregnancy, but also because many adults are uncomfortable with the idea of teens having sex.

Drawing on qualitative data from 47 interviews conducted with college-bound teen boys and girls, we investigate the processes through which perceived parental and peer norms about sex and the communication of these norms influence college-bound teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex. Although virgins and sexually experienced college-bound teens faced similar contexts in which most peers were having sex and parents were almost universally against teen sex, some teens had sex and some did not. Our findings demonstrate that college-bound teens who remained virgins during high school view, understand, and talk about teen sexual behavior in very different ways than do college-bound teens who gained sexual experience during high school. We find that differences in understandings of age norms alongside differences in close friends' sexual norms and behaviors, and varying levels of communication with close friends and parents about sex, contribute to differences in sexual behavior for these college-bound teens. While virgins report an individual-level process of deciding whether they were (or were not) ready to have sex during high school, we find that their behavior fits within a traditional understanding of an age norm because of their emphasis on avoiding negative sanctions. Sexually experienced teens, on the other hand, explicitly report abiding by a group-level age norm that prescribes sex as normal during high school. Finally, parents' normative objections to teen sex – either moral or practical – and the ways in which they communicate with their teen about sex have important influences on whether teens ultimately decided to “go all the way” during high school.

## 1. Introduction

Many Americans are uncomfortable with the idea of teenagers having sex (Fields, 2008; Schalet, 2004, 2010). This can present a problem for the parents of many U.S. teenagers, given the likelihood that their child will lose his/her virginity before finishing high school (Regnerus, 2007; B. Risman & Schwartz, 2002). Over the last 30 years, our culture has become “dramatically more sexualized” (Albanesi, 2010, p.4) but these changes have not gone unchallenged. Some of the challenges have taken the form of government-subsidized abstinence-only sexual education programs (Albanesi, 2010; Irvine, 2004) with campaigns such as the “True Love Waits” movement, which encourages teens to make virginity pledges (Albanesi, 2010; Bearman & Brückner, 2001). Despite their recent popularity, research has offered limited support for the effectiveness of these initiatives (Albanesi, 2010; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Kirby, 2001a; Regnerus, 2007; Uecker, 2008). Instead of classes or pledge organizations, most teens report that they would prefer to communicate about sex with their parents (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Whitaker & Miller, 2000), yet many feel they do not get enough information (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). And, teens’ sexual behaviors are most influenced by their peers’ behaviors (Kinsman, Furstenberg, & Schwarz, 1998; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, & Skay, 2006). Therefore, to understand teens’ sexual behavior, we focus on their parents’, peers’, and close friends’ norms about sex and communication of those norms.

In this study we talked to college students about their experiences during high school to investigate the ways in which college-bound teens understood and utilized different social norms about sex while they were in high school. Studying college-bound teens is important, both because of the widespread concern about teenagers having sex during high school and because we can be reasonably sure that for these teens in particular, sex has at least some potential consequences that they would not want at this point in their lives, given their college plans. It is likely that higher SES college-bound teens are encouraged by parents, teachers, and peers to postpone family formation until they have completed their education and begun their careers. This expectation, commonly associated with privileged young Americans, has been defined by Hamilton & Armstrong (2009) as the *self-development imperative*. Additionally, these college-bound youth have inherited the culture of “hooking up” that characterizes sexual behavior on many college campuses today (Armstrong,

Hamilton, & England, 2010; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009).

Understanding the ways in which college-bound teens understand and utilize sexual norms during high school can provide some insight into the ways that high school sexual norms influence sexual attitudes and behaviors as teens get ready for the transition to college.

Prior research has demonstrated a strong relationship between teens' perceptions of family and peer norms about the appropriateness of teen sex and their sexual behavior (see Kirby 2001b for a useful review). Yet, although research has demonstrated a relationship between sociodemographic and family factors and teens' sexual behaviors, we still know little about the ways these factors are translated into micro-level processes, such as decision-making about sex (Gillmore, et al., 2002). Furthermore, social influences, especially peer norms, are important determinants of teens' sexual behavior, yet the processes through which peer norms influence behavioral change are not well understood (Kinsman, et al., 1998; Sieving, et al., 2006). Through 47 qualitative interviews, we investigate the processes through which perceived parental, peer, and close friend norms influence teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex. We utilize the life course theoretical perspective to highlight teens' subjective understandings and internalizations of the appropriate timing of events, such as sexual initiation, and the ways in which these understandings are influenced by parents, peers, and close friends through communication and sanctioning. Finally, we respond to the call from Elliott (2010, p. 208) for research investigating "how youth interpret their parents' lessons about sexuality and the meanings young people give to sexuality" by using in-depth interview data to investigate the meanings and understandings teens develop about the appropriate timing of sexual behavior through communication with parents, peers, and close friends.

The larger study from which the data are drawn sampled college students, asking them about teen sex and pregnancy during their high school years. We did not set out to compare teens who were virgins throughout high school with those who were sexually experienced; rather, this distinction emerged inductively as important for understanding norms and communication about teen sex. Our findings show that college-bound teens who remained virgins throughout high school viewed, understood, and talked about teen sexual behavior in very different ways than did college-bound teens who gained sexual experience during high

school.<sup>1</sup> Even though both sets of teens estimated that most of their peers had sex before leaving high school and virtually all of their parents were against sexual activity between teens, some teens became sexually active and others did not. Furthermore, virgins and sexually experienced teens understood the appropriate timing of sex in different ways: Virgins internalized a subjective age norm that proscribed sex until adulthood while sexually experienced teens utilized an age norm that proscribed sex during high school as normal to justify their decision to have sex. Why are there such differences between these two groups? Based on our qualitative data, we argue that differences in communication about sexual norms by parents and close friends contributed to the differences in behavior for most of these college-bound teens. Although the peers of both groups were for the most part sexually active, both virgins' and sexually experienced teens' close friends generally engaged in similar levels of sexual behavior as the teens themselves: Virgins' close friends were "not ready" for sex while sexually experienced teens' close friends were having sex and "being careful." Thus, close friends normalized sex as either an act that would be negatively sanctioned by others (in the case of virgins) or an act that was seen as normal (for sexually experienced teens). Parental norms also played a role in teens' decisions about sex, although parents were almost universally against teen sex. Parents' objections to teen sex –either moral or practical – and the ways in which they communicated with their teen about sex also had an influence on whether teens ultimately decided to "go all the way" during high school. Regardless of the basis for objection, parental norms were salient in teens' decisions about sex as these college-bound teens worked hard to conform outwardly to their parents' expectations by hiding any sexual activity they were engaging in from parents.

## **2. Background**

### *2.1 Age Norms and Teenage Sexual Behavior*

In our respondents' narratives about sex during high school, age norms served as important guides for determining the appropriate timing of sex, whether they were understood as subjective and constructed at the individual level like for virgins, or identified as group-level age norms, like for sexually experienced teens.

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<sup>1</sup> In a closed-ended question during the background section of the interview, teens self-defined as having been "sexually active" in high school versus not. Thus, we are not categorizing teens by their experience with a specific behavior such as penile-vaginal intercourse, but by their own definition of "sex."

Although a variety of disciplines contribute to the literature on social norms, we use the sociological definition of age norms as group-level expectations about behaviors that are considered appropriate at different stages in the life course (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Settersten, 2003). Neugarten and colleagues (1965, p. 711) have written that “age norms and age expectations operate as prods and brakes upon behavior, in some instances hastening an event, in others delaying it.” Individuals internalize these age-based brackets for behavior and will readily describe themselves as “early” or “late” when they diverge from the expected timeline or sequencing of events (Neugarten, et al., 1965). In the past few decades researchers have documented a relative destandardization of age norms for younger cohorts, in that there is more diversity and tolerance for variation in the timing and sequence of life course transitions in late adolescence and early adulthood, but age norms persist (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Shanahan, 2000). A defining feature of a social norm is the sanctioning that results from breaking the norm (Marini, 1984; Settersten, 2003). Simply the threat of negative sanctions that are attached to violating a social norm may be enough to keep individuals from violating that norm (Herold, 1981; Mollborn, 2010; Wooten, 2006). Even in the absence of sanctions, age norms are often followed because they have been internalized and thus are taken for granted (Billari & Liefbroer, 2007; Heckhausen, 1999).

Although individuals may not always conform to group norms or cultural ideals about appropriate behavior, the group’s consensus about which behaviors are appropriate produces and reinforces the norms, expectations, and sanctions that regulate individual behavior (Geronimus, 2003). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals gauge the appropriateness of behaviors by observing the behaviors and social approval cues of others in their midst (Cialdini, 2001; Rimal & Real, 2005). The level of identification with others in the group is also important to gauge in order to accurately predict whether an individual will abide by a particular norm. An individual is more likely to be influenced by members of a particular reference group when s/he identifies closely with the group (Kirby, 2001a; 2001b; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Norms about the appropriate timing and context of teen sexual behavior vary by gender (Carpenter, 2002; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Martin, 1996). The *sexual double standard* is based on the belief that men

are encouraged and even expected to pursue sexual opportunities with women regardless of the context, while women are expected to avoid casual sex and engage in sex only when in a relationship, and preferably, when in love (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; B. Risman & Schwartz, 2002). Fear of stigma may constrain the sexual behaviors and impact the sexual preferences of young women (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Tolman, 1994). However, others have argued that gender may be losing its ability to shape the experiences of virginity loss and, perhaps, sexual careers in general (Carpenter, 2002). Although specific prescriptions for and proscriptions against teen sex may differ for teen boys and girls (Albanesi, 2010; Blinn-Pike, 1999; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Eyre & Millstein, 1999; Leigh, 1989), research has shown that teens make decisions about whether to have sex in much the same way regardless of gender (Gillmore, et al., 2002). Although there are some differences in sexual norms, sanctions, and experiences among college-bound boys and girls in our sample, we find that the process through which teen boys and girls decide about whether to have sex during high school is largely the same. The limited previous research in this area has identified differences in perceptions of peer norms and of peer sexual activity based on level of sexual experience (Gillmore, et al., 2002; Nahom et al., 2001). We also found such differences, so we grouped our sample based on sexual experience rather than gender.

## *2.2 Influences on Teenage Sexual Behavior*

We understand there to be at least three interconnected levels of social influence on behavior: individual, interpersonal, and institutional or structural (B. J. Risman, 2004). Many scholars have investigated structural-level factors that are related to teens' engaging in early sexual behavior, such as race, ethnicity, social class, and citizenship (E.g. Bettie, 2003; Collins, 2000; Gillmore, et al., 2002; Gonzalez-Lopez, 2005; Plummer, 2003). Others have investigated how individual-level constructs such as self-esteem, planful competence, and educational aspirations influence teens' sexual decisions and outcomes (E.g. Billy, Brewster, & Grady, 1994; Clausen, 1991; Goodson, Buhi, & Dunsmore, 2006; Lauritsen, 1994; Small & Luster, 1994). As in many other areas of sociology, the interactional level has been relatively neglected (Emirbayer, 1997).

In this study we focus primarily on the interactional level, investigating the relative influence of two reference groups: parents and peers. Much research has demonstrated that each of these reference groups'

norms, expectations, and sanctions have significant influence over teens' decisions about whether to have sex; however, the relative influence of each of these groups has not been clearly elucidated, as few studies have investigated both parental and peer influences (Whitaker & Miller, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Although we know that social influences, such as the norms, attitudes, and behaviors of peers, serve as important determinants of teen sexual behavior (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1989; Ralph J. DiClemente, 1991; Kinsman, et al., 1998; Sieving, et al., 2006), few scholars have investigated how social norms are translated into behavioral change (Kinsman, et al., 1998). Prevalent behaviors, which may or may not reflect social norms (Marini, 1984), have been shown to be important for understanding teens' sexual behaviors. In a study of sexual initiation among sixth graders, Kinsman and colleagues (1998) have found that the most important peer norm predictor of intention to initiate sex in the next year was adolescents' perceptions about the prevalence of peer sexual behavior. Young adolescents were much more likely to report an intention to initiate sex and were more likely to actually initiate sex if they perceived that most of their peers were having sex (Kinsman, et al., 1998).

The relationship between parental influence and teen sexual behavior is less straightforward. In a study of high school aged boys and girls, Gillmore and colleagues (2002) have found that beliefs about the expectations of reference groups, such as parents, influenced teens' perceptions of social norms about sex, thus indirectly impacting their decisions about whether to have sex. In a study of age norms about another transition to adulthood, leaving home, Billari and Liefbroer (2007) have found that perceptions of societal norms were not influential in young people's decisions but that perceptions of the opinions of significant others (such as parents) were influential in decisions about leaving home. Other scholars have argued that parents have little or no influence over teens' behaviors (E.g. Harris, 1995). There is a wealth of research on parent and teen communication about sex and teens' risk behavior (E.g. Aspy et al., 2007; R.J. DiClemente et al., 2001; M.K. Hutchinson, Jemmott, Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2003; Teitelman, Ratcliffe, & Cedarbaum, 2008), but there is little information about the processes through which parental norms about sex are communicated to teens (Gillmore, et al., 2002; Jaccard & Dittus, 1993; Whitaker & Miller, 2000). We

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<sup>2</sup> Gillmore and colleagues (2002) have investigated the relative influence of adult and peer norms in adolescents' intentions to engage in sex and found that adult normative beliefs were significant predictors of the perceived social norm toward sexual behavior while peer norms were not significantly related to perceptions of social norms about sex among adolescents.

address this gap in the literature directly by exploring the ways that parents communicate or convey their attitudes and beliefs about teen sex with their teen in both explicit and implicit ways.

### **3. The Study**

Our work draws on 47 in-depth qualitative interviews with college students at a large public university in the western United States about their experiences with sex, contraception, and pregnancy as teenagers. Rather than generalizing findings to a broader population, the goal of the research is to explore teens' narratives and experiences in order to elucidate complex processes underlying relationships between social influences and sexual behavior that have been identified in quantitative research. This in-depth information is intended to inform future research using larger, more representative samples. The larger project's interviews, which received institutional review board approval, were conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 43 interviews were conducted by trained undergraduates in two senior-level Sociology classes during the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009. After receiving targeted training on conducting qualitative interviews, students were asked to recruit a college student acquaintance and interview her or him.<sup>3</sup> Students transcribed the interviews and submitted a transcription, an audio file of the interview, and their field notes. England and colleagues (2008) have successfully used peer interviewing techniques for sensitive topics, such as teen sex, that may result in more open disclosure with a familiar peer interviewer than with an older stranger. We believe that this strategy was justified for our project because participants apparently did reveal more sensitive information to the peer interviewers. For example, two participants disclosed previous pregnancies and abortions to the peer interviewers, but none did so to adult interviewers.

In the second phase of data collection, we employed a purposive sampling strategy and conducted interviews that were somewhat longer and less structured. A female research team consisting of a faculty member, a graduate student, and an undergraduate student conducted interviews with 14 undergraduates, who were recruited through a campus-wide email list and paid \$10 for their time. During recruiting, students

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<sup>3</sup> This interview was part of a graded research project for the courses, one of which was taught by the second author and the other by a different instructor. Students could choose an alternative assignment instead of conducting the interview, and they or the participant they interviewed could choose not to release the interview data to this research project. To avoid the possibility that students would feel coerced into releasing the data, this decision was not known to the course instructor until after final grades had been submitted.

were asked whether they were first-generation college students or came from a rural or poor community. Half of the selected participants had these background characteristics, which were rare in the first phase of data collection. The others were chosen from the broader pool of recruits. While the participants and interviewers were strangers and disclosure of sensitive information may therefore have been dampened, this phase of data collection was useful because it permitted us to go into greater depth in probing about important themes that arose in the first round of interviews. This strategy of “abduction” (Reichertz, 2010) is useful for developing and testing theoretical ideas as they evolve.

The interviews were semi-structured, combining a list of questions that the team asked of every participant with in-depth probe questions tailored to each interviewee. The depth of probing varied in the student-conducted interviews from the first phase, but in the second phase the individualized probing was extensive. Topics covered included participants’ perceptions when they were in high school of norms about teenage sex, contraception, and childbearing in their peer groups, families, communities, and society at large; how these norms influenced their own and their peers’ fertility choices and behaviors; and what sanctions they faced as violators of these norms. We asked about their communication with parents and peers about these issues, as well as any stories they were told about peers’ experiences. In the second round of interviews, we also asked participants to compare sexual norms and behaviors from when they were in high school to those in college. While the bulk of the interview concerned events and attitudes from the past and was therefore probably subject to some degree of recall bias (Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, & Coates, 1990; Graham, Catania, Brand, Duong, & Canchola, 2002), participants’ high school experiences were still fairly recent, and they seemed to have little trouble remembering them.

Of the 57 college student participants, 47 (30 women and 17 men) came from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, defined as either of their parents having attained a college degree or holding a managerial or professional job. Because we found that teen sex, contraception, and pregnancy norms and behaviors differed sharply by communities’ socioeconomic status and because many college-bound lower-SES teens reported feeling like anomalies in their communities, we focus here only on the higher-SES group. In being college-bound, these participants were typical of teenagers in their communities. All but one (who

identified as South Asian/Indian) self-identified as White or Caucasian, all identified as straight or heterosexual, and their ages ranged from 19 to 24. This sample composition was a little less diverse than the student population from which it was drawn, but it reflects the demographics of the vast majority of students at this university. There is a great deal of regional variation in the sample: Participants attended high school in 15 different states. They identified the communities in which they attended high school as ranging politically from very conservative to very liberal. We group respondents based on their report of whether they were sexually active during high school; however, there were some differences by gender. In our sample, 16 females and 5 males remained virgins, while 14 females and 12 males gained sexual experience during high school.

All interviews were transcribed and entered into the QSR NVivo (8.0) qualitative software package. Transcripts were then coded using three techniques. First, responses were coded according to the question the participant was answering, including simple distinctions between answers (e.g., positive versus negative attitudes toward teen sex among their close friends). Second, both authors read entire transcripts and identified important themes that emerged from the data. These themes were then identified and coded in other transcripts. Third, we identified key characteristics of respondents and compared findings across categories. Participants' level of sexual experience in high school emerged as important for understanding the findings through this process. Using each of these analytic tools, we brought together our findings on norms about teenage sex, contraception, and pregnancy and their links to teens' behavior. While pregnancy-related norms and behaviors are not the main focus of this study, the specter of pregnancy was clearly salient for participants and shaped sex and contraception norms, attitudes, and behaviors.

#### **4. Results**

This results section focuses on norms about sex that are communicated to college-bound teens by parents, peers, and close friends. Figure 1 shows the normative context of teens' decisions about sex that arose in our data. Most teens in our sample experienced very similar peer and parental contexts in which peers were having sex and parents were against sex; however, there are important differences in parental objections to teen sex and close friends' sexual norms based on teen's level of sexual behavior. Virgins more often

described their parents are morally opposed to teen sex and their close friends as “not ready” for sex. Sexually experienced teens, on the other hand, more often described their parents as practically opposed to teen sex while their close friends were sexually active and “being careful.” In the sections below, we first describe virgins’ and sexually experienced teens’ and their friends’ norms about sex, then turning to ways in which teens communicated about these issues. We then shift our focus to parents, outlining two primary motivations for parental objections to teen sex and describing the ways in which parents communicated their objections to teens.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

#### *4.1 Age Norms among Virgins: Being Ready*

Many college-bound virgins in our study demonstrated a subjective understanding of an age norm proscribing sex until adulthood through their focus on the importance of “being ready.” For these teens, making sure one was ready to have sex felt like an individual-level process, at times influenced by outside forces like parents and close friends. On an individual level, being ready was often defined by age and emotional maturity, but some teens emphasized the risks of sex, especially negative sanctioning which would damage one’s reputation. This focus on age and maturity is similar to what Regnerus (2007) has defined as “emotional readiness” in his study of religious youth and sexual behavior. According to Regnerus’s (2007) respondents, emotional readiness consisted of not only “being ready,” but also realizing “what you’re getting into” and being “old enough to handle the complex emotions of sex” (p. 110). Many virgins in our study described sexual readiness in similar ways. For example, Sophie (female, virgin) stressed the importance of age:

I think for me at least it was just that they’re doing this and I’m not. It’s something I’ve thought about but never done before and is still really new to me and strange I guess, so there’s that aspect of just being something different and perceived as older than what I was doing.

Haylie (female, virgin) also talked about the way that age influenced her sense of readiness:

I mean, it was more that I just didn’t think about it as much or see myself doing it *yet*, like when I thought about it, well, like someday it will happen but right now it’s not and that’s okay...

Emotional maturity was also highlighted as important in virgins' calculations about whether to have sex. For example, Ella (female, virgin) said that she didn't think she was "old enough or mature enough to handle it either." Similarly, Adrian (male, virgin) said that the sexually active teens were the ones "who wanted to be more mature than they really were or thought they were more mature." And, Liam (male, virgin) said that "people were more scared of the institution of sex than they were of the results of it being pregnancy," reflecting that it was not just the consequences of sex that intimidated or frightened teens, but the act of sex itself. These data indicate that for many college-bound virgins, the process of deciding whether one was ready for sex was characterized by individual-level assessments. Teens calculated whether they felt they were old and mature enough to have sex and whether they thought they'd be able to handle the situation and the complex emotions that might be evoked.

Many virgins also based their decisions about sexual readiness on the potential risks of sex. Some emphasized unplanned pregnancy, while others feared the possible negative sanctions that would result from public knowledge of sexual activity. Regardless of which risk was emphasized, avoidance of these risks was important enough for many college-bound virgins to decide that they were not ready to have sex during high school. In other words, many of these teens decided they were not ready to have sex because they were unwilling to accept any negative consequences. For example, Violet, (female, virgin) described her fears about the consequences of sex:

Well, to be honest with you, it scared the shit out of me. I saw this fifteen-year-old girl that was pregnant walking around with a huge belly on her and I was not ready for that. I didn't have my first boyfriend until I was a senior so that was never really a concern. And of course guys are going to be pushy and ask but, you know, it wasn't hard for me to think, you know, do I want to have sex and possibly have a baby or just not until I'm ready?

Unplanned pregnancy was clearly salient in Violet's decision to abstain from sex. This risk was not just a concern for teen girls. For instance, Logan (male, virgin) said:

I'm sure if I had ever gotten to a point, where I was really ... if I was ever put in a position where, [laughs] it sounds so corny, but sex was an imminent type of deal, the fact that pregnancy is a

possibility would have been a pretty main deterrent before crossing the finish line.

Adrian (male, virgin) agreed when he said that pregnancy played a role in abstaining from sex: “Like, it’s not really worth it, the risks ... even if you are being careful, like you probably won’t get pregnant, but it’s not something you want to worry about.” Thus, both teen boys and girls were concerned about the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy, and this risk was enough to delay sexual activity until one felt ready.

But for many college-bound virgins, pregnancy was not the greatest risk. Several focused instead on the potential danger of others finding out about one’s sexual activity and the subsequent damage to one’s reputation. This concern was much more important to college-bound virgins than sexually experienced teens: In our sample, twice as many virgins as sexually experienced teens said that a major risk of sex was being labeled a slut or having your reputation ruined. In line with the sexual double standard, teen girls were more worried about this risk than teen boys. Madelyn’s (female, virgin) quote about her friends captures this well:

They were worried about parents finding out, their reputation at school usually, what other people would think of them ... I knew some kids who would say like the typical prom night stereotype, like kids did talk about that, but then we’d always do night activities after our dances so you’d go rock climbing or something crazy like that. I feel like a lot of the kids who [had sex], they didn’t even think about the chance of getting pregnant, like I could see a lot of kids not even considering that; it’d be more in the time, in the moment, of reputation, people finding out and stuff like that.

This comment reflects the preoccupation that many college-bound virgins had with other people’s knowledge of their sexual behavior, that in the moment of deciding whether to have sex, the risk to one’s reputation might loom larger for some teens than even the risk of pregnancy. Of course, one of the obvious physical markers of teen sexual activity would be a later-term pregnancy. Madelyn (female, virgin) also described how this outcome could ruin one’s reputation:

R: I think it was because they were sexually active and then the whole school knew about it sort of kind of deal ‘cause I knew other kids that were sexually active but like it wasn’t broadcast because sex is something you just don’t talk about in our high school so that’s why it damaged their reputation.

I: So it was basically making their sexual activity public?

R: Yeah.

Significantly, Madelyn argued here that it was the public knowledge of one's sexual activity, and not pregnancy per se, that would damage a sexually active teen's reputation. Claudia (female, virgin) agreed with Madelyn that the public knowledge of sexual behavior was influential in how teens would react to a pregnancy:

Well, I think that sex is something that happens privately and pregnancy is something that happens publically, so they kind of exist in different realms in our thoughts, so whether or not we say we are okay with it or not okay with it either in sex or in pregnancy, that behavior really changes whether or not it is something that everyone is going to know or not. 'Cause, I mean, you can even say, "I'm okay with people having sex, I don't care about it," and you don't ever have to yourself, you don't ever really have to get into that situation. And again, you could say, "I wouldn't mind if one of my friends was pregnant," and you might respond totally differently because you would have to deal with that in a more public setting.

Claudia's comment clearly connects the ways that public knowledge about sexual behavior, in this case through a pregnancy, could impact the ways that teens thought about and acted in regards to sex. For these college-bound virgins, one of the most significant risks of having sex was the sanctioning that would occur if other people found out. This fear of negative sanctions is evidence that there *was* a group-level age norm at work, even though these teens viewed their decision to abstain from sex as made at the individual level and uninfluenced by others.

A minority of virgins in our sample described their lack of readiness for sex as determined in large part by their religious conviction and moral opposition to sex before marriage. This was especially the case for teen boys who remained virgins. For example, Aaron (male, virgin) was very involved with his local Christian youth group and said that he remained a virgin during high school because "before marriage, abstinence was the only option." Similarly, Adrian (male, virgin) said that he abstained from sex during high school because of "personal beliefs and fears," combining his belief in marriage as the appropriate context for sex with fears of an unplanned pregnancy. When asked if his personal beliefs were primarily religious, Adrian

said, “I would say more religious but not completely. Like, I was brought up religious but I’m sure I had a weight on that... but if I wasn’t religious in high school, like if I stopped being religious, I don’t think that I would necessarily change.” Thus, although Adrian attributes the origin of his personal belief in abstinence to religious conviction, he has now internalized this belief as a subjective norm in much the same way as the virgins who described readiness for sex at the individual level.

Teens did acknowledge that these individual-level decisions were not made in a vacuum. College-bound virgins especially acknowledged their reliance on close friends who, through their own virginity, confirmed and reinforced their choice to remain virgins (see Figure 1). Haylie (female, virgin) said, “My decision to not have sex was more based around *myself* not being ready and not being in serious relationships in high school, and then my friends also not having sex.” When asked whether teens were influenced by their friends’ decisions not to have sex, Logan (male, virgin), said, “I’m sure that played a part, but at the end of the day, our decision was our decision.” This is a key aspect of the way that college-bound virgins in our study talked about their decisions about sex: They discussed readiness for sex as an individual-level process, attributing their thinking about readiness for sex only *secondarily* to interactional-level group norms about sex. These group norms were not the shared norms of members of their peer networks, who were likely to be sexually active, but rather, of their close friends, who, like themselves, were usually virgins. Violet (female, virgin) reflected on this:

I actually got really lucky. We were very, not to say this is better than any other way, but we were all virgins long, far into high school, and I knew girls who were having sex when they were thirteen but they weren’t close friends of mine, they were just people I knew. So, the people I surrounded myself with were not, didn’t feel that pressure at all.

Aaron (male, virgin) also differentiated between the sexual norms and behaviors of close friends and his wider peer network:

I mean as a high schooler, [sex] was something that was kind of like... I wouldn't say the forbidden fruit type of deal, but it was just something that was really separated, you know? I had one friend

who played football and he would kind of switch between our group and the football players, and the stories he would tell, and the things that they did, just like worlds apart, you know?

Aaron's comment demonstrates the differences in sexual behavior between his close friends, who were virgins, and members of his broader peer network who had quite different sexual experiences. These comments highlight the ways that college-bound virgins considered their close friends' sexual experience in reinforcing the choice that they had made to abstain from sex. These teens depicted their close friends as buffers against the sexual peer pressure that other teens (in other friend groups) experienced, but that close friends were not referenced as influential in the actual decision-making process to avoid sex. Close friends' sexual norms were secondary to individualized subjective age norms about the appropriate time for sex in these college-bound virgins' decisions about sex. This process could conceivably work in the opposite direction; that is, these teens may have decided to remain abstinent during high school and then chosen a group of friends who supported their beliefs. However, we do not have the data to address this issue.

These results demonstrate that college-bound virgins in our study were highly likely to talk about readiness for sex as an individual-level process that was secondarily influenced by outside factors like close friends. At the same time, though, many of their decisions were influenced by the threat of interpersonal sanctions, which indicates the existence of an unacknowledged group-level age norm. These teens had internalized a set of age norms to the extent that they saw these norms as individualized "cognitive maps" guiding their behavior and perceived choices (Settersten, 2003). These individualized understandings, in turn, caused them to view the choice to have sex as based on their own practical, moral, and religious attitudes and experiences, rather than on larger group age norms. If these teens had viewed their choice as based on an age norm about the appropriate timing of sex, they might have been more likely to have had sex during high school, since most of their peers were sexually active by the end of high school. Instead, their reasoning is closely related to their perceptions of their parents' norms about teen sex. We discuss parental norms in greater detail below, but first we focus on sexually experienced teens' age norms and teens' peer communication about sex.

#### 4.2 Age Norms among Sexually Experienced Teens: Being Normal

Unlike the college-bound virgins, sexually experienced teens in our study talked explicitly about the influence of a group age norm that prescribed sex during high school. Compared to virgins, these teens relied more explicitly on their close friends' sexual norms and behaviors as guides for appropriate behavior; thus, many sexually experienced teens talked about having sex in high school as part of "being normal." Sex was described as a normal part of teenage life and as a natural part of intimate relationships. Relying on their close friends' as markers for what was normal, these teens felt more comfortable having sex because they knew that others had already taken that step and had faced few or no visible negative consequences (see Figure 1). Kara (female, sexually experienced), the first of her friends to have sex, reflected on how her peers' views of her behavior changed as sex became normalized throughout high school:

I mean, by the time I was a senior in high school, well, it changed through high school. When we started like freshman, sophomore year it was, when people started having sex, it was less accepted and I remember when I lost my virginity when I was 16 there were a lot of girls that looked down on me because I was not a virgin anymore, but by the time we were seniors in high school and we were 18, they were all having sex and they were having sex with way more guys, way more partners than I was *ever* and their views on it had completely changed.

Helena (female, virgin) also talked about the normalization of sex during high school:

I guess, like, for most of high school people thought that there wasn't, like most people weren't having sex, but as we got into, like, our senior year and stuff it was more like, you know, like someone, if people were having sex it wasn't as surprising anymore.

When asked if his peers were sexually active during high school, John (male, sexually experienced) said, "I mean, in the beginning years of high school, no; towards the end, you know, junior and senior year, more definitely did."

Some sexually experienced teens acknowledged explicitly that they relied on their close friends' experiences as normative guides for their own behavior. For example, Kaitlyn (female, sexually experienced) said: "Once their friends have sex and start experimenting it starts to be okay. I mean, once everyone is

doing it, you think it is okay. You start to think, everyone is doing it, so why am I not doing it?” Kaitlyn’s comment demonstrates how sexually experienced teens were often aware of their close friends’ behaviors and used these as markers for whether or not they were on a normal path. Carter (male, sexually experienced) said that in his high school, sex “was promoted more so than it was frowned upon.” And, Gavin (male, sexually experienced) said that during high school he thought, “Everyone’s having sex; I should probably go get some sex.” These quotes demonstrate that sexually experienced teens were aware of the role of peers’ behaviors and attitudes about sex during high school and that these norms were encouraging of sex during high school, especially for upper-class students. In other words, these teens acknowledged that a group-level age norm was guiding their behavior. They also point to a gender difference in norms, with sex encouraged for some boys (though as seen above, this was not the case in other male participants’ social contexts).

Some sexually experienced college-bound teens normalized their and their close friends’ sexual behavior by focusing on the *context* of sex. In these instances, sex was viewed as normal in an intimate relationship. Kaitlyn (female, sexually experienced) said, “Sex was a really common thing among all of my high school friends. I mean, it wasn’t anything that people put too much thought about. People were doing it, mostly in relationships.” Dylan (male, sexually experienced) said that sex was “always in a relationship.”

Like college-bound virgins, sexually active teens relied more heavily on their close friends as markers of sexual acceptability than on their wider peer network; however, unlike for virgins, these teens’ close friends’ behaviors were in accordance with most of their peers. Therefore, sexually experienced teens were less likely to talk about sanctions for sexual behavior, even when they acknowledged that not all of their peers were sexually active. For instance, Isabella (female, sexually experienced) talked about the normalization of sex within her friend group, while at the same time recognizing that other teens in her extended peer network were not having sex:

A lot of my friends or peers were sexually active, but there were definitely some groups of people that were not sexually active. A lot of my close friends, or people that I hung out with, most were sexually active by the time we were ... I think starting 16 to 18. I don't think there was anybody I

really know of that still was still a virgin. But there were some people, like in my theater troupe, that had not begun to be sexually active yet.

College-bound sexually experienced teens used the knowledge of their close friends' sexual behaviors in deciding on the appropriate timing of sex. Because many of their close friends (and peers) were sexually active, these teens viewed sexual behavior during high school as appropriate, especially if it occurred within a relationship. Although there were some gender differences and some boys were more explicitly encouraged to have sex than girls, the process through which these teens decided whether to have sex was similar. College-bound sexually experienced teens gave weight to their close friends' sexual norms and experiences when deciding about whether to have sex and made this explicit in the interviews. In the next section, we discuss how sexual norms among close friends and peers were communicated.

#### *4.3 Close Friends' and Peers' Communication about Sex*

Roughly equal proportions of virgins and sexually experienced college-bound teens in our sample reported that their peer network was largely silent about sex. For example, Charles (male, sexually experienced) said the belief about sex was that you should “keep that behind closed doors.” And Helena (female, virgin) said, “No one really talked about it.” Despite this similarity, we also found important differences in how college-bound virgins and sexually experienced teens talked about sex with close friends, in particular. Virgins were more likely to say that talking about sex with close friends was taboo, while sexually experienced teens more often reported that their close friends talked openly about sex. For example, Aaron (male, virgin) said that among his close friends, sex was viewed as “essentially a bad thing. Or at least something that was taboo or shouldn't be talked about or ... or that [we] definitely shouldn't be involved in at that time.” Camryn (female, virgin) also talked about silence among close friends: “We never really talked about that, like we didn't. I mean, I didn't really know of any of my friends who were having sex. Like I said, it was still, like that was all really private.” Ella (female, virgin) also indicated silence around the issue of sex when she said that she thought everyone around her was having sex: “I thought I was the only person who wasn't [having sex], but it turns out a lot of people actually weren't either.” This silence about sex among close friends is likely related to these teens' fears of norm violation

and sanctioning —that public knowledge of one’s sexual behavior could be damaging to one’s reputation, as we discussed above. Talking about sex might open the door to others’ finding out; thus it was much safer to avoid the topic altogether.

On the other hand, sexually experienced teens were much more likely than virgins to report that they talked about sex with their close friends, even if the topic was avoided in their larger peer network; however, talk about sex in this group tended to differ by gender with males reporting more frequent conversations about sex with their close friends. For example, Dylan (male, sexually experienced) said: “People only talk about that stuff with their best friend, people who you really trusted not to tell.” Finn (male, sexually experienced) agreed that teens would probably “tell a couple of close friends” about sex. This contradicts other research on masculinity and communication about sexual experience. On the other hand, Veronica (female, sexually experienced) said that her friends were more likely to talk about sex “with other girls who were afraid they were pregnant or not getting their period or something like that.” We find that there were differences between virgins and sexually experienced teens in the likelihood of talking about sex with close friends, and these differences are likely related to the threat of sanctions feared by virgins in our study. However, as we discuss below, both sets of teens were also aware of parental objections to teen sex, which probably resulted in discussions about sex among sexually experienced teens being limited to trustworthy friends. There are also gender differences in communication with close friends among sexually experienced teens, which may indicate that teen girls are faced with stricter norms and sanctions about sex, in general, which would limit their talk about sex even with their closest friends. Previous research has shown that young women’s sexual behavior may be constrained by fear of stigma (E.g. Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Tolman, 1994), and our findings go a step further because the fear of stigma is impacting teen girls’ communication about sex, even with close friends. However, in the case of a crisis, such as a late period or suspected pregnancy, some teen girls will break the barrier of silence and talk to their close friends about sex. Gaining support from friends in crisis situations can mean that girls are able to avoid talking about these issues with their parents (see below).

#### *4.4 Parents' Norms about Sex: Moral and Practical Objections*

College-bound teens in our study recognized the importance of parental norms about sex in their decisions about sex. Parental norms were particularly influential in virgins' behavior as demonstrated by their internalization of a norm against sex, while the sexual experiences of close friends and peers had greater influence on sexually experienced teens' behavior. Yet, college-bound virgins and sexually experienced teens alike overwhelmingly reported that parents disapproved of sex during high school. This disapproval had strong implications for teens' behaviors as teens worked hard to avoid negative sanctions from parents. Parents' objections to teen sex largely reflected either a moral or a practical basis (see Figure 1). This split in parental objections to sex is similar to what Bearman and Brückner (2001) reported in their study of virginity pledgers. They argued that critics of virginity pledges were more concerned with the concrete consequences of teen sex, such as sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, while pledge supporters were more likely to stress the "moral systems" that justified saying no to sex (Bearman & Brückner, 2001, p. 861). We find that Bearman and Brückner's pledge supporters are akin to the moralizing parents of college-bound virgins, while the pledge critics are similar to practical objections of parents of some sexually experienced teens and some virgins in our study. Dylan (male, sexually experienced) directly addressed the different motivations behind parental objections to teen sex that were prevalent in our sample:

From the parent's perspective it varied really diversely. I feel like my parents told me "We understand that you're going to do this but keep your consequences." But other parents' talks were like, "You don't do this, this is like wrong, religiously, morally. Like if you did this it would completely destroy our family," type of thing. So, it really varied from parents.

Moral objections to teen sex were often associated with religious beliefs that prescribed abstinence until marriage (or at least adulthood). For example, Camryn (female, virgin) said:

So many of the families that I grew up with were really religious, and so they believed in abstinence only and that was it. So, I mean, there was no other option other than abstinence and if you deviated from that, then you were considered a deviant.

Similarly, Aaron (male, virgin) said according to the way he was raised: "Before marriage, abstinence was the

only option.” Moral objections to teen sex were more common among parents of virgins, and in many cases, these values were shared by the teens themselves. For example, when asked why virgins avoided sex, Parker (male, virgin) said, “I believe it’s the morals that their parents instill in them as they grow up.” Similarly, Bethany (female, virgin) remarked on the values instilled in her and her close friends by their parents:

Well I think my group of friends, we all came from parents who taught us pretty much the same values: to respect your body, or respect yourself and be careful, and I am pretty sure we were all taught not to have sex, so I think we all came into it with the same values that we were taught so we viewed it in pretty much the same way.

Here Bethany uniquely combined moral and practical objections to sex in her use of the rhetoric of “being careful.” We return to this in more detail below and discuss how “being careful” was more often used by parents who had practical objections to teen sex. Isabella (female, sexually experienced) also argued that parents’ values were important in virgins’ postponing sex. She said that people waited “because they knew their family values, or what their family would think of them if they had [sex].” These teens demonstrated an understanding and commitment to their parents’ norms about sex in their own decision about whether to have sex during high school, and their focus on their families’ values indicates that they shared these moral concerns with their parents.

Other parents had *practical* objections to teen sex, which were evidenced by their focus on avoiding negative consequences, especially unintended pregnancy. For example, Alexis (female, virgin) said:

[My mother] really liked hypothetical situations in which really weird things happen. So like when we always, not always, but when we had those talks of adolescent-hood and stuff, then she would say things like “Yeah, and if you ever got pregnant then your dad and I would totally help you out, and if you wanted to get an abortion, okay, we would help you with that. But if you wanted [the baby] then you know, we would help you with that too, and it wouldn't be the end of the world or anything. But *here are ways to prevent it, and you should do those instead.*”

Similarly, Dylan (male, sexually experienced) said:

My family is actually probably a little different; we're really open about stuff, so the whole sex talk or whatever, it wasn't something that I felt was awkward or anything, and I went to private school 'til eighth grade so I learned about a lot of that in sex ed and stuff. But, as far as my parents, I mean, my parents were concerned. They just told us to be careful, like they know we're going to do what we're going to do, but to be careful and always think about the consequences of your actions, and so that really is what stuck in my head.

Parents with practical objections to teen sex were primarily concerned with their teens being responsible if they did have sex, although they were still opposed to teens having sex. Teens whose parents had practical objections to sex indicated that their parents were focused primarily on the avoidance of unintended pregnancy. Isaac (male, sexually experienced) reflected on this:

I knew those expectations of me, I knew how my community thought and my family thought, um, about those issues, so um, the goal was certainly not to get pregnant. Yeah, I mean uh, pregnancy, an unexpected pregnancy was, uh, not a good thing.

Additionally, Veronica (female, sexually experienced) said: "We were probably really careful because we were raised by our parents who taught us that it's better to have a kid once you're older." As shown here, most parents who had practical objections to teen sex reinforced the importance of responsibility in sex and avoiding unintended pregnancy, although they did not condone sexual activity among teens. Importantly, these parents were more likely to directly communicate about sex with their teen, while parents with moral objections to sex often remained silent.

#### *4.5 Parental Communication about Sex*

Different parental norms about sex were related to different levels of communication between parents and teens about sex. Parents with practical objections to teen sex were much more likely to address these issues directly, usually stressing responsibility and avoiding unintended pregnancy. In other words, these parents taught their teen to "be careful." Jessica (female, sexually experienced) said that although her parents were against her having sex, at the same time they "were realistic about it" and ultimately, she was careful because: "That's just how we were raised ... to use protection." Building on this, Patton (male, sexually experienced)

said:

I mean, I know that personally my parents had a pretty open dialogue with me about having safe sex way before the thought of me having sex was in consideration. I feel like most of my friends' parents were probably the same way because most of my friends had pretty good relationships, for the most part, with their parents in high school. So I think it's probably a combination of hopefully good parenting and understanding the consequences in our society of being a teen parent. Not that it's necessarily always a negative thing, but it just makes... it limits your choices and can make it a lot more difficult. So, I think that was probably what kids were talking about with their parents.

Isabella (female, sexually experienced) said, "It's never really been an option in my family to get pregnant early...I mean, we talked about it, but it was never really an option to have a child before I completed other things." She went on to say that she and her parents "talked more about, like, contraceptives and preventative sexual education talks" and that her parents stressed the importance of completing her education and "getting yourself prepared to have a family." As demonstrated here, many parents who had practical objections to teen sex voiced those objections to their teen and stressed the importance of being careful and responsible and avoiding an unintended pregnancy if they were sexually active.

In contrast, virgins whose parents were morally opposed to teen sex often reported that their parents were silent about these issues. For example, Alana (female, virgin) said that sex was a topic that "you don't see ... you don't talk about it" with parents. Parker (male, virgin) said that his parents "would never talk about it with me." Given this, how did virgins know how their parents felt about sex? Answers to this question were typically vague. Noelle, (female, virgin) said that her parents' moral objections to sex were "just kind of understood" while Parker (male, virgin) said that he knew his parents were against teen sex "by the way I was brought up." Other college-bound virgins, like Helena and Bethany agreed that their parents were silent on this issue, yet because of their knowledge of their parents' morals and values, they knew that their parents were morally opposed to teen sex.

However, college-bound virgins' parents were not the only silent ones on this issue. Some college-bound sexually experienced teens also reported that their parents were silent on the issue of teen sex. For

example, John (male, sexually experienced) said although he “know[s] my parents and how they would react,” which would be “not positively,” they had never talked about sexual issues. Similarly, Nadia (female, sexually experienced) said that although her mother, who was a nurse, never talked directly to her about sex, “She’ll make little comments on the side,” indicating that she did not approve of teenage sex that might end in pregnancy. Although some parents of college-bound teens were similar in their silence about teen sex, they differed in their objection to teen sex. Most virgins whose parents were silent implicitly expressed moral objections to sex through a shared understanding of their family’s values, as described above, while sexually experienced teens’ parents who were silent about sex implicitly expressed practical objections to sex, focusing on the potential results of unprotected sex, especially unintended pregnancy. For example, Mariah (female, sexually experienced) said that although “no one really talked to me about [sex] ... no one ever,” she knew that if she got pregnant, her mother would “take care of [the child], or we’d put it up for adoption.” Similarly, Spencer (male, sexually experienced) said that his parents “never talked specifically” about sex, his parents “stressed responsibility.” Just like the parents of college-bound teens who *did* talk with their teen about sex, these parents emphasized practicality rather than moral objections to teen sex.

Interestingly, many college-bound teen girls accommodated their parents’ practical objections to teen sex by accessing birth control pills for non-sex reasons. This strategy enabled parents and teens to avoid discussing sex directly while being confident that the girl was protected from unintended pregnancy, the main concern of parents who had practical objections to teen sex. For example, Sydney (female, sexually experienced) said:

A lot of the girls I knew were already on birth control. I was put on birth control when I was 18. I mean, most of the girls I knew were on it not just for sexual reasons but just because it was cool, I guess, to have regular periods. A lot of people were doing that.

Similarly, Nadia (female, sexually experienced) said:

When I wanted to get on birth control or something, I told my parents it wasn’t for that reason, like for sex. It was just to, like, get more regular on my period or whatever. And, it wasn’t really

something that I would, like, directly talk to my parents about ... and I think that was the same with my friends too.

Although not on birth control himself, Henry (male, sexually experienced) said: "Some girls were on birth control, but they might say it is so that it makes their periods lighter. That way, they didn't have to address it [with their parents]." Birth control for non-sex reasons was not only prevalent among sexually experienced teens in our sample. College-bound virgins also reported that they and their close friends utilized birth control for non-sex reasons. For example, Noelle, (female, virgin) said: "A lot of the girls were on the pill. People would start early for like cramps or to clear their face so they didn't have to have the conversation with their parents if they're already on the pill." And, Bethany (female, virgin), said, "I know, like, I was on the pill since eighth grade, but not because I was having sex, just for health reasons." Similar to sexually experienced teens, virgins described proactively going on the pill for non-sex reasons, many explicitly to avoid having to discuss sex with their parents. In this way, accessing birth control for non-sex reasons was an effective way to maintain silence between parents and teens and at the same time, parents with practical objections to sex could be assured that their daughter was "being careful," whether or not she was sexually active.

Silence was also relevant for sexually experienced college-bound teens because they actively hid their sexual activity from parents. Finn (male, sexually experienced) said that teens worked to hide their behavior from parents, and as a result, "parents didn't know anything. Parents were always really out of the loop." And, Ella (female, virgin) said: "I know a lot of kids whose parents were really strict, but that just meant they'd have to try that much harder to sneak out and have sex with their boyfriend." Henry (male, sexually experienced) agreed that a lot of people were "[unwilling] to address it with their parents." Despite knowledge of their parents' objections to teen sex, sexually experienced teens continued to have sex. The fact that they worked to hide this behavior from their parents indicates that they were aware of their parents' norm against sex, but that their close friends' sexual norms and behaviors were more important influences on their own sexual behavior. Parent norms against sex were important to these teens in that they encouraged that they hide their behavior and maintain silence with their parents about these issues.

Isabella (female, sexually experienced) addressed this issue:

I: So, do you think that the family's opinion of teen sex or the peers of teen sex had more influence?

R: Probably the peers overall. I mean, a lot of people weren't even really talking to their families about it. I think it totally depends on the family also, but the family's opinion would overall be that ... hoping that teenagers would be not sexually active until a little bit later in life, but still providing information, knowing that most teens don't wait anymore, like that long. So, I think for the most part that families would play a small role, but definitely peers would have more of an impact on the teen's decision.

This strategy permitted sexually experienced teens to negotiate the opposing expectations of friends and parents, by conforming to peer norms behaviorally but avoiding public evidence of their nonconformity to parental norms.

## **5. Discussion**

These results demonstrate a complex relationship between college-bound teens' sexual norms and those of their parents, peers, and close friends. Despite vastly similar contexts in which most peers are sexually active and most parents are opposed to teen sexual activity, our evidence from in-depth interviews with 47 young women and men suggests that college-bound virgins and sexually experienced teens view, understand, and talk about sex differently during high school. These differences are related to a variety of factors, including norms related to age, parental objections to teen sex, and sexual norms among close friends (see Figure 1). College-bound virgins in our study subjectively understand their decision to abstain from sex during high school as based primarily on an individual-level decision about sexual readiness, even as they acknowledge the importance of avoiding the risks of sex, including pregnancy and negative sanctions. Virgins describe sexual readiness as influenced by chronological age, emotional maturity, the risks associated with sex, and for many their parents' views about sex. Many of these teens talk about avoiding sex because of the potential for negative sanctions if others were to find out, and their close friends are largely silent about sex. Although virgins do not acknowledge a group-level age norm, the importance of sanctions to these teens' behavior

demonstrates the existence of a classic age norm proscribing sex. However, these teens fail to explicitly acknowledge the existence of that norm and instead attribute their behavior to an individual-level choice to remain a virgin, a choice that is at times influenced by their close friends and parental values. Ironically, because these teens view sexual readiness at the individual level, they can simply choose to have sex if and when they feel they are ready. These results provide a nuanced picture of common understandings of social norms which goes beyond traditional conceptualizations that emphasize the importance of sanctions over and above individual-level conceptualizations of normative influences on behavior. By viewing the role of social norms in behaviors in this way, we can see that it is not only sanctioning that influences behavior, but also the ways in which individuals perceive the existence and role of social norms in behavioral choices.

In contrast, college-bound sexually experienced teens view sex during high school as governed by a group age norm prescribing sex during high school as normal. These teens look to their close friends' (and often peers') sexual experiences to gauge the right time for sex. Based on close friends' and peers' sexual experiences during high school, these teens often conclude that high school is the appropriate time to have sex (especially if it occurs in a relationship). Sexually experienced teens are likely to have close friends who are also sexually active, and these teens are more likely than virgins to talk about sex with their close friends, which is especially the case for teen boys. Although previous research has found that boys boast about and exaggerate their sexual experience to reinforce their masculinity (Pascoe, 2007), these reports were scarce in our data. It is possible that this is because our sample is comprised exclusively of college-bound, primarily white teens who may instead engage in different strategies for managing their masculinity (E.g. Morris, 2008; Pike, 1996; Wilkins, 2008; Willis, 1981). Thus, teen girls may face more sanctions in regards to talking openly about teen sex; however, sexually experienced teens did not base their sexual activity on avoiding sanctions from peers. The lack of peer sanctions associated with remaining a virgin (especially for teen girls) indicates that while these teens base their behavior on a statistical age norm in terms of their close friends and peers being sexually active, it is not a social norm because violators are not sanctioned. These findings complicate a number of assumptions in the gender literature that emphasize the importance of sanctioning for teens' sexual behavior. Interestingly, although virgins emphasized negative sanctions in their calculus of the risks of

sexual behavior – such as being labeled a slut for teen girls – sexually experienced teens were less concerned with negative sanctioning from peers. This may be because their sexual behavior matched that of close friends and their larger peer networks. The assumption that teens base their sexual behavior in part on the threat of negative sanctions deserves consideration as our findings indicate that this may vary by teens' level of sexual activity.

We also find that parents are significant influences in college-bound teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex. For virgins especially, parental moral objections to teen sex are important influences in these teens' sexual behaviors. In fact, many virgins expressed moral reservations about teen sex, indicating that they share their parents' objections to sex. Our evidence shows that many parents are silent on the issue of sex, especially when they have moral objections to teen sex. Parents who discuss sex openly with their teen usually talk about "being careful," and this is the case for both virgins and sexually experienced teens. Although silence is often associated with parents' moral objections to sex, it plays many other roles in sexual communication between parents and teens. In some cases, teen girls access birth control for non-sex reasons to preempt the need for communication about sex with their parents. Sexually experienced college-bound teens also contribute to silence about sex with parents by hiding their sexual activity. In these situations, communication between sexually experienced teens and their parents is effectively ruled out as these teens either already have the tools to be careful (if they are on birth control) or do not let their parents know that they are having sex and need knowledge about being careful.

Providing access to birth control to teen girls for non-sex reasons is useful for parents with practical objections to sex, as these parents have provided their teen with the tools to be careful if they choose to be sexually active, while at the same time they are able to avoid direct and perhaps uncomfortable discussions with their daughter about sex. Parents with moral objections to sex are also negotiating a paradox in which they want their teen to be safe but do not want to talk openly with their teen about sex because of the moral implications. Thus, parents are exercising agency, too. Both sets of parents may want to voice their objections to teen sexual behavior at an age when their teen is statistically likely to start having sex; however, moral objections or discomfort may constrain them from doing so. Therefore, many parents' chosen

solution is to provide access to birth control for their teen daughters for non-sex reasons in order to protect them from unplanned pregnancy and to effectively avoid discussing sex with their teen. However, as noted below, although this strategy protects teen girls from pregnancy, birth control does not protect against sexually transmitted infections. Additionally, effective use of this form of birth control (e.g., consistently taking pills on time) is necessary for protection from pregnancy, which may be a struggle for some teens.

These results demonstrate the importance of close friends in teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex. The majority of our respondents estimate that most of their peers were sexually active before the end of high school. Why do virgins and sexually experienced teens who experience very similar contexts end up behaving so differently in terms of sex? We find that close friends are often the greater influence on teens' actual sexual behavior when parents' and teens' norms do not match up. We argue that for some virgins, especially those whose parents are not morally opposed to sex, close friends provide a link in explaining why these teens maintain their virginity while the majority of their peers do not. Sexually experienced teens also recognize the importance of close friends (and peers) in their decisions about sex, albeit in a much more explicit way. For these teens, close friends' sexual behaviors are the marker by which normal sexual behavior is measured. Watching their close friends have sex and avoid negative consequences (or at least visible ones) encourages these teens to expect that high school is the appropriate time to have sex. These teens learn to "be careful" from their parents and their close friends, in that parents implicitly or explicitly emphasize responsibility and close friends engage in responsible, careful sexual behavior as demonstrated through the lack of visible consequences, such as pregnancy.

Significantly, virgins' and sexually experienced teens' close friends are likely to be similar to themselves in their level of sexual experience during high school, even though both groups report that most of their peers are sexually active. This is similar to Giordano's (1995) evidence that there are important differences between close friends and larger peer networks. In our study, virgins' close friends are more likely to view sex between teens negatively and are less likely than sexually experienced teens to talk openly about sex with close friends. Previous research has shown that teens exercise considerable agency in their choice of close friends throughout high school by choosing people who will support the goals they have and

by distancing peers with different goals and behaviors (Schneider & Stevenson, 2000). For college-bound virgins, surrounding oneself with like-minded friends may provide the push that some need to remain virgins during high school, thereby avoiding potential negative consequences like unintended pregnancy and sanctioning from peers. This helps us understand how norms can coexist with agency, as teens are agentially choosing close friends (and therefore their normative contexts) based on their behaviors and essentially turning peer pressure on its head. But they are doing it by drawing on a discourse of individualism that has important consequences.

The picture we present here is not clear cut for either group of college-bound teens in our study, and all teens in either category do not necessarily fit neatly into one category or the other. But we do find important similarities in the ways that college-bound teens understand, view, and talk about sex during high school based on whether they were sexually experienced or remained virgins. This study supports considering multiple levels of influence on behavior. We acknowledge that there are other important factors that influence these and other college-bound teens' decisions about whether and when to have sex, especially structural factors such as religion and race, and contextual variables such as neighborhoods and schools.

Our results also underscore the importance of considering the interactive influence of parents, close friends, and peer networks in college-bound teens' sexual behavior during high school. The teens in our study clearly understand their decisions about sex as influenced by each of these significant others, albeit at different stages in the decision-making process and in different ways. These college-bound teens exercise considerable agency in negotiating between several different normative belief systems about teen sex, some of which are complementary and most of which are competing. That these teens are able to make sense out of these different belief systems and to utilize them in their decisions about whether and when to have sex demonstrates substantial levels of agency. These results are important to the teen-parent sexual communication literature because our results show that much silence around sex is based on a fear of parental knowledge about teens' sexual activity. Thus, we should continue to study sexual initiation because of the risks for negative consequences and because of its importance for adolescent and young adult sexual trajectories; however, we should also focus on the direction of information flow and how that flow does or

does not happen based on who teens are talking to about their sexual behavior.

Although we offer several contributions, there are limitations to our study. First, our data are drawn from teen boys and girls who were graduated from high school and currently attending college. Therefore, these results may not be generalizable to the larger population of teen boys and girls, including those who drop out of high school or do not go on to college. Although we include much regional variation in high schools in our sample, our respondents may not be typical of the students in their high school or region. Additionally, because our sample is drawn from one western university, it may be biased towards students who chose that university for one reason or another. Finally, we are unable to explore racial/ethnic variation in processes related to norms about teen sex in this primarily White sample.

Our results provide an impetus for future research with representative quantitative data to verify the relationships and influences uncovered here among a larger sample of U.S. teens. Our findings may be useful in several ways for policy experts and quantitative researchers focused on sexual behavior in this important phase of the life course. First, we demonstrate the importance of parents, peers, and close friends in college-bound teens' decisions about sexual behavior. It is important not to assume that close friend effects and peer effects are the same thing. Nationally representative surveys such as Add Health can differentiate between these two sets of influences. Second, parental communication about sex is related to teens' delayed sexual initiation and to an increase in birth control and condom use among sexually experienced teens (Aspy, et al., 2007; Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). In this study of higher SES college-bound teens, we find that the *content* of communication with parents is very different for virgins and sexually experienced teens.

Additionally, when they talk directly about sex, most parents in our study focus on avoiding pregnancy: Putting daughters on the pill protects against pregnancy but not STIs, so this may be a particularly high-risk group for STIs if condom use is not consistent. Encouraging parents of higher-SES youth to talk directly about sex with their teen and to provide practical information about contraceptive use, including condoms, is likely to contribute to a reduction in the risk of STIs among teen girls and boys. Recent research has demonstrated that parents more often talk to teen girls than boys about sex, especially during the early years of high school (Martinez, et al., 2010). Our results show that parents are influential in their teen's decision

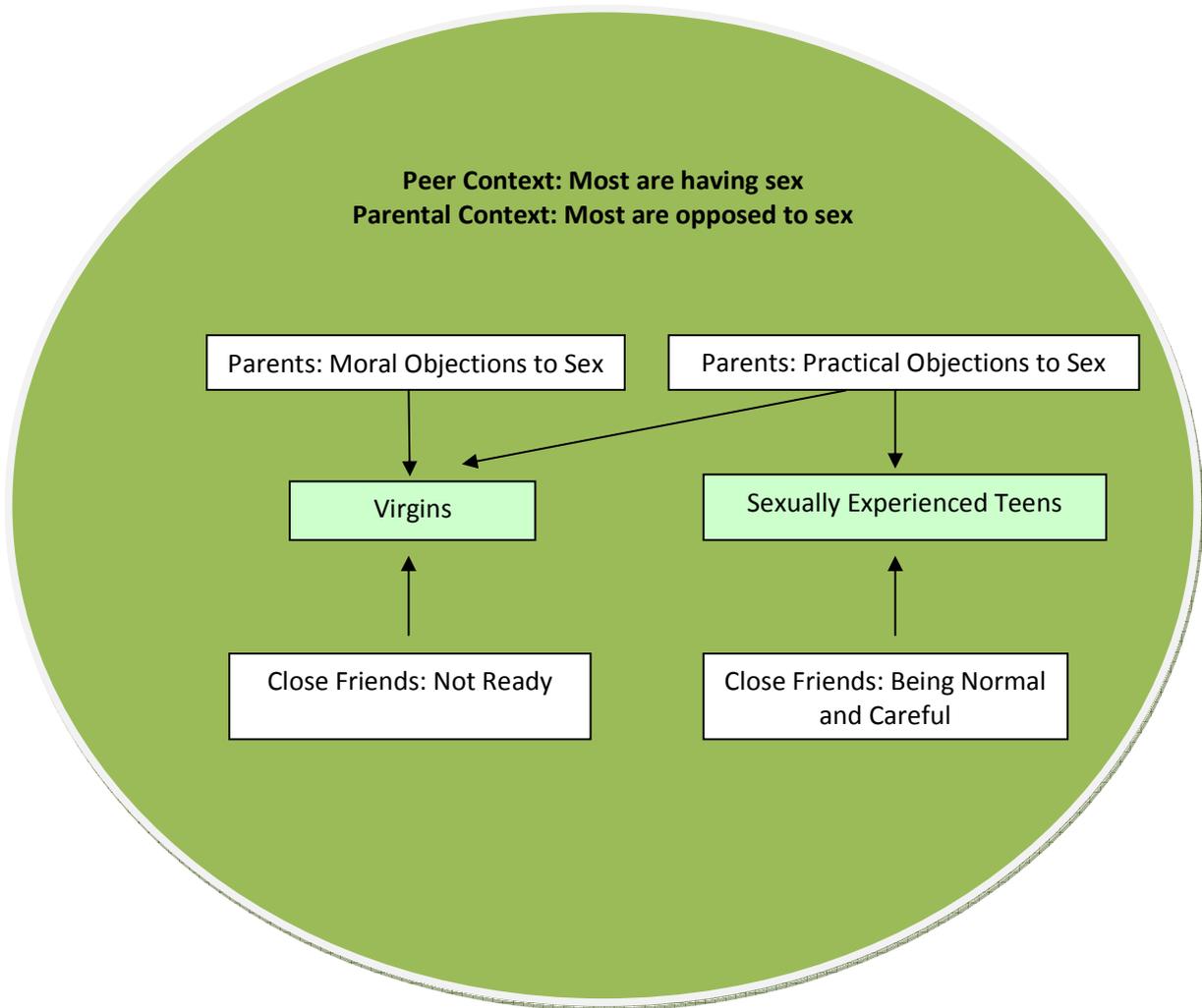
about whether and when to have sex, and thus, early conversations about sex with teen boys and girls are important and may thwart the silence that often results among sexually experienced teens and virgins and their parents. Finally, our study demonstrates that parents can be influential in teens' sexual behaviors throughout high school, regardless of whether they are morally or practically opposed to teen sex. Teens actively choose close friends who share their values and goals. Even when they are opposed to their teen having sex, parents can still encourage healthy sexual behavior among teens by talking with them directly and by providing them with accurate information about being careful if they choose to have sex.

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**Figure 1**

Normative contexts of college-bound teens' decisions about the transition to sex.



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