Assessing Attitudes and Knowledge Toward Sexual Intercourse of Adolescent Students

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Abstract

Effective sexual education is important for adolescent students (Abraham, Henderson, & Der, 2004). A comprehensive sexual education program provides students with information about safe sexual practices that can help students make more intelligent choices when becoming sexually active (Wisnieski, 2013). Assessing the knowledge and attitudes of students may increase their awareness of risks and knowledge about sexual activity while providing educators with an understanding of what does and does not need to be taught to students. This article presents an overview of current research associated with adolescent sex education, and provides an explanation of how the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A) can be used to measure students’ knowledge and attitudes toward sexual intercourse. Using such a measure might serve to improve the knowledge and attitudes of adolescent students towards sexual intercourse and provide an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions.

Introduction

The number of teens who are sexually active continues to increase. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) conducted in 2011, 51% of high school students in Oklahoma were sexually active and 43% did not use a condom during their last sexual intercourse. Sex education in schools is needed so that students are knowledgeable about the risks of being sexually active at a young age. For example, sexually transmitted disease risks increase with the number of partners a person has (Finer, Darroch, & Singh, 1999). This is concerning given that 17% of sexually active youth in Oklahoma reported having had sexual intercourse with four or more persons (YRBS, 2011). Such a statistic lends credence to the suggestion that further sexual knowledge is needed and students should become aware of the risks associated with sexual intercourse.

Effective education should not only provide students with the risks associated with sexual intercourse, but provide education that encourages greater knowledge about sex in general. For example, students can be made aware that romance and sexual intercourse need not be synonymous, and that many young people regret early sexual experiences (Abraham, Henderson, & Der, 2004). The knowledge of other options may lead to a decrease in unwanted sexual intercourse and a decrease of students participating in sexual activities at a young age.

Another alternative that needs to be presented to students is the use of condoms. The most effective way to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unwanted pregnancy in sexually active adolescents is through the use of condoms (Christ, Raszka, & Dillon, 1998). Comprehensive sexual education programs that include condom use instruction have been shown to delay sexual intercourse and increase the chance that students who are sexually active will use a condom the next time they engage in sexual intercourse (Eisenberg, Bernat, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2009).

Attitudes toward sexual intercourse in adolescents can be influenced by a myriad of
personal and situational factors. Exposure to different types of media can impact their expectations, perceptions, and attitudes toward sexual intercourse (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). According to Bleakly and colleagues, the more one believes that the outcome of a decision will be positive the more likely that person will participate in the activity. Thus, if a student believes that participation is necessary or feels influenced by significant others to have sexual intercourse, and if they perceive that other students their age are participating, the more likely that student will have sex. When exposed to sexual media content, an adolescent’s sexual behavior increases by creating social pressures to have sexual intercourse. Furthermore, students’ attitudes show that if they believe other peers are having sex, their intent to have sex will increase (Bleakly et al., 2011). It becomes important, therefore, to provide education for those who might be encouraged to participate in sexual intercourse to ensure that they are making wise decisions.

Why Assess Attitude Towards Sexual Intercourse?

The increase in sexual activity among adolescents and the changing attitudes toward sexual intercourse is a concern that should be addressed through a comprehensive sexual education curriculum in schools (Abraham et al., 2004). Students participating in abstinence-only programs are more likely to view consequences from sexual activity as an accident, and these programs have shown to be less effective than abstinence-based programs that include appropriate contraceptive teaching (Little, Henderson, Peterson, & Stonecipher, 2010). Fifteen million STDs are contracted annually in the United States, (St. Lawrence et al., 2002), and according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, over 130,000 teenage girls were pregnant in 2011. Therefore, it is important that schools provide an age-appropriate and comprehensive sexual education curriculum. However, having effective curricula and lesson content requires teachers to better understand students’ knowledge and attitudes prior to teaching. Doing so allows lessons to be tailored to address inadequate knowledge and/or attitudes which could be considered risky.

The Sexual Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A)

The Sexual Knowledge and Attitude Test for Adolescents (SKAT-A) is a survey that aids in assessing the knowledge and attitudes toward sexual activities. SKAT-A is developed for students between the ages of 12-18 and is a self-report questionnaire (Fullard, Lief, & Scheier, 2005). The attitude section of the test contains 40 statements that solicit the opinions of students’ attitudes toward sexual intercourse. It uses Likert-scale response where participants are provided with questions to which they must provide their opinion on a sliding scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree (Davis, 1998). Sample questions from the attitudes section of the test include: premarital sexual intercourse for young people is unacceptable to me and a person who catches a sexually transmitted (venereal) disease is probably getting exactly what he/she deserves. Scores are obtained for the attitude section of the SKAT-A by adding the responses to each of the 40 items.

The knowledge section consists of 40 questions that are in a true/false/not sure format. These questions cover topics including pregnancy/contraception, abstinence/sexual awareness, orgasm, masturbation, negative consequences of sex, and homosexuality (Fullard et al., 2005). Scores for knowledge are calculated by adding the total number of correct responses. Each correct answer earns one point and all incorrect or not sure responses do not receive any points (Davis, 1998).

Practical Use of SKAT-A in School Health Education

SKAT-A can be used as a pre- and post-test with an educational intervention to assess the students’ attitudes. Students can participate in interventions that discuss different aspects of sexual education. For example, they can be provided with information regarding sexually transmitted diseases, the dangers of having more than one sexual partner, teenage pregnancy, and the impact of having a child while still in school. Topics may also include contraception and different types of birth control, information regarding condoms, and the benefits and risks of their use. Information covering orgasms, masturbation, homosexuality, abstinence and sexual harassment will also be beneficial for the students to learn. Interventions should include both a presentation covering the material and a
discussion portion so that students may ask questions and be a part of the learning process. The two tests and interventions may be spread throughout the year to allow students to fully learn the material presented.

Conclusions

Sexual education in schools is an element of school curriculum that is often debated; however, the negative effects of STIs and pregnancy to the individual indicate a need to help students learn strategies for making safer decisions about sex (Wisnieski, 2013). It is needed to inform students of the consequences of becoming sexually active at a young age as well as understanding the benefits of abstinence or being safe if they should chose to participate in sexual activities. Sexual education can help students understand different components of sexual intercourse, so that they can make informed, knowledgeable decisions when thinking about becoming sexually active. The use of SKAT-A can provide health educators with a simple and effective measure of determining the knowledge and attitudes of students toward sexual intercourse prior to any education on the subject. Further, it can be used as a post-measure to determine whether students’ knowledge and attitudes have changed following any educational intervention.

References


