

Interfaculty Chair and Department of Public Health
Medical University of Lublin

HANNA SKÓRZYŃSKA, ANNA PACIAN,
LESZEK GROCHOWSKI

*Attitudes of young people towards problems connected
with human procreation*

In recent years the process of acceleration of biological puberty of youth can be observed in Europe as well as in Poland. It has a significant influence on current and future trends in human procreation. Among the most significant reasons for social and economic transformations of the family taking place currently, the following ones can be mentioned: unemployment, material impoverishment of the society, housing crisis and cultural transformations. What is evident is the erotization of culture and separating sexuality from mere purposes of procreation. Owing to modern methods of contraception eroticism that used to be subordinated to procreation of the family is now identified with self-realization. Moreover, diminishing social pressure concerning sexual freedom, virtually unlimited access to erotic literature and videotapes and decline of parental authority all influence the formation of attitudes of young people towards sex and erotica. The whole mass culture aimed at young people not only shapes their opinions on fashion, music and lifestyle but also on sexual relationships, while apparent promotion of sexuality treated instrumentally reduces this sphere of life to the level of physical activities and sensations (1). Thus many factors contribute to the changes in morality of this sphere of life as well as to the phenomenon of premature sexual initiation.

Sexual activity of youth before marriage is widespread nowadays. The data taken from sociological reports show that these statistics do not involve 1% of young people getting married, 2-3% of newly married couples in Poland (2).

Premature sexual activity is not a positive phenomenon as it is inseparably connected with reproductiveness. In Poland approximately 10% of youth under 15 has had sexual experiences. The percentage of pregnancies among girls under 16 in Poland is 0.8-3% (4). Premature maternity poses a threat to the health and life of a mother and a child. As follows from the data, in case of pregnancies under 15 the death rate of mothers is 60%

higher compared with mature women and the death rate of children is 2.5 times higher than that of children born by women above 20 (2).

Apart from this, premature maternity brings about numerous unfavourable changes in the lives of adolescent parents, both in the sphere of education and in everyday existence.

Among the consequences of negative sexual behaviours and early sexual initiation we should mention undesired pregnancies, incomplete families and disintegration of the family, social, economic and psychological problems as well as health consequences including the increased risk of neoplasm of the uterus neck, genitals infections and sexually transmitted diseases. From the point of view of the health promotion and preventive treatment premature sexual initiation is therefore treated as a threat to health (5).

OBJECTIVE

The major objective of the research was to get acquainted with opinions and attitudes of secondary school students concerning the issues connected with human procreation.

METHOD

The research instrument was the survey questionnaire that consisted of 23 questions, including 16 closed questions and 7 multiple-choice questions. The research was completely anonymous and carried out with the use of an auditorial method from December 1999 to February 2000. The survey that involved 300 respondents aged 15-19 was carried out in secondary schools i.e. comprehensive and technical schools in Lublin.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey involved 300 student participants including 165 girls (55%) and 135 boys (45%). The age of the subjects ranged from 15 to 19. The majority of the respondents (62.33%) live in cities while the remaining 37.67% come from rural areas. The aim of the initial questions was to determine the influence of the environment and family relationships on the formation of youth's attitudes towards the issues connected with human procreation. The family should constitute the basic environment for young man's psychosexual development. The large majority of the youth came from complete families (83.7%); the remaining respondents were brought up either by single parents (11.3%) or by grandparents (4%). The majority of the respondents, as many as 70.3%, defined their relations with parents as partnership, 11.7% – as strict discipline and 13% indicated total

laxity and lack of discipline in parent-child relationship. Few respondents, accounting for 5% of the total, mentioned complete lack of interest with their problems from the side of their parents. Although the majority of students declare positive relations with their parents the subject of human sexual life is seldom touched in their conversations with parents. Only 35.7% of young people talk with their parents about these matters. 11.3% would feel embarrassed to touch these issues in their conversations with adults. According to 21% of the respondents parents themselves are reluctant to take up the subject of sex. The research results prove that the first sources of information about sexual life are friends (33.3%) followed by youth magazines (28.7%). The participation of parents and school in sexual education is unsatisfactory. Peer groups seem to have more and more impact on shaping behaviours of young people; they also constitute the base for the subsequent realization of sexual activity. The pressure brought by colleagues has a strong influence on youth's attitudes but it is much smaller in the lives of young people who maintain good relations with their parents (2, 3).

Those who indicated their parents as the source of information about sex accounted for a small percentage (11.7%), whereas 18.7% mentioned school classes. These results prove that the educational function is being taken over by peer environment and mass media. In the opinions of the youth under the survey the leading role in conveying information about human sexual life is played by mass media (press, television, video films), while the role of the family in shaping attitudes towards human sexuality is insignificant.

Not all the respondents had sexual education classes at school. Out of 64% of the respondents who did not, the majority expressed the willingness to attend such classes. Nearly 20% of the students who took part in such classes regarded them as uninteresting and unnecessary. These statements are in accordance with other studies (6) and they distinctly show that school does not realize its educational role in the area of shaping youth's sexual attitudes.

What followed was the evaluation of young people's opinions about sexual activity. Information obtained from the students about the possibility and conditions of sexual initiation demonstrate considerable liberalization of attitudes. In the group under the survey 45.7% accept sexual activity provided there are emotional bonds between partners. A significantly smaller number of respondents, i.e. 11.3%, considered the fact of getting married to be the basic requirement for sexual initiation, while 22.7% of the students claimed that you can take up sexual activity whenever you wish. The consent for taking up sexual activity before getting married is commonly noticeable, although 87.7% of the respondents label themselves as believers.

An indispensable condition to get married according to the respondents is the feeling of love – 44.6%, followed by the feeling of security – 28% and the responsible partner – 14.9%. Only 8.0% of the students claimed that the factor necessary for marriage is the capability of earning for a living. A small percentage of 4.5% of the students considered pregnancy to be the reason to get married.

The answers of the youth to the questions concerning the reasons for having offspring proved that family and children are important goals in life for the majority (Fig. 1). Even though the above results as well as many other surveys show that family and children seem to be high in the hierarchy of young people's values, behaviours of young generation connected with marriage and procreation speak volumes for the divergence of declared attitudes and actual behaviours.

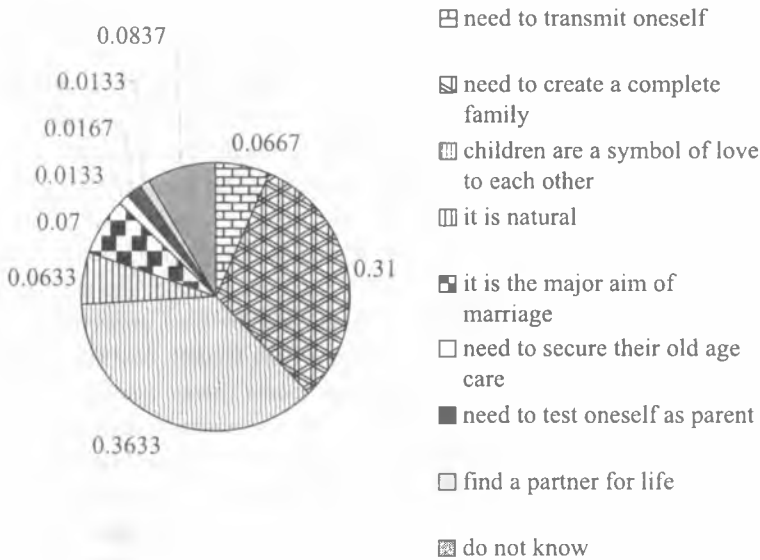


Fig. 1. Reasons for having offspring according to young people

The following issues under the analysis were reasons for sexual initiation of young people. The major reason for taking up sexual activity is curiosity (26.4%), need for intimacy with the beloved person (17.4%) and desire to satisfy one's sexual needs (13.8%). 10.5% of the students indicated the wish to test oneself as a sexual partner and the same percentage accounted for those whose motif would be peer influence and pressure. For 12.9% of the respondents the arising occasion is a reasonable motif, while 8.5% emphasized the omnipresent trend for early sexual initiation among teenagers. These declarations confirm psychosexual immaturity at this period of growing. Sexual activity and its meaning is treated and defined in different ways by young people. Sexual experience, according to the teenagers under the survey, is principally a romantic experience (26.2%), physical desire (14.1%), pleasure, bliss (18.9%), evidence of love (17.3%), but also sport (2.1%), entertainment (4.5%), method of relieving tensions (3.7%), fun (4.2%), determinant of adulthood (3.4%) and sin (1.8%) (Fig. 2).

The total of 63% of the respondents have not had any sexual experiences so far. The reasons for not taking up sexual activity include: the lack of a proper partner (29.3%),

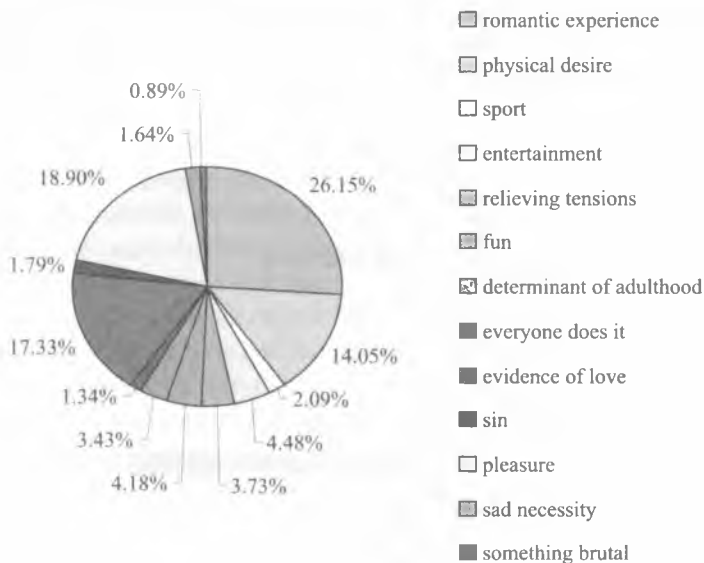


Fig. 2. What does sexual activity mean to you and how do you treat it?

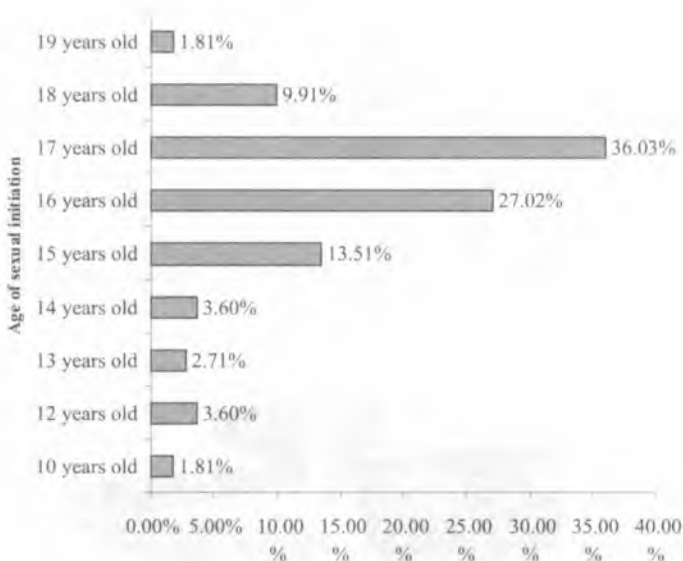


Fig. 3. Age of sexual initiation

fear of the consequences (29%), lack of the feeling of maturity (13%), religious beliefs (19%) and lack of interest in this sphere of life.

Among the group under the survey 37% of the respondents have already had sexual initiation, with girls accounting for 41.5% and boys – for 58.5%. The average age of

sexual initiation was 15.87. These results are compatible with works by other authors (6). Having further analyzed this group we observed that the largest percentage of respondents started sexual activity at the age of 17 (Fig. 3).

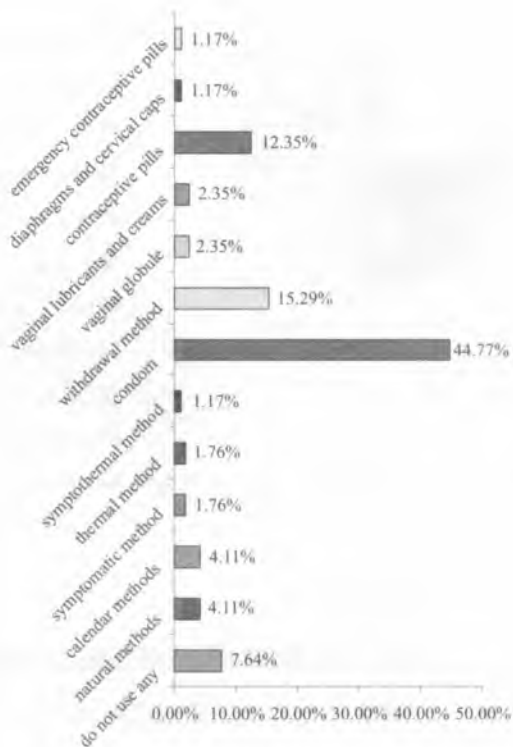


Fig. 4. Do you use any methods of contraception?

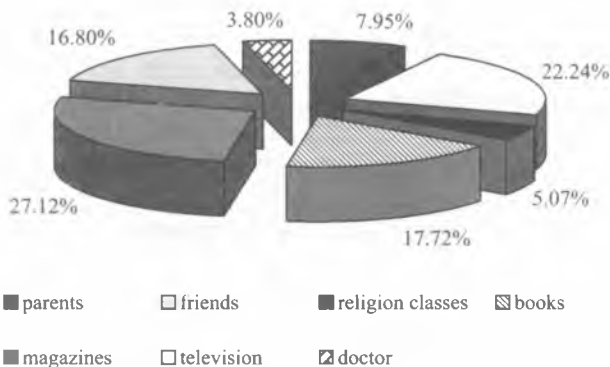


Fig. 5. Sources of information about pregnancy prevention methods

In the group of youth with sexual experiences 58.5% do not have a stable partner, which can indicate the cases of casual sex among teenagers. Only 22.5% of them has regular sexual intercourses. For the remaining these are frequently casual relationships. Security of such behaviours can be measured with the protection against sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. On the basis of the teenagers' answers we can observe low awareness of contraception methods. Definitely, the most popular of these methods is condom (44.8%), followed by withdrawal method (15.3%) and contraceptive pills (12.4%). 7.6% of the respondents admit that they do not use any preventive methods, which proves their thoughtlessness and lack of responsibility for their behaviour (Fig. 4).

According to the majority of the respondents (63.3%) their knowledge about contraception is sufficient. However, it is not known how this knowledge is employed in practice. Every fifth respondent claimed that his knowledge of this issue is very narrow and 16.7% of the teenagers admitted they practically do not have any knowledge. Information about contraception reaching young people does not come from competent persons, namely health service employees, but from casual people not necessarily competent in this area (Fig. 5). Awareness in the field of sexual education and proper use of contraceptives should be raised exclusively by specialists. The acceptance of such a model of sexual education will protect growing youth against making thoughtless and irresponsible decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

1. School and family are not successful in informing youth in the field of sexual education. This function has been taken over by peer environment and mass media that influence attitudes and behaviours of teenagers, promoting acceptance of premature sexual relationships without showing their negative consequences.

2. The phenomena of premature sexual initiation of teenagers as well as much freedom in the sphere of sexual life were observed. The motifs that make teenagers take up sexual activity indicate psychosexual and social immaturity.

3. Sexual behaviours of adolescents can result in negative social and health consequences. Casual sexual experiences and the use of inefficient methods of contraception increase the risk of undesired pregnancy, premature maternity and sexually transmitted diseases.

REFERENCES

1. Harwans-Napierala B.: Rozwój tożsamości płciowej dzieci i młodzieży. *Probl. Rodz.*, 2, 33, 1999.
2. Lew-Starowicz Z.: *Barwy seksu. IWZZ*, 77, 1987.
3. Lew-Starowicz Z.: *Dojrzewanie do miłości. Książka i Wiedza*, Warszawa 1989.
4. Pawłowska R.: Środowiskowe uwarunkowania wczesnego rozpoczynania przez młodzież stosunków płciowych. *Probl. Rodz.*, 1, 33, 1994.
5. Płowaś-Goral M., Skórzyńska H.: Problemy zagrożeń zdrowotnych związanych z wczesną inicjacją seksualną i prostytutką w ocenie młodzieży Państwowych Domów Dziecka w Lublinie. *Probl. Med. Społ.*, 32, 517, 1997.
6. Sirko I., Poręba R.: Czynniki wpływające na poziom wiedzy z zakresu wychowania płciowego u młodzieży środowiska miejskiego. *Ginekol. Pol.*, 64, 8, 380, 1993.

2002.03.15

SUMMARY

The aim of the paper was to get acquainted with opinions and attitudes of secondary school students concerning the issues of human procreation. The survey was carried out in secondary comprehensive and technical schools in Lublin during the years 1999 and 2000 among 300 students aged 16–19. The survey shows that mass media play the leading role in conveying knowledge and shaping attitudes and behaviours of teenagers in the sphere of sexuality. The function of family and school in this field is realized to an insignificant extent. Media make use of issues and interests of teenagers that are natural at certain age and succeed in promoting acceptance of early sexual relationships, not showing the risk connected with them at the same time. Among the group under the survey 37% of the respondents have already had sexual initiation. Girls accounted for 41.5% of the total and boys – for 58.5%. The average age of sexual initiation among the respondents was 15.87. The declaration of love, according to the majority, gave the right to take up sexual activity. They accepted the rule that you can make sex whenever you wish and a stable partner is not necessary, which is a sign of psychological immaturity and willingness to grow up fast. The use of contraception was approved of by nearly all the respondents. The most frequent preventive methods they used were: condoms (44.8%), withdrawal method (15.3%), both characterized by easy accessibility but at the same time low efficiency. 7.6% of sexually active students do not use any method of contraception. Such behaviours create a serious risk of premature pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Postawy młodzieży wobec zagadnień związanych z prokreacją człowieka

Celem pracy było poznanie opinii młodzieży szkół średnich na temat problemów związanych z seksualnością i prokreacją człowieka. Badania ankietowe przeprowadzono w liceach ogólnokształcących i technikach w Lublinie na przełomie lat 1999 i 2000 wśród 300 uczniów w wieku od 16 do 19 lat. Badania wykazały, że środki masowego przekazu spełniają coraz większą rolę w przekazywaniu wiedzy i kształtowaniu postaw oraz zachowań nastolatków w sferze seksualnej. Funkcja edukacyjna rodziny i szkoły w tym zakresie zdaniem ankietowanych jest realizowana w niewielkim stopniu. Media bazując na naturalnych w tym wieku zainteresowaniach i problemach dojrzewających nastolatków skutecznie kształtują w nich akceptację wczesnych kontaktów seksualnych, nie ukazując jednocześnie ryzyka z tym związanego. W badanej grupie 37% uczniów przeżyło już inicjację seksualną. W grupie tej dziewczęta stanowiły 41,5%, chłopcy 58,5%. Średni wiek inicjacji seksualnej wśród ankietowanych wynosił 15,8 lat. Deklarowane uczucie miłości zdaniem większości badanych dawało prawo do podejmowania stosunków seksualnych. Uznawali także zasadę, że współżyć można zawsze, gdy się ma na to ochotę, a stały partner nie jest konieczny, co wskazuje na ich niedojrzałość psychiczną i chęć szybkiego poznania dorosłego życia. Stosowanie antykoncepcji dopuszczali prawie wszyscy badani. Najczęściej stosowane przez nich metody zapobiegawcze to: prezerwatywa (44,8%), stosunek przerywany (15,3%) – charakteryzujące się łatwą dostępnością, ale też dużą zawodnością. 7,6 % uczniów utrzymujących kontakty seksualne nie stosuje żadnych metod zapobiegania ciąży. Takie zachowania stwarzają poważne ryzyko przedwczesnej ciąży i chorób przenoszonych drogą płciową.