

**Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health**  
**Volume 40, Number 4, December 2008**

## **The Quality of Young People's Heterosexual Relationships: A Longitudinal Analysis of Characteristics Shaping Subjective Experience**

By Daniel Wight, Alison Parkes, Vicki Strange, Elizabeth Allen, Chris Bonell and Marion Henderson

**CONTEXT:** Research on young people's sexual relationships often overlooks subjective experiences and enjoyment. Perceived quality of sexual relationships may be related to gender, background characteristics, circumstances of first intercourse and subsequent sexual history.

**METHODS:** Longitudinal data from 13–16-year-olds who participated in randomized trials of school sex education in either Scotland (N=5,356) or England (N=6,269) were used to examine young people's subjective experiences of heterosexual relationships. Logistic regression models tested for associations between selected variables and pressure and regret at first intercourse, pressure and enjoyment at most recent intercourse, and three measures of relationship quality.

**RESULTS:** Of the 42% of youth who reported having had sex by follow-up, most assessed their first and most recent sexual relationships positively. Greater proportions of females than of males felt pressure at first sexual intercourse (19% vs. 10%), regretted their first time (38% vs. 20%) and did not enjoy their most recent sex (12% vs. 5%). Younger age at first sex was an important correlate of partner pressure and regret at first intercourse (odds ratios, 2.0 each, for those 13 or younger vs. 15–16-year-olds). Negative experiences were associated with less control (e.g., feeling pressure, being drunk or stoned, and not planning sex) and with less intimacy (e.g., sex with a casual partner and less frequent sex). Background social characteristics had limited influence compared with circumstances of first intercourse and subsequent sexual history.

**CONCLUSION:** Most young people evaluated their early sexual experiences positively. The quality of relationships was enhanced by better communication and greater physical intimacy. For a vulnerable minority, however, early sexual experiences were negative. They could be protected by delaying first intercourse, restricting sexual activity to established relationships and learning skills to improve control in sexual encounters.

Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2008, 40(4):226–237

[» table of contents](#)

[» search the PSRH archive](#)

[» guidelines for authors](#)

Daniel Wight is program leader, Alison Parkes is research associate and Marion Henderson is research scientist—all with the Sexual and Reproductive Health Programme, Medical Research Council Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, Scotland. Vicki Strange is senior research officer, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Elisabeth Allen is lecturer, Medical Statistics Unit, and Chris Bonell is senior lecturer, Public and Environmental Health Research Unit—both at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

DOI:10.1363/4022608

[Full text in PDF](#)

[Full-featured version available to subscribers](#)

Personal subscribers should contact Wiley customer service with any questions related to their online access. Phone: 1 (800) 835-6770 or E-mail: [cs-journals@wiley.com](mailto:cs-journals@wiley.com).