

Social Network Constellation and Sexuality of Sexually Abused and Comparison Girls in Childhood and Adolescence

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This longitudinal study examines how childhood and early adolescent (age 6 to 15) peer and nonpeer social networks relate to sexual attitudes and behaviors in adolescence and young adulthood (age 12 to 25) for sexually abused and comparison girls. A large number of male peers in childhood is related to heightened sexual activity, sexual preoccupation, increased sexual pressure, and risky sexual behavior in adolescence. High-quality, female, nonpeer relationships have a positive effect on attitudes toward casual sex. Multiple group models illuminate several cross-lag group moderators: (a) Abused girls who are happier with male nonpeers are less preoccupied with sex; (b) abused girls who are happier with male peers are more likely to use birth control; and (c) abused girls who have early physical relationships are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior. Treatment implications include monitoring the effects of low-status peer groups, encouraging contact with female role models, and encouraging the formation of high-quality relationships with male peers and nonpeers.