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AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND UNWANTED, UNPROTECTED SEX

New study in leading prevention journal finds that promoting self-esteem, body image and ethnic identity among African American girls may help in preventing unwanted, unprotected sex.

ATLANTA, Aug. 12, 2004 -- Can sexually active African American girls learn to refuse unwanted, unprotected sex? The question is important because African American adolescent girls have higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) than Caucasian girls of the same age.

A new study finds that promoting a better “self-concept” among African American girls might be the answer.

According to Laura Salazar, Ph.D., of the School of Public Health, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Health Education at Emory University, adolescent girls transition into adulthood with certain self-concepts that are related to their own body image and self-esteem. Among African American girls, self-concept is also influenced by ethnic identity.

In an article published in the September issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Prevention Science*, Salazar found that African American girls with stronger self-concept were better “communicators” with their sex partners, which in turn was related to their being able to refuse unwanted and unprotected sex with greater frequency.

“We studied a group of 335 African American girls who were already sexually active. Therefore, talking with sexually active girls about abstinence was not the issue, rather, we wanted to know how the girls were able to deal with not wanting unprotected sex when their partners did,” Salazar said. Her study was funded by the Center for Mental Health Research on AIDS of the National Institute of Mental Health.

“What we found was African American girls with a stronger self-concept were better able to communicate with their sex partners, and subsequently better at refusing to have unwanted, unprotected sex. The relationship between self-concept and communication attributes was statistically significant, and the effect was large enough to suggest that self-concept may have considerable influence on African American adolescent girls’ ability to communicate effectively with their sex partners,” according to Salazar.

The study results suggest that programs aimed at preventing STD and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections among sexually active adolescent African American girls may be more effective if they targeted body image and self-esteem issues, and adopted an Afrocentric approach.

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Salazar suggests that programs for African American adolescent girls that seek to develop their self-concept should include activities geared toward an examination and discussion of how some forms of media portray women and set the standard for what is considered beautiful, what is considered to be the ideal, and what is considered as women's role in our society. Getting girls to think about whether or not these stereotypes and images are negative and how some of these portrayals may have an influence on their overall perception of themselves, their body image, and their identification with their Black culture is critical to enhancing their self-concept.

The Emory researcher measured self-esteem by questioning the girls about their general perceptions of themselves with statements such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." Ethnic identity was measured by the girls' responses to statements like, "I have a clear sense of what it means to be Black," or "I feel a strong attachment towards Black people." Body image was measured by using standardized scales about attitudes toward their own as well as boys' or guys' assessment of their physical attractiveness.

Prevention Science is a peer-reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research (SPR), an international organization focused upon the advancement of science-based prevention programs and policies through empirical research. The membership of the organization includes scientists, practitioners, advocates, administrators, and policy makers who are concerned with the prevention of social, physical and mental health problems and the promotion of health, safety, and well-being.

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