

# New research shows sexual abuse unique risk factor for teenage pregnancy

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Children who suffer childhood sexual abuse early are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, adolescent pregnancy, and teenage motherhood, according to new Penn State research.

The findings are important, because becoming a mother during adolescence can have consequences for not only the mother, but her child, said Jennie Noll, professor of human development and family studies, director of the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network, and co-funded faculty member of the Social Science Research Institute. "Adolescents typically do not possess the psychological and emotional tools necessary to excel at the additional demands and responsibilities required to parent a child."

The National Institutes of Health-funded research allowed Noll and her team to track a sample of adolescent females aged 14–17 with and without a documented history of maltreatment longitudinally through age 19. They examined the three distinct outcomes—high-risk sexual behaviors, adolescent pregnancy and adolescent motherhood—because not every adolescent who engages in risky sexual

activity becomes pregnant, and not every pregnancy results in an adolescent becoming a mother.

"Because of its explicit sexual nature, we wanted to see if [sexual abuse](#) conferred unique risk for these outcomes as compared to other environmental factors, including alternative forms of child maltreatment such as physical [abuse](#) and neglect," Noll explained. "This has never been tested before because it is rare to have a data set that differentiates between the different types of maltreatment on differing outcomes."

The results showed that sexual abuse predicted sexual risk-taking over time and that these kids were more than twice as likely to become teen mothers compared to other kids. Sexually abused females were also more likely to use substances, report more externalizing behaviors, affiliate with risky peers, and have lower self-esteem, lower cognitive abilities and higher depression symptoms.

However, even after these potential confounding factors were controlled, sexual abuse was the strongest predictor of teen motherhood.

"This suggests that there is something highly unique about the sexual trauma of [childhood sexual abuse](#) that increases the chances for subsequent [risky sexual behaviors](#)," said Noll. "Our findings demonstrate that all types of abuse and trauma are not equal. Survivors of sexual abuse likely require specialized treatment that can help them deal with the sexual boundary violations, stigma and shame associated with sexual abuse. Given that there are over 50,000 new sexual-abuse cases per year in the U.S., such targeted interventions will likely have a substantial impact on national [adolescent](#) motherhood rates as well."

The study was published recently in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

**More information:** Jennie G. Noll et al. Is Sexual

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Pregnancy, and Motherhood in Adolescence?,  
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