

# Sexual behaviour of some secondary school students in Benin City, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** One perennial issue that most Nigerian parents hardly discuss with their children is sex; it is seen as a taboo subject. However, it is something which children have to face the realities of now or later as adults. Denial of such vital information in the home leads many children to obtaining it from their peers, books, the internet or other sources and very often the information may be faulty. The consequence is that adolescents develop a plethora of behaviour which may be inimical to proper socialization. This study was designed to explore sexual behaviour of adolescents. It used a survey design. The population of the study comprised all senior secondary school students in Benin City. A sample of 600 students was drawn from twenty secondary schools. The instrument used was a questionnaire that attempts to measure sexual behaviour on a three-point scale with categories: very frequently, sometimes and not at all. It was constructed based on responses from a focused group discussion with some adolescents. The information collected was analysed through the use of an interpretative norm expressed as a mean. The results should a preponderance of non-verbal behaviours. Based on the results, it was suggested that parents should play a more prominent role in regulating sexual behavior of adolescents. In this way adolescents are made aware of skills that can be helpful in developing and regulating sexual behaviours. Consequently, adolescents would imbibe behaviours which would reduce their vulnerability to unguided sexual behavior outcomes.

**Keywords:** sexual behaviour, adolescents, students, gender differences

## Introduction

The issues surrounding sex are hardly those of discourse between parents and children in Nigeria. Nonetheless sexual behavior is an important aspect of the socialization process as it plays an important role in societal regeneration. Thus adolescents in an effort to understand what is involved in it rely on the media, peer group and internet for information. Human growth and development subsumes biological and social maturity. While growth involves an increase in size, development connotes an increase in functional ability. The end point of maturity is one's ability to procreate and depends to a large extent on biological maturity which is not episodic but gradual. The changes noticed create considerable confusion for the adolescents as parents are not forthcoming in discussing behaviours with sexual overtone. Thus what

constitutes appropriate sexual behavior during adolescence is mystified and not understood (Odu & Akanle, 2008).

Sexual behavior among adolescents may be seen as a precursor of sexual interaction or practices. The interaction is reflected in dating, which consequently lead to sexual intimacy. As indicated by Abraham & Kumar (1999) and Insel & Roth (1999) this is usually expressed through petting and necking which may involve kissing, caressing and stimulating the breasts and the genitals. These behaviours could eventually lead to getting involved in actual sexual relationships. The behaviour exhibited to a great extent can be traced to the effect of the media which in most cases can be very provocative, and the peer group that encourages experimentation with what the media has idolized. Equally appreciated as having an effect on adolescents sexual behaviour is

family and parental education. In particular parent-child communication has been found to have a significant role to play here (Meschke, Bartholomae & Zental, 2000; Miller, 1998).

Other factors internal to the child have equally been used to explain sexuality. Theory of sexuality as a social construct has been most apt in this direction. This theory, according to Larsson (2000), posits that the social system and the economic, religious, and medical as well as the cultural spheres determine the position held and the nature of sexuality. Viewed from a constructivist point of view, sexuality is a relational and contextual concept, in which social processes are assumed to control as well as construct sexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Weeks, 1981, 1985). In this view, each society constructs and shapes its own suitable conception of sexuality (Vance, 1991). The sexuality of girls and boys develop on this basis in interplay with their surrounding, in accordance with society's expectations and assumptions. Adolescents are a part of the society in which they grow up and thus internalize its norms and values concerning sexual behavior. What is termed healthy and natural sexuality is thus formed from the society one lives in and equally depends on gender as constructed. Thus sexuality is derived from the functions of the physical body but gains meaning for the child through interplay with the surroundings, and hence the child is able to determine its own identity and consequently sexuality. Thought processes (Masters and Johnson, 1979) and sexual scripts (Achebe, 1988) influence sexual behavior and how one views and acts towards an event. Odu and Akanle (2008) in their study of sexual behaviour of youths in Nigeria showed them to be sexually very active. Though their study was conducted in Nigeria this study is different as it focuses on behaviours that can lead to actual engagement in sexual activity.

Sexual behaviour as used here involves body touching such as exploring one's own body and that of others, sexual language, and other interactions which can have sexual connotations. It is used in a restrictive sense and it is different from sexual practice which people engage in for pleasure, for reproduction and even to promote or strengthen a bond of relationship. The attitude towards sexuality may be negative, positive, possibly reluctant or embarrassed but never entirely indifferent. The expressions of sexual desire, curiosity and behaviour in adolescents have aroused many

feelings in adults; most importantly adults feel that they would be promiscuous in later years and thus get exposed to dangers which can lead to self extinction. This is because their sexual experience is often gained in an unplanned or secretive fashion, under circumstances that make them vulnerable to coercion, sexuality transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy.

The consequences of their decision in this regard can be far-reaching. These include transmission of HIV/AIDS and other STIs, unwanted pregnancy which may be occasioned by poor negotiating skills, lack of education and also poor knowledge of contraception (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Mehra, Savithr & Coutinho, 2009). As succinctly presented by Mamta (n.d.), the consequences of an adolescents' pregnancy are difficult to comprehend even at this age as some may end up with clandestine abortions leading to enhanced morbidity. Furthermore, young adolescent mothers are far more likely to drop out of school or vocational training compared to their childless counterparts. In addition young adolescent fathers may not continue with their education because of the need to look for a means to support their family; immediate employment definitely is the next option. Because adolescents are not yet mature, they may be overcome with feelings of guilt, shame and low self-esteem. These feelings can be compounded by the reaction of elders and hence further affect the adolescents' long-term personality and ability to form long lasting relationships (Mamta, n.d.).

Based on this situation, it becomes necessary to understand the sexual behaviour so as to be able to assist adolescents early in life to face challenges associated with sexual behavior that may eventually occasion sexual practices that can have a detrimental effect. Consequently, this study mapped out the sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Benin City. The aim is to identify the predominant sexual behaviours as well as categorise them for purposes of recommending actions to aid practice.

### **Methodology**

This study investigated the prevailing sexual behavior of adolescents in secondary schools. As a result a survey research approach was adopted. It involved the selection of twenty secondary schools within Benin metropolis. From each school a random sample of senior school class two (SS2) was

selected. From each class thirty students were selected for use in the study.

A questionnaire was used for the collection of data. A draft of the questionnaire was constructed on the basis of the outcome of a focus group discussion with ten SS2 students. This questionnaire was presented to three experts knowledgeable in instrument development for critique and establishment of the content validity-evidence. Based on the comments a modified version was generated. This was administered on a sample of 30 SS2 students for purposes of determining the reliability of scores from the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient using Cronbach alpha was 0.87 and ambiguities were not noticed in its administration.

The questionnaire was administered with the assistance of teachers in the schools visited. The responses were transformed into numeric values as follows: Often=3, Sometimes=2 and Not at all=1. The information generated was analysed using frequencies, means and directional agreement among male and female respondents. Based on the means the 10 items with the largest means but with a value not less than 1.51 were selected as indicative of predominant behaviours. The value of 1.51 was selected as this value was higher than the real upper limit of the category 'not at all'. Though all

predominant behaviours are of interest, the focus in this study is to identify the ten most predominant ones; this was done for all subjects pooled together and respondents in the different categories examined. Thus the predominant behaviours are those items ten items with highest mean values which equally have means values greater than 1.51. The ethical considerations involved giving an assurance to the respondents that the responses would be treated with strict confidentiality; the responses would equally not be accessible to any third party. In addition the respondents were informed that the responses were not to be used in any harmful way against them. Thus the respondents were able to take an informed decision to participate as there was no coercion.

### **Results**

Out of the six hundred questionnaires administered five hundred and five useable questionnaires yielding a return rate of 81.2% were obtained. Table 1 contains the demographic characteristics of the respondents. There were more female respondents than males and a majority of the respondents were aged 15 – 19 years. Christianity was professed by almost all the respondents and more than three-quarter attended public schools.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	203	40.4
Female	302	59.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>		
12 – 14 years	32	6.4
15 – 19 years	468	93.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	475	94.1
Muslim	23	4.5
Others	7	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Ownership of School</b>		
Private	107	21.4
Public	304	78.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Shortfall due to no response

From table 2 it is noticed that all the means were greater than 1.51 which implies that the behaviors can be classified within the category of sometimes.

**Table 2: Frequency distribution and means of behaviour items (N=505)**

Behaviour	Often	Sometimes	Not at all	Mean	Decision
Winking of eyes.	102	224	178	1.85	Predominant
Sending love texts.	68	186	251	1.64	NP
Engaging in secret discussion.	77	160	268	1.62	NP
Engaging in some suggestive play.	67	122	314	1.51	NP
Writing love letters.	72	140	293	1.56	NP
Exchanging gift with the opposite sex.	75	179	251	1.65	NP
Giving dates e.g. appointment, hanging out.	73	172	260	1.63	NP
Being too conscious of oneself in an extraordinary manner.	104	221	178	1.85	Predominant
Seeking attention of the person you like.	129	234	141	1.98	Predominant
Touching opposite sex.	92	196	216	1.75	Predominant
Sending non verbal message through hand shake.	92	187	224	1.74	Predominant
Talking shy to a particular person.	125	215	164	1.92	Predominant
Answering call in a hidden manner e.g. in low tone.	108	204	193	1.83	Predominant
Sitting down and deliberately opening legs.	86	150	269	1.64	NP
Wearing transparent clothes.	74	156	272	1.61	NP
Wearing dresses that expose the body.	79	135	290	1.58	NP
Becoming excessively neat to catch the attention of the opposite sex.	89	189	227	1.73	NP
Asking friends and the elderly ones questions about opposite sex directly or indirectly.	116	218	171	1.89	Predominant
Changing steps in walking to impress the opposite sex.	84	189	231	1.71	NP
Body and eye contact movement while speaking.	110	195	200	1.82	Predominant
Value personal independence.	158	222	125	2.07	Predominant
Fantasizing about the opposite sex.	81	196	81	1.71	NP
Peeping uninvited into strangers' homes.	67	122	315	1.51	NP

NP= Not predominant

When the normative rule of selecting the ten items with the highest means, each greater than 1.51 is applied then the predominant behavior are: 'winking of eyes', 'being too conscious of oneself in an extraordinary manner', 'Seeking attention of the person you like', 'touching opposite sex', 'Sending non verbal message through hand shake', 'talking shy to a particular person', and 'answering call in a hidden manner e.g. in low tone'. Others are 'asking friends and the elderly ones questions about opposite sex directly or indirectly', 'Body and eye contact movement even while speaking' and 'value personal independence'.

The predominant behaviours are mainly direct and indirect. The object towards which one displays the behavior may notice it or it could be through an intermediary. For example talking in a low tone is indicative that the adolescent is aware that what is

being done is not expected or wants only the person being related with to be aware of it and nobody else. All in all the behaviours can be categorized into verbal and non-verbal. It would seem that from the responses of these adolescents that the non-verbal behaviours seem to be most common.

In table 3, the decision to select an item as predominant is guided by rank ordering the mean values greater than 1.51 and picking the ten items with highest mean values. In the case of male adolescents, the mean values for the ten items range between 1.95 and 2.16; while that of female adolescents range between 1.66 and 1.97. Thus items predominant for females may not be for males. An examination of the means equally show that all the behaviours were generally more predominant for males

**Table 3: Means and predominance of behaviours by gender**

Behaviour	Males	Decision	Females	Decision
Winking of eyes.	1.85	NP	1.85	Predominant
Sending love texts.	1.87	NP	1.48	NP
Engaging in secret discussion.	1.81	NP	1.49	NP
Engaging in some suggestive play.	1.79	NP	1.32	NP
Writing love letters.	1.83	NP	1.38	NP
Exchanging gift with the opposite sex.	1.86	NP	1.51	NP
Giving dates e.g. appointment, hanging out.	1.85	NP	1.48	NP
Being too conscious of oneself in an extraordinary manner.	1.95	Predominant	1.79	Predominant
Seeking attention of the person you like.	2.16	Predominant	1.85	Predominant
Touching opposite sex.	1.96	Predominant	1.62	NP
Sending non verbal message through hand shake.	1.84	NP	1.68	Predominant
Talking shy to a particular person.	2.03	Predominant	1.89	Predominant
Answering call in a hidden manner e.g. in low tone.	1.97	Predominant	1.75	Predominant
Sitting down and deliberately opening legs.	1.99	NP	1.49	NP
Wearing transparent clothes.	1.79	NP	1.50	NP
Wearing dresses that expose the body.	1.78	NP	1.45	NP

Becoming excessively neat to catch the attention of the opposite sex.	1.98	Predominant	1.66	Predominant
Asking friends and the elderly ones questions about opposite sex directly or indirectly.	1.98	Predominant	1.84	Predominant
Changing steps in walking to impress the opposite sex.	1.88	NP	1.60	NP
Body and eye contact movement while speaking.	2.11	Predominant	1.69	Predominant
Value personal independence.	2.21	Predominant	1.97	Predominant
Fantasizing about the opposite sex.	1.89	NP	1.59	NP
Peeping uninvited into strangers' homes.	1.69	NP	1.39	NP

NP= Not predominant

adolescents than the females. The behaviours which are predominant that there was a consensus among male and female adolescents were 'being too conscious of oneself in an extraordinary manner', 'seeking attention of the person one likes' and 'talking shy to a particular person'. Others are 'answering call in a hidden manner e.g. in low tone', 'becoming excessively neat to catch the attention of the opposite sex', 'asking friends and the elderly ones questions about a person of the opposite sex directly or indirectly' and 'valuing personal independence'.

For the female adolescents, 'touching opposite sex', 'body and eye movement', and 'sitting down and deliberately opening legs' are also predominant. For the males other predominant behaviours are 'changing steps in walking to impress the opposite sex', 'Sending non verbal message through hand shake', and 'winking of eyes'. From these results one can conclude that some of the behaviours exhibited by the group of adolescents is dependent on gender.

Females, considering the mean scores less than 1.51, are not much into 'sending love texts', 'Engaging in secret discussion', 'engaging in some suggestive play', 'writing love letters', 'Giving dates e.g. appointment', 'hanging out', 'sitting down and deliberately opening legs', 'wearing transparent clothes', 'wearing dresses that expose the body' and 'Peeping uninvited into strangers' homes'.

## Discussion

The results from this study show a preponderance of both direct and indirect behaviours. Adolescents are

aware of parental non-approval of sex-related behavior because of the general disapproval of discussions related to sexual matters. It is no wonder that behaviours found to be predominant included 'talking in a low tone' and even 'dressing to attract attention'. Generally, people are attracted towards objects which glitter and therefore dressing neatly can serve to 'attract the butterfly to the nectar'. All in all the behaviours can be categorized into verbal and non-verbal. The non-verbal behaviours seem to be predominant thus being in tandem with results obtained by Odu and Akanle (2008). This situation could be related to sexual scripts that the adolescents may have internalized from other sources as parents may not have provided sexuality education. In addition parent-children communication may not have been well facilitated and therefore adolescents have to explore behaviours on experimental basis.

The variation in predominant sexual behavior of male and female adolescents is not unexpected as they generally have different socialization exposure. Bhende(1994) indicated that females are more closely watched that sexual activity is impossible. This notwithstanding opportunity provided on the way to school and on play grounds are enough to get information about sexuality particularly behaviour for which they may not know the consequences. Sexuality education as part of the school curriculum should provide dependable source of information. It is doubtful if this is properly implemented and hence adolescents still have to rely on other sources for sexual information. Experience shows that males are more gregarious and tend to be less risk averse.

Consequently, they would display more sexual behavior as obtained from large mean values in this study.

Sexuality has been affirmed here based on the responses provided by the sample used for this study. As noted by Wellings, Collubien, Slaymaker, Singh, Patel and Bajos (2006) this fact needs to be fully imbibed for public health messages are to be heeded. We should not close our eyes and believe that adolescents' behaviours do not matter. The fact that girls did not have to expose their bodies seems to be in agreement with societal expectations in Nigeria. This result is in line with the results obtained by Mehra, Savithri & Coutinho (2009) who indicated that girls are expected to dress decently without exposing their bodies.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Within the limitations of this study it can be concluded that the adolescents in Benin City display behaviours which could eventuate in actual sexual activities. These behaviours are both verbal and non-verbal with the verbal not being directly related to the object of interest but from others who may have a relationship with the person. When it is however direct the message is usually clouded and not clearly exposed; that is the information is to be decoded by those it is directed at. The non-verbal communications are directed at the object person. The behaviours are contingent on gender and their intensity is more pronounced for males than females.

As a result of these findings we need to encourage the acquisition of life skills integrated into sex education. Things to be included should be about negotiation, assertion and listening, identification of pressure and being able to resist such pressure. Parents should be assisted to sharpen their parenting skills to include counseling. With such preparation students and adolescents can be assisted to make well informed and voluntary decisions to face issues in the sexuality terrain.

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