

# Journal of Adolescent Research

<http://jar.sagepub.com>

---

## Dating Age and Stage as Correlates of Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behavior

Brent C. Miller, J. Kelly McCoy and Terrance D. Olson  
*Journal of Adolescent Research* 1986; 1; 361  
DOI: 10.1177/074355488613009

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/1/3/361>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Adolescent Research* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jar.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

## Dating Age and Stage as Correlates of Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behavior

Brent C. Miller  
Utah Sate University

J. Kelly McCoy  
University of Georgia

Terrance D. Olson  
Brigham Young University

### Abstract

Dating experiences, especially the type or stage of dating, have consistently been found to be related to premarital sexual behavior. Findings regarding the age at first date and sexual behavior have been less consistent. This paper examined the age at which dating began and the type of dating relationship as correlates of premarital sexual attitudes and behavior among mid-teen adolescents. The analyses were based on a sample of high school students ( $n = 836$ ), most of whom were between the ages of 15 and 18 when the surveys were conducted. Early dating, especially early steady dating, was related to permissive attitudes and to premarital sexual experience among both males and females. The relationship between early dating and intercourse experience was particularly strong among Mormons, a religious group which has institutionalized age 16 as the legitimate age to begin dating.

---

The data analyzed in this paper were collected as part of the evaluation of a prevention services demonstration grant (APH 0003-6-01-0) awarded to T. D. Olson by the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs.

Some of the earliest studies about dating reported that the stage or type of dating relationship was related to premarital sexual experience with casual daters the least, regular or steady daters moderately, and engaged persons the most likely to report having had sexual intercourse (Ehrman, 1959). While this general pattern has persisted since the earlier research (Sherwin & Corbett, 1985), in more recent studies it has been found that engagement has become less and less a precondition to beginning intercourse. One recent study reported that initial sexual intercourse occurred in steady dating relationships more often than in any other context (Jessor, Costa, Jessor & Donovan, 1983).

Because the type or stage of dating has been linked to premarital sexual behavior in many studies (Bell & Coughy, 1980; King, Baliswick & Robinson, 1977; McCabe & Collins, 1983; Robinson & Jedlicka, 1982; Spanier, 1976) there is little to be learned by focusing on it alone. Additionally, however, it has been reported that commitment or love between partners before having sexual intercourse is more important to females than males (Carroll, Volk & Hyde, 1985; Lewis, 1973; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977; Sherwin & Corbett, 1985). In one longitudinal study it was found that approximately 75 percent of women first experienced sexual intercourse within a committed interpersonal relationship (steady dating, engagement, or marriage) as compared to about 50 percent of men (Jessor, et al., 1983).

Other researchers have reported that dating frequency among college students (Spanier, 1976) and qualities of the dyadic relationship among younger teens (Jorgensen, King & Torrey, 1980) are relatively powerful predictors, as compared with other variables, of adolescent coital experience. Among college students, current dating frequency and religiosity were found to be stronger predictors of premarital sex behavior than earlier (high school) dating frequency, but Spanier (1976) reasoned that the number of dating partners and number of times in love are probably very important in a processual sense and they are partially represented by the current dating involvement variable.

Findings about the age of dating debut in relation to premarital sexual intercourse have not been consistent. Ehrman (1959) found that age at first date was related to sexual behavior, with early daters being most permissive. In Reiss' (1967) analyses, however, the age of first date was not an important explanatory variable; in three female samples there were only nonsignificant tendencies and among males there appeared to be a curvilinear relationship with early and late daters being most permissive. In contrast to Reiss' findings, Bell and Chaskes (1970) and Lewis (1973) reported that girls who began dating at age 14 years or earlier had higher rates of coitus than those who began dating when they were 15 years of age or older.

The present analyses were conducted to add further evidence and, hopefully, to clarify the relationships between dating experiences and adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior. More specifically, the research questions addressed by these analyses were: (a) How is the age when dating began related to adolescent sexual attitudes and intercourse experience? (b) Do the variables age at first date and type of early dating, in combination, provide a stronger explanation of adolescent sex attitudes and behavior than either variable used alone?

## METHODS

### Sample

Data were collected in 1983 in five high schools in Salt Lake City, Utah and in six high schools in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Because the data were collected through teachers who consented to cooperate, the resulting sample is a non-probability sample. About 95 percent of the 836 respondents were between the ages of 15 and 18 years, with a few being age 14 or 19 years. The largest proportion (40%) were age 16 years. The sample was almost two-thirds female, probably because some of the surveys were administered in elective home economics classes along with health and other required courses. Because the surveys were completed by students in Utah and New Mexico, over half (56%) of the teenagers were affiliated with the Mormon church. The sample was three quarters (76%) white, with the largest minority group being Hispanic (15%).

### Procedures

Data were collected as part of pre- and posttest surveys used to evaluate an experimental secondary curriculum. Arrangements were made with school districts in Utah and New Mexico to implement and evaluate the curriculum. In each school where administrators and teachers agreed to participate, two or more entire classes of students were surveyed during class time. Prior to administering the surveys, students were provided with a letter to their parents explaining the curriculum being used and the surveys that would be conducted. A consent form was also sent home, and it was to be signed by the parent(s) and returned to the teacher prior to administering the surveys. It was not feasible to guarantee anonymity because pre- and posttests surveys needed to be matched, but confidentiality was assured. Virtually all students in each class completed the surveys; few parents exempted them and few students declined. Although 836 surveys were returned, 26 cases were dropped from these analyses because the students were or had been married. Additional cases were set aside in the analyses because of incomplete responses to various questions.

### Measurement

A key independent variable, the age of first date, was measured by responses to the question, "If you have begun dating, at what age did you begin?" Present dating relationships were assessed by asking, "Which of the items listed below best describes your current dating situation? I am: 1. not dating; 2. dating occasionally; 3. dating several different persons; 4. dating mostly one person; 5. steadily dating one person; 6. engaged; 7. married; 8. other."

In an attempt to operationalize the concept of early exclusive dating a retrospective question was asked: "Which of the items listed below best describes your dating behavior in 9th grade?" The response alternatives were the same as those for the current dating question (above).

Measures of the dependent variables (sexual attitudes and behavior) were obtained by responses to two questions. Attitudes about sex before marriage were assessed by asking, "What is your attitude about teenagers having full sexual relations (sexual intercourse) before marriage? Do you think it is: 1. always wrong; 2. usually wrong; 3. neither right nor wrong; 4. usually all right; 5. always all right." Sexual behavior measurement was limited to asking if the respondent had experienced full sexual relations (sexual intercourse), with responses dichotomized into "yes" (have had sex) and "no" (virgins).

## RESULTS

The crosstabulation of dating status and sexual attitude permissiveness shown in Table 1 is consistent with findings of many previously reported studies. Current dating status was related to attitudes about premarital sexual behavior, with those who were not dating or dating occasionally having less permissive attitudes than those who were dating several partners, dating steadily, or engaged to be married ( $F, 5.63, 4 \text{ df}, p = .001$ ). The effect of dating status was observed for both males and females (there was no gender interaction effect), although males had slightly more permissive attitudes than females overall ( $F, 4.55, 1 \text{ df}, p = .03$ ).

TABLE 1  
Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Mean Scores\* by Current Dating Status and Gender, 1983.

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N
<i>Dating Status</i>						
Not dating	2.16	(74)	1.96	(104)	2.04	(178)
Occasionally	2.20	(89)	2.04	(151)	2.10	(240)
Several partners	2.64	(33)	2.49	(76)	2.53	(109)
Mostly one partner	2.40	(15)	2.18	(68)	2.22	(83)
Steadily one partner	2.64	(44)	2.44	(97)	2.50	(141)
Engaged	2.80	(5)	2.50	(18)	2.57	(23)
Column Total	2.34	(260)	2.28	(514)	2.25	(774)

\*Higher scores reflect more permissive attitudes as measured by responses to the question "What is your attitude toward teenagers having full sexual relations (sexual intercourse) before marriage?" 1 = always wrong, 2 = usually wrong, 3 = neither right nor wrong, 4 = usually all right, 5 = always all right.

Disregarding gender, Table 2 shows that teenagers in the most exclusive, committed dating relationships (steady dating and engaged) reported the highest percentages of sexual experience, followed by those who were dating several partners, mostly one partner, and those who reported that they were dating occasionally or not dating at all. However, this overall pattern is clearly because of the data for females; among males the only substantial difference in intercourse experience by

dating status was between not having dated at all or only occasionally on the one hand (about one fourth sexually experienced) and having been more involved in dating on the other (over 45% sexually experienced.).

To see if this relationship might be stronger among those who began exclusive dating at younger ages, sexual attitudes and behavior were cross tabulated with the question about type of dating experiences during the 9th grade. The first row in Table 3 shows that approximately half of this sample did not date during the 9th

TABLE 2  
Percent of Never Married Adolescents Who Reported Having Had  
Sexual Intercourse by Current Dating Status\* and Gender, 1983

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
<i>Dating Status</i>						
Not dating	22.4	(67)	18.4	(98)	20.0	(165)
Occasionally	26.7	(86)	22.2	(144)	23.9	(230)
Several partners	47.1	(34)	35.6	(73)	39.8	(108)
Mostly one partner	46.2	(13)	28.1	(64)	31.2	(77)
Steadily one partner	45.9	(37)	49.4	(87)	48.4	(124)
Engaged	33.3	(3)	71.4	(14)	64.7	(17)
Column Total	32.5	(240)	30.6	(480)	31.3	(721)

\*In answer to the question: "Which of these items below best describes your current dating situation?"

$\chi^2$  Total 44.89 (5,  $N = 721$ ),  $p < .000$

$\chi^2$  Males 11.86 (5,  $N = 240$ ),  $p < .03$

$\chi^2$  Females 38.20 (5,  $N = 480$ ),  $p < .000$

TABLE 3  
Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Mean Scores\* by Dating Status  
in the 9th Grade and Gender, 1983.

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N
<i>9th Grade Dating</i>						
Never dated	1.94	(158)	1.84	(257)	1.88	(415)
Occasionally dated	2.74	(62)	2.37	(124)	2.49	(186)
Several partners	3.16	(19)	2.77	(57)	2.87	(76)
Mostly one partner	3.00	(17)	2.58	(45)	2.69	(62)
Dated one steadily	3.17	(12)	2.82	(39)	2.90	(51)
Column Total	2.34	(268)	2.20	(522)	2.25	(790)

\*Higher scores reflect more permissive attitudes as measured by responses to the question "What is your attitude toward teenagers having full sexual relations (sexual intercourse) before marriage?" 1 = always wrong, 2 = usually wrong, 3 = neither right nor wrong, 4 = usually all right, 5 = always all right.

grade when they would have been approximately 14 years old. Among those who did date as 9th graders, however, dating experience in the 9th grade was more strongly related ( $F, 30.8, 4 \text{ df}, p = .001$ ) than current dating status to sexual attitudes. Again, this effect was the same for males and females.

Table 4 shows that males and females who never dated during the 9th grade were much less likely than early daters to have had sexual intercourse when they were in high school. Those who dated more than occasionally during the 9th grade, and especially those who dated steadily, were most likely to report having had sexual intercourse.

TABLE 4  
Percent of Never Married Adolescents Who Reported Having Had Sexual Intercourse\*  
by Dating Status in the 9th Grade and Gender, 1983.

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
<i>9th Grade Dating</i>						
Never dated	15.8	(146)	18.3	(251)	17.4	(397)
Occasionally dated	51.9	(54)	34.5	(108)	40.1	(162)
Several partners	57.9	(19)	55.6	(54)	56.2	(73)
Mostly one partner	62.5	(16)	38.5	(39)	46.4	(56)
Dated one steadily	70.0	(10)	63.6	(33)	65.1	(43)
Column Total	32.3	(245)	30.7	(485)	31.3	(731)

\*In answer to the question: "Which of these items listed below best describes your dating behavior in the ninth grade?"

$\chi^2$  Total 91.41 (5,  $N = 731$ ),  $p < .000$

$\chi^2$  Males 46.62 (4,  $N = 245$ ),  $p < .000$

$\chi^2$  Females 52.29 (4,  $N = 485$ ),  $p < .000$

Table 5 shows an inverse linear relationship between the age when dating began and permissiveness of sexual attitudes ( $F, 19.03, 5 \text{ df}, p = .001$ ). Males and females who began dating at ages 12 or 13 years said that, on the average, premarital sexual intercourse for teenagers was "neither right nor wrong," as compared to the "usually wrong" response of those who began dating at age 16 or 17.

The percentage of teenagers who had experienced intercourse by the age at which they first began dating is shown in Table 6 and Figure 1. In the total sample there is a consistent pattern of more sexual experience among those who began dating at earlier ages, ranging from 82 percent of those who first dated at age 12 years to 18 percent of those who started dating at age 17 years.

Over 40 percent ( $n = 282$ ) of this sample had not begun dating until age 16 years, which is somewhat later than might be found in other samples. The postponement of dating is probably because of the large number of Mormon adolescents included in

TABLE 5  
Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Mean Scores\* by the Age When  
Dating Began and Gender, 1983

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N
<i>Age When Dating Began</i>						
12	3.63	(8)	2.83	(12)	3.15	(20)
13	3.40	(5)	2.92	(39)	2.98	(44)
14	2.94	(31)	2.69	(74)	2.76	(105)
15	2.79	(47)	2.26	(145)	2.39	(192)
16	2.00	(113)	1.89	(175)	1.93	(288)
17	2.13	(15)	1.63	(8)	1.96	(23)
Column Total	2.40	(219)	2.25	(453)	2.30	(672)

\*Higher scores reflect more permissive attitudes as measured by responses to the question "What is your attitude toward teenagers having full sexual relations (sexual intercourse) before marriage?" 1 = always wrong, 2 = usually wrong, 3 = neither right nor wrong, 4 = usually all right, 5 = always all right.

TABLE 6  
Percent of Never Married Adolescents Who Reported Having Had  
Sexual Intercourse by Age When Dating Began\* and Gender, 1983.

	Males		Females		Row Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
<i>Age When Dating Began</i>						
12	71.4	(7)	90.0	(10)	82.4	(17)
13	100.0	(5)	52.6	(38)	58.1	(43)
14	72.4	(29)	48.5	(66)	55.8	(95)
15	47.5	(40)	37.2	(129)	40.0	(170)
16	15.6	(109)	17.6	(170)	16.8	(279)
17	21.4	(14)	12.5	(8)	18.2	(22)
Column Total	34.3	(204)	33.3	(421)	33.7	(626)

\*In answer to the question: "If you have begun dating, at what age did you begin?"

$\chi^2$  Total 91.10 (5,  $N = 626$ ),  $p < .000$

$\chi^2$  Males 53.58 (5,  $N = 204$ ),  $p < .000$

$\chi^2$  Females 48.95 (5,  $N = 421$ ),  $p < .000$



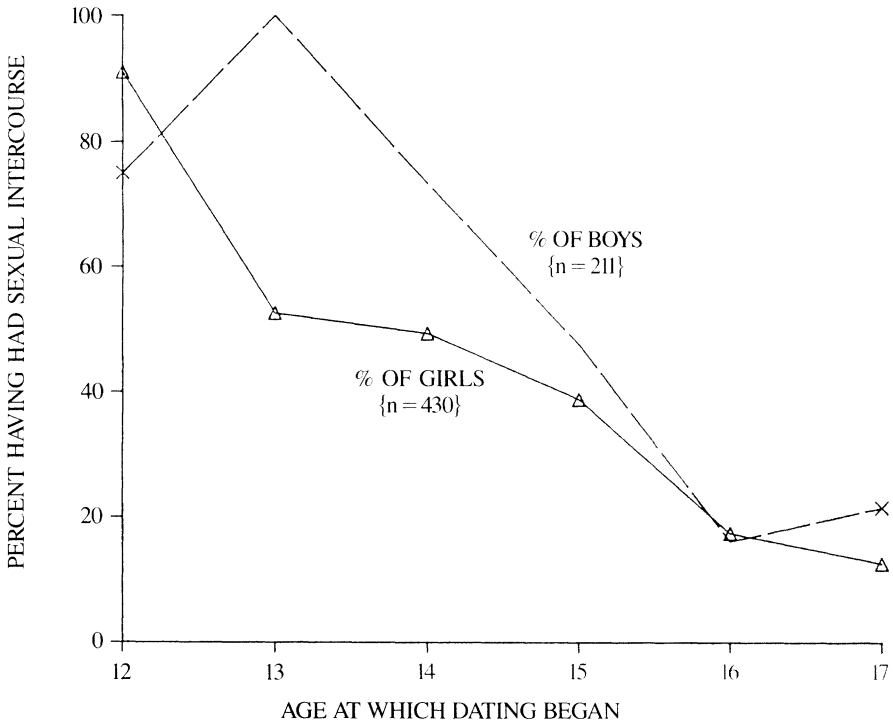


Figure 1. Percentage of never married teenagers having had sexual intercourse based on the age dating began, 1983.

the sample. Because there were a large number of Mormons, separate analyses by religious affiliation were considered to be appropriate. Examining religious affiliation seemed to be particularly relevant in this study because Mormon Church leaders have made strongly worded statements about both dating and premarital sex. For example, the late leader of the sect, who faithful Mormons considered to be prophet, wrote:

When you get in the teenage years, your social associations should still be general acquaintance with boys and girls. Any dating or pairing off in social contacts should be postponed until at least the age of 16 or older, and even then there should be much judgment used in selections and in the seriousness. . . . There should be limited contacts and certainly no approach to the intimate relationships involving sex. There must never be any sex of any kind prior to marriage (Kimball, 1975).

Consistent with the specific teachings of their Church leaders, Table 7 shows that Mormon teenagers were much less likely to have dated at young ages. Only 10 percent of Mormons had dated at age 14 years or younger as compared to 42 percent

of non-Mormons. Conversely, almost two-thirds (64%) of Mormons had not dated until age 16 years or older, as compared to only 28 percent of the non-Mormon youth who had postponed dating this long.

Table 7 also shows that Mormon teenagers were much less likely than non-Mormons to report having had sexual intercourse (18% vs 53%). The proportion who were sexually experienced depended more on the age dating began among Mormons, however, than among non-Mormons. Among non-Mormons, 38 percent of late daters had experienced sexual intercourse compared to over 60 percent of early daters. Among Mormons, only 10 percent of late daters had experienced sexual intercourse, but fully half of the early daters had. Early dating Mormons were five times as likely to have had sexual intercourse as Mormon youth who had postponed dating until 16 years of age.

TABLE 7  
Sexual Intercourse Experience by Age when Dating Began,  
Mormon and Non-Mormon Compared, 1983.

Age When Dating Begin	Mormon				Total	
	Virgin %	n	Nonvirgin %	n	%	n
14 or younger	50.0	(19)	50.0	(19)	10.8	(38)
Age 15	74.7	(65)	25.3	(22)	24.6	(87)
16 or older	89.9	(205)	10.1	(23)	64.6	(228)
Total	81.9	(289)	18.1	(64)	100.0	(353)

Age When Dating Begin	Non-Mormon				Total	
	Virgin %	n	Nonvirgin %	n	%	n
14 or younger	37.6	(44)	62.3	(73)	42.1	(117)
Age 15	44.5	(37)	55.4	(46)	29.9	(83)
16 or older	61.5	(48)	38.4	(30)	28.0	(78)
Total	46.4	(129)	53.6	(149)	100.0	(278)

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data reported in this paper are consistent with earlier findings that the stage of dating which, presumably, reflects dyadic commitment, is related to sexual attitude permissiveness and intercourse experience. This is more strongly the case for females than males as shown in Tables 2 and 4.

The age at which dating began was also strongly related to permissive sexual attitudes and behavior in this sample, with early daters being more permissive

among both males and females. This might be because those who begin dating at young ages are more likely to develop close dyadic relationships in which sexual intercourse is more likely to occur.

The age of dating and premarital sexuality may be strongly related in this study because over half of the sample were affiliated with the Mormon church. When the relationship between age of dating debut and sexual experience were analyzed by religious affiliation, it was evident that Mormons were more likely than non-Mormons to postpone dating and less likely to have experienced sexual intercourse. Early dating Mormons, however, were five times as likely to have had sexual intercourse as Mormons who had postponed dating until 16 years of age. Among non-Mormons, early daters were less than twice as likely to have had sexual experience as those who had postponed dating until 16 years of age.

This stronger relationship between age of dating debut and sexual activity among Mormons is probably best explained by the norm in this religious group that dating should be postponed until 16 years of age. Mormons who date in their early teens are violating normative expectations. Mormon Church leaders have taught that "early dating, especially early steady dating, brings numerous problems, much heartache, and numerous disasters. The early date often develops into the steady date, and the steady date frequently brings on early marriage.... Early marriages often end in disillusionment, frustration, and divorce.... Dating, and especially steady dating, in the early teens is most hazardous" (Kimball, 1965 as quoted in Featherstone, 1975, p. 9).

In the United States as a whole, the median age when adolescents begin to date has declined over time. Among females the age of first date has dropped from about 16 years of age in the 1920s and 1930s to age 13 years in the 1970s (Rice, 1975). Interestingly, dating debut appears to be much more strongly affected by age than by sexual maturation (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Gross, Jennings, Rosenberg & Duke, 1981). In other words, individuals who experience early sexual maturation are no more likely to date sooner than those who mature more slowly. Conversely, older adolescents are socially expected to date, and they generally do, regardless of their individual level of sexual development. Because social expectations appear to have more to do with dating than biological development (Dornbusch et al., 1981), it should, perhaps, not be surprising that Mormon youth have markedly different patterns of dating and premarital sexual experiences than adolescents in the general population. Regardless of religious context, however, the age at which dating begins and the type of dyadic relationship, especially at young ages, appear to be important variables in explaining premarital sexual attitudes and behavior.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, R., & Chaskes, J. B. (1970). Premarital sexual experience among coeds, 1958 and 1968. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 32, 81–84.
- Bell R. R., & Coughney, K. (1980). Premarital sexual experience among college females, 1958, 1968, 1978. *Family Relations*, 29, 355.

- Carroll, J. L., Volk, K. D., & Hyde, J. S. (1985). Differences between males and females in motives for engaging in sexual intercourse. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *14*, 131–139.
- Dornbusch, S. M., Carlsmith, J. M., Gross, R. T., Martin, J. A., Jennings, D., Rosenberg, A., & Duke, P. (1981). Sexual development, age and dating: A comparison of biological and social influences upon one set of behaviors. *Child Development*, *52*, 179–185.
- Ehrman, W. (1959). *Premarital dating behavior*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Featherstone, V. (1975). Why can't I date when I am 15? *The New Era*, February, 8–9.
- Jessor, R., Costa, F., Jessor, L., & Donovan, J. E. (1983). Time of first intercourse: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*, 608–626.
- Jorgensen, S. R., King, S. L., & Torrey, B. A. (1980). Dyadic and social network influences on adolescent exposure to pregnancy risk. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *42*, 141–155.
- Kimball, S. W. (1975). President Kimball speaks out on morality. *Ensign*, February, 4.
- King, K., Balswick, J. O., & Robinson, I. E. (1977). The continuing premarital sexual revolution among college females. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *39*, 455–459.
- Knox, D., & Wilson, K. (1981). Dating behavior of university students. *Family Relations*, *30*, 255–258.
- Lewis R. A. (1973). Parents and peers: Socialization agents in the coital behavior of young adults. *Journal of Sex Research*, *9*, 156–170.
- McCabe, M. P. & Collins, J. K. (1983). The sexual and affectional attitudes and experiences of Australian adolescents during dating: The effects of age, church attendance, type of school, and socioeconomic class. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *12*, 525–538.
- Peplau, L. A., Rubin, Z., & Hill, C. T. (1977). Sexual intimacy in dating relationships. *Journal of Social Issues*, *33*, 86–109.
- Reiss, I. L. (1967). *The social context of premarital sexual permissiveness*. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- Rice, F. P. (1975). *The adolescent* (2nd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Robinson, I. E. & Jedlicka, D. (1982). Change in sexual attitudes and behavior for college students from 1965 to 1980: A research note. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *44*, 237–240.
- Sherwin, R. & Corbett, S. (1985). Campus sexual norms and dating relationships: A trend analysis. *Journal of Sex Research*, *21*, 258–274.
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Formal and informal sex education as determinants of premarital sexual behavior. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *5*, 39–67.
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Perceived sex knowledge, exposure to criticism, and premarital sexual behavior: The impact of dating. *Sociological Quarterly*, *17*, 247–261.

Reprint Requests should be addressed to:

Brent C. Miller  
 Department of Family and  
 Human Development  
 Utah State University  
 Logan, UT 84322-2905