

# RESEARCH FACTS and



# FINDINGS

A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester, and New York State Center for School Safety

## Young Men's Sexuality: What's Typical?

by Andrew Smiler, PhD

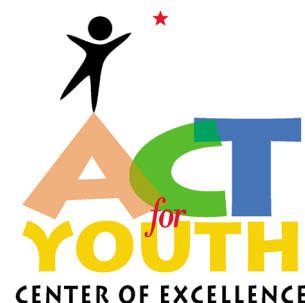
American culture conceptualizes young men's sexuality as ever-present, indiscriminate, and barely controlled. In the fictitious world of American Pie, Superbad, and Porky's, guys think only about sex, abhor relationships, and will do almost anything to get laid. This image is maintained by TV characters like Charlie from "Two and a Half Men" and Barney from "How I Met Your Mother," and it's the standard presentation of rap performers in their music videos. In fiction and in high school hallways, this image of male sexuality is idolized and idealized. Heck, this guy is so popular that he's the one most likely to be described in sex education curricula, particularly abstinence-only programs (Santelli et al., 2006). In current slang he's a "player," but he's also been known as a "Casanova," "stud," or "Don Juan."

Other media images of males, and other boys in real life, don't get as much respect or admiration. On TV and in film, they may be the butt of the jokes, like Charlie's brother Alan in "Two and a Half Men." At school, they have less status than other guys, unless they have some other claim like being a major jock. Yet the research tells us that most guys aren't promiscuous and don't see themselves as players.



### Normative sexual development

There's a clear progression from the asexuality of childhood to the sexual activities of adolescence. In a series of studies, University of Indiana pediatric researcher Mary Ott has explored how youth understand this transition. They consistently describe a period of "abstinence" during which they (and their peers) were wholly uninterested in any type of romantic relationship or sexual behavior. This is followed by a period of growing interest that does not include any type of romantic or sexual behavior, followed by entry into the worlds of dating, kissing, etc. The shift from uninterested to early interest and first activities typically occurs around 11-14 years of age (Ott & Pfeiffer, 2008; Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006).



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Adolescents' depiction of this transition matches the data nicely. Cross-sectional and longitudinal data indicate the expected pattern of sexual firsts: kissing, then "groping," then manual or oral sex (for male-female couples), followed by intercourse (penis in vagina for male-female couples, oral or anal sex for male-male couples) (Jakobsen, 1997; Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureno, & Rea, 2004; Shtarkshall, Carmel, Jaffe-Hirshfield, & Woloski-White, 2009; Smiler, Frankel, & Savin-Williams, 2011; Smith & Udry, 1985).

First kisses occur most frequently at age 13, 14, or 15, at least among boys who kiss girls. Nearly two-thirds of 15-year-olds have had their first kiss and the percentage climbs to 90% of college students (Feiring, 1996; Feldman, Turner, & Araujo, 1999; Regan et al., 2004; Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Smiler et al., 2011). However, the percentages are lower and the ages older for boys who kiss boys, presumably because of the greater implication of the relationship (vs. fooling around or exploration) that might be associated with kissing (Smiler et al., 2011).

First experiences of groping typically occur around age 15 or 16; data suggest a one- to two-year delay between first kissing and first groping is fairly common. There does not seem to be a difference based on sex of partner (Smiler et al., 2011).

Small- and large-scale surveys indicate that a majority of boys have had sex prior to high school graduation. According to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance study, 60 - 64% of 12th grade boys reported they'd had sex in each survey year from 2001 to 2011 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Surveys of college undergraduates indicate as much as 80% have had sex (Regan et al., 2004; Smiler et al., 2011). Regardless of the sample, the average age of first sex is typically around 16, with one study reporting a slightly younger age for first sex among youth with male partners (Smiler et al., 2011). The delay from groping to sex appears to be as long as one year (Smiler et al., 2011).

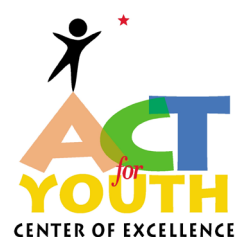
The vast majority of male youth who have female partners follow this sequence, but a minority do not (Shtarkshall et al., 2009; Smiler et al., 2011). In some cases, it may be a matter of starting "late" and progressing through the milestones very quickly (and possibly, but not necessarily, in the expected order). The "expected" sequence is also present among boys who have male partners, although there are many more youth who deviate from this sequence. This is likely due to opportunities for sexual exploration with other boys who do not want/expect a relational context, do not identify as same-sex attracted (and thus may not "return the favor"), or both (Savin-Williams, 2005; Smiler et al., 2011).

Ethnicity plays an important role here. Data from one multi-ethnic study of undergraduates indicated that European-Americans tend to have the highest rates of activity and the lowest average ages of initiation of each behavior; these values were similar to the rates and ages reported above. Asian-Americans' activity rates were 10 - 20% lower and they averaged one to two years older. Undergraduates of Latino or African descent had rates and ages that were between these poles (Regan et al., 2004) but because this study relied on undergraduates, these percentages and ages probably do not apply to youth raised in poverty.

## Challenging the Stereotype

For ideas about how to help boys resist the influence of the pervasive "Casanova" stereotype, see the Andrew Smiler's *Challenging Casanova: Moving beyond the notion that "boys just want sex"* from ACT for Youth.

[www.actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm\\_casanova\\_0913.pdf](http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/pm/pm_casanova_0913.pdf)



## The role of relationships

Romantic relationships are very important to adolescents (Collins, 2003) and as a context for sexual behavior. Indeed, relationships are reported at rates quite similar to kissing (Fiering, 1996) and kissing is often used to signal the presence of a romantic relationship (Welsh, Haugen, Darling, & Grello, 2005).

Among 9th and 10th graders (mostly 14 to 16 years old), 80 - 90% percent of boys typically report some experience with dating (Fiering, 1996; Smiler, 2008); about half have had a dating relationship of twelve weeks or longer (Fiering, 1996). The percentages are similar among high school seniors and undergraduates (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Regan et al., 2004; Smiler et al., 2011), and approximately 16% of 18-year-old boys have been in a relationship of 11 months or longer (Carver et al., 2003). These numbers indicate that dating is quite common among boys, begins as early as kissing, and is more common than any of the sexual behaviors discussed earlier.



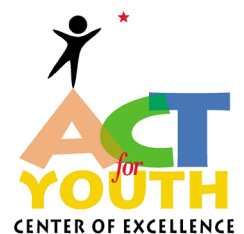
Boys typically highlight companionship and connection, emotional support and intimacy, and to a lesser extent, peer norms as the primary reasons they date (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Connolly, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999, 2004; Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Feiring, 1996; Shulman & Kipnis, 2001; Smiler, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Not surprisingly, they tend to favor partners who are emotionally stable, have a pleasant disposition, are dependable, and are mutually attracted to them, rating these as more important than physical appearance (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001).

On surveys and in interviews, most boys are clear that they generally prefer their sexual contact to occur within the context of a relationship (Bogle, 2008; Perlman & Sprecher, 2012; Smiler, 2013; Welsh et al., 2005). Although they recognize that sexual intimacy is an expected part of a romantic relationship, it's not usually the reason boys get into relationships (Welsh et al., 2005). Indeed, boys' motives for sex often highlight relational concerns, consistent with the cultural trope that sex is a way to demonstrate love (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010; Marston & King, 2006; Meston & Buss, 2007; Ott, Millstein, Ofner, & Helder-Felsher, 2006; Smiler, 2008).

## Characteristics of Casanovas

Promiscuous boys represent a small but noteworthy subgroup. Survey data suggest 15 - 20% of boys and young men have three or more partners in a 12 month span, but only about 5% of guys maintain that rate across three consecutive years (Dariois et al., 2008; Humblet, Paul, & Dickson, 2003; Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 2004).

Youth who see themselves as Casanovas, or "players," have a distinct profile. They typically start having sex at younger ages and report more partners (total, annually)



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than their peers. Players also start dating earlier and report more dating partners (total, annually) (Pleck, Sonsenstein & Ku, 1993, 2004; Smiler, 2013). Unfortunately, they're less likely to use condoms consistently (Dariotis et al., 2008) and more likely to cheat on their partners (Humblet et al., 2003).

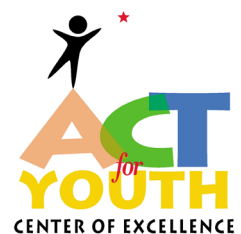
Players hold a particular set of beliefs that contributes to their sexual behavior. They believe that it's perfectly acceptable for teens to have sex, that it's acceptable to have sex prior to marriage, and that having multiple partners is a good thing. They're also competitive, willing to take risks, and believe it's important that others know they're heterosexual; this cluster of attitudes suggests these boys are out to "prove" their sexuality, if not their masculinity, by having as many female partners as possible (Smiler, 2013).

## Summing up

Overall, the research literature indicates that while some boys do adhere to the sexually risky player image, most boys do not fit the stereotype. Instead, boys tend to progress from childhood asexuality through first kisses and ultimately to first sex while having and maintaining romantic relationships. Indeed, sizable percentages of boys have relatively long-term relationships for their age. Further, their decisions about who to date, and thus be sexual with, are more likely to be driven by the partner's personal qualities (e.g., mature, dependable, emotionally available) than their partner's appearance. ★

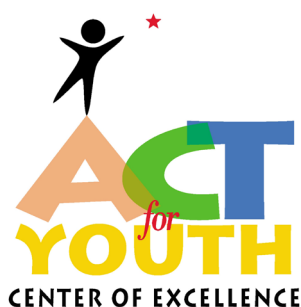
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