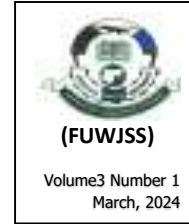


**PEER INFLUENCE AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR
OF ADOLESCENTS IN JOS-NORTH LOCAL
GOVERNMENT AREA SECONDARY SCHOOLS,
PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA**



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Abstract

One of the daunting challenges confronting Nigeria is status offence of juveniles and adolescents indulging in sexual activities which have implications on their reproductive health and educational pursuit. Regrettably, attention has not been given to improving understanding on the role of peer influence which is one of major determinants of adolescents' behaviour. Thus, this study examines peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools within Jos-North Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria. The study employed questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to collect data from students, teachers and parents from three private and public secondary schools within Jos-North Local Government Area. Respondents to the questionnaire consist of 224 female students and there were twelve focus group discussion sessions involving male and female student groups. There were twenty in-depth interviews involving staff, parents and students (both male and female). Findings revealed that peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools through persuasion (using words or actions to encourage unwilling peers to have sex) and coercion (pressuring unwilling peers through threats or derision to have sex). The study's findings established a need to incorporate sex education into curriculum of secondary schools to educate adolescents on best practices with reference to sex and human sexuality. Hence, the study recommends urgent multiple intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral interventions involving schools, religious institutions and the family to stem the trend of adolescents' early sexual engagement among secondary school students in Jos-North Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Peer influence, sexual behaviour, adolescents, persuasion, coercion

Introduction

Adolescent is a major transitional stage during which a progressive disengagement from the family is combined with the desire to test one's independence, partly, through risky conduct which often takes the form of sexual behaviour. Adolescents and young people are persons between 10 and 24 years of age (World Health Organization, 2004). This age is characterized by rapid physical growth and development as well as sexual maturation. At this stage the adolescent begins to experience physical, emotional and social changes, and peer pressure also sets in. The most common peer pressure which teens face may be the pressure to conform; although, individual adolescents vary in the degree to which they acquiesce to conformity pressure (Widman, Choukas-Bradley, Helms, & Prinstein 2016). In other words, the extent to which perceptions of peers' behaviour influence one's own behaviour is likely dependent on individual's level of susceptibility to peer influence (Fishbein, 2010). Large amount of unsupervised time spent with peers at parties, "hanging out" at malls, dating and talking on the phone may contribute to a variety of negative peer pressure in adolescents.

Most students at the secondary school level are at their adolescent age, a period during which they are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure because they are at a stage of development, when they are separating from their parents' influence but have not yet established their own values or understanding about human relationship or the consequences of their behaviour (Robards & Bennet, 2013). Adolescence stage is a period during which teens are typically striving for social acceptance and may be willing to engage in behaviour that will make them to be accepted, even against their better judgment. At this stage, the pattern of thinking is that in which immediate needs tend to have priority over long term ones because teens lack knowledge and skills to make healthy choices; children learn more through interaction with peers (Bearman & Bruckner, 2009).

As a child grows older and more mature, it is not only the family that provides all the education required by the growing child. In school, the child interacts with other children in groups which are influential socializing agents for the developing child. Peer group is the pivot of social change; and during interaction with peers, the child's life is transformed from the helpless child into a mature adult (Peci, 2017). Dias, Amendoeira, Silva and Cruz (2019) have noted that risky sexual behaviour commonly found among the adolescents was linked to peer's influence primarily through relationships, communications, interactions, connections and control within peer groups. Social interactions with peers may expose adolescent students to the cultural norms and values that tend to facilitate risky sexual behaviour. Early

adolescent sexual activity remains a recurring juvenile delinquency and public health issue in most parts of the world (Morris & Rushwan, 2015) with its accompanying complications for the individual and society (Durowade, Babatunde, Omokanye, Elegbede, Ayodele, Adewoye, Adetokunbo, Olomofe, Fawole, Adebola, & Olaniyan, 2017), which may range from an increased incidence of unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, unwanted and teenage pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and risk for sexually transmitted diseases including Human Immune-deficiency Virus/ Acquired Immuno-deficiency Virus (HIV/AIDs).

A study on reproductive health practices of adolescents in secondary schools conducted by Youth Adolescent Reflection and Action Centre (YARAC) in 2021 in the 17 local government areas in Plateau State reported that 61.3% of adolescents aged between 14 – 20 years had sexual experience. From the percentage for the State, 13.8% - a very high percentage compared to other local government areas within the state – were from Jos North Local Government Area. The high percentage of adolescents in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area who are sexually active is a cause for concern because of implications on society as well as their social and reproductive life. However, instead of focusing attention to finding out the cause(s) of large population of adolescents engaging in sexual activities, most studies in Nigeria (Omotosho, 2014; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2016; United Nations International Children Emergency Fund, 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019), concentrated on consequences of adolescents engaging in sexual activities, rarely bothering to find out factors that trigger adolescents' sexual behaviour. This is tantamount to focusing on symptoms instead of the cause. In view of the crucial role peer groups play in adolescents' behaviour, the researchers found it necessary to investigate peer influence on sexual behaviours of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area. We believed that findings from the study will assist parents, teachers, guardians and other stakeholders to broaden their understanding on this status offence. Information from the research would help to develop and improve preventive and interventional policies for the purpose of enhancing disciplined moral upbringing of adolescents in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area.

In this study, we define sexual behaviour as erotic activities that may expose an individual to the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and unplanned pregnancies. Some of these behaviours include unprotected sexual intercourse, multiple sexual partners, forced or coerced sexual intercourse and sexual intercourse for reward.

Reproductive Health Behaviour among Adolescents in Nigerian Schools

Nigeria has been experiencing profound social and moral changes. One of the changes is attitudes towards premarital sex often reported among students in secondary schools (Fatusi & Blum, 2008). Studies on reproductive health behaviour of students in Nigeria indicate that many secondary school adolescents usually initiate sexual intercourse at an early age and engage in high risk sexual behaviour (Akinwale, 2015). The age of first sexual experience is declining, with an increasing number of sexually active adolescents. The period of risk of unprotected sexual activity with all its adverse consequences of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, STIs/HIV is also increasing (Omosho, 2014), and was estimated to be 3.5% in Nigeria in year 2016, the highest among countries in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations International Children Emergency Fund, 2017). A fifth of adolescents in Nigeria aged 15–19 years, were found to have initiated sex (18% males and 22% females) (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2016).

The 2019 Nigeria National HIV/AIDS Indicator and Impact Survey found that 1.9 million people were living with HIV and AIDS in Nigeria as at 2018 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). HIV prevalence among adolescents aged 15–19 in Nigeria was estimated to be 2.9% and 3.2% among young people aged 20–24 years (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). In the statistics on HIV/AIDS which is one of the leading consequences of risky sexual behaviour among adolescents, HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is one of the world's most serious public health challenges. The latest statistics on HIV around the world from Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (2023) shows there were approximately 39 million people across the globe with HIV in 2022. Of these, 37.5 million were adults and 1.5 million were children (<15 years old). In addition, 53% were women and girls. The estimated national HIV prevalence for year 2022 was 2.1% among individuals aged 15–49 years in Nigeria, which corresponds to approximately 2 million people living with HIV (Onovo, Adeyemi, Onime, Kalnoky, Baboyma, Melaku, Lee, Parrish, Adebobola, Ashefor, Ogorry, Goldstein & Meric, 2023). Onovo, et al, (2023), revealed that Nigeria ranks third among countries with highest burden of Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus (HIV) infection in the world. Similarly, Elflein (2023) has noted that Nigeria is one of the countries with highest HIV rates in the world.

Other consequences or implication of negative sexual behaviour of adolescents include social and reproductive health problems such as unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions which may even lead to death, early child bearing, and dropping out of school, among others, have similar high prevalence rate. Although the age and percentage of adolescents who initiate sex at early age in Nigeria is low compared to Ohio, USA, (17.7%

before 14 years, 31.2% before 15 years, 54.9% before 16 years and as high as 68.6% before 17 years (Nnebue, Chimah, Duru, Ilika & Lawoyin, 2016), it calls for caution to keep it low because adolescents are facing a longer period of time during which they are sexually active before marriage.

Theoretical Framework

The social learning theory guided analyses in this study. The social learning theory was propounded by Albert Bandura (1973). The main argument of the social learning theory is that social behaviour is learnt in associating with significant others. For adolescents, sexual behaviour is learnt in associating with significant others who are family members, and/or peers who are in or out of school. The influence of significant others on adolescent behaviour may operate through modeling so that adolescents whose friends indulge in sexual activities are more likely to do same than adolescents whose friends do not. Peer group norms and values may influence children's and adolescents' sexual behaviour.

Gagnon and Simon (1973) suggest that sexual scripts (written by other peers) help to organize and communicate the social expectations about sex. Interpersonal scripts provide the structures by which the individual adolescent presents him/herself to others and responds to others in ways that facilitate sexual engagement. Peers are influential in adolescents' sexual behaviour, therefore, social learning theory best explains peer influence and adolescent sexual behaviour in society.

Research Methodology

This study was cross sectional survey. The study population was male and female in-school students of between 11 and 19 years from Junior Secondary School (JSS) 1 to 3 and Senior Secondary School (SSS) 1 to 3 from selected private and government owned secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area. The study population also included male and female academic staff from selected private and government owned secondary schools within the Local Government Area. Plateau State Ministry of Education Area Directorate Office, Jos, provided the list of names of the 22 public secondary schools and 51 private secondary schools within Jos Local Government Area for year 2023. These schools had a total student population of 21,506 as at the time of this research (Jos North Directorate of Education, 2023); this formed the sampling frame. The researchers used the Raosoft Sample Calculator to calculate the sample size of 224 for the quantitative data.

The researchers used multi-staged sampling technique to select the schools that participated in the study. First, the researchers stratified the schools into private and public secondary schools, and the fish-bowl method

used to select three private and public secondary schools each for the study; all the selected schools were co-educational. We applied the principle of equal status to select equal number of participants (37) from each school and 6 participants from each class. Then, we selected arms of Junior Secondary School (JSS) 1 to 3 and Senior Secondary School (SSS) 1 to 3 from the schools chosen through simple balloting. Participants in the study from each of the selected classes were picked on first-to-hand basis. However, we gave preference to selecting participants we thought would have better understanding of the subject matter because of their puberty age.

Questionnaire, in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussion guides were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data; the tools were pre-tested and adjustments made where necessary before we proceeded to collect data. Twenty in-depth interviews (five each with female secondary school students, male secondary school students, parents of the secondary school students, and members of staff from the secondary schools) were conducted for the study. We also conducted twelve focus group discussion (FGD) sessions (six each male students and female secondary school student groups). Participants in IDI and FGDs were purposively selected because of their perceived knowledge on the subject matter for the study. Each FGD session had between 7-12 participants.

Triangulation of the methods enabled us validate or authenticate data collected through various methods; it also provided information to compliment that from alternate source and/or provide alternative explanation(s). The quantitative method enabled us determine precisely peer influence on adolescents' sexual behaviour among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area. On the other hand, the qualitative method provided research participants an opportunity to tell their story based on personal experiences. Two research assistants assisted the researchers with the data collection for the study. The data collection process was done within ten days. The quantitative data from the study was processed using the computer software, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 21. The data from the study has been presented in tables and bar charts from which analysis and interpretations have been made. Qualitative data from the study was transcribed and have been used here for content analysis.

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the Plateau State Ministry of Education, the Education Department within Jos North Local Government Area as well as Administrative Units of the selected secondary schools before the commencement of the study. Details of the study were made available on the consent form in simple English language; participation in the study was voluntary, and in keeping to confidentiality

and anonymity, we have concealed identity of participants. Furthermore, the study did not expose the researchers or participants to any harm.

Results and Discussions

In this section of the paper, we have presented and analyzed results from the study on peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area.

Table 1: Participants' opinion on peer influence on sexual behaviour in Jos North L. G. A.

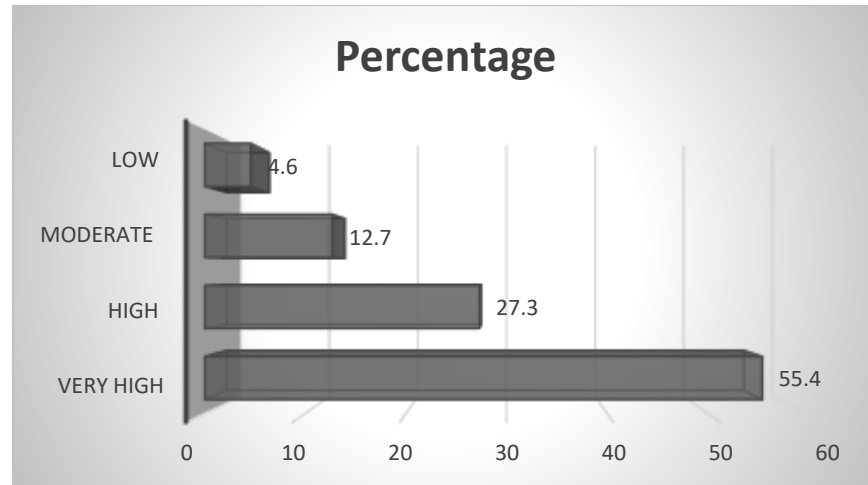
Peers influence sexual behaviour	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	120	54.
No	39	17.7
Can't Say	61	27.7
Total	220	100

More than half (n120=54.6%) of participants in table 1 above agreed that peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area. However, 17.7% (n=39) participants disagreed, while 27.7% (n=61) participants could not say whether peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in the Local Government Area. This is in line with findings by Alex-Hart et al (2015), and Ndebele (2017) who asserted that adolescence sexual behaviour is influenced by peer pressure. The finding is also similar to studies by Seth (2017) and Borges (2007). Seth reported that peer influence was a determining factor for sexual behaviour; he stated that without the influence of peers, most of the adolescents who had initiated sexual intercourse early would have delayed till they were matured enough. Analytically it could be inferred that peers influence other peers to engage in sex.

Many participants in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews made a similar revelation; they agreed that adolescents in secondary schools learn most sexual behaviour and practices from peers, and these influence their sexual behaviour. Although some participants argued that some of the sexual behaviour of adolescents are learned from family relations, most of them agreed that a greater part of it is learned from peers through socialization. Peers play an especially important role in sexual socialization – the process through which adolescents learn and adopt attitudes and norms regarding sexual behaviour and relationships (Widman et al., 2016; Eyiah-Bediako, Quansah, Omotosho & Hagan Jr. 2021). The importance of peer influence for sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area is not surprising, given key characteristics

such as puberty, sexual desires, identity seeking and development process which occur during this developmental period (Kroger, 2003).

Figure 1: Rating of peer influence on in-school adolescents' sexual behaviour



In figure 1, most participants (more than half) in the study rated peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area very high (55.4%), or high (27.3%); but 12.7% participants in the study rated peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in the Local Government Area as moderate. On the other hand, 4.6% participants believed that peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area is low.

Most participants in focus group discussions rated peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area very high. This view was also shared by many participants in in-depth interviews including a male teacher at Peace Academy, a private secondary school at Jenta Mangoro in Jos, who argued that:

Through their peers most of these students learn a lot in the school. Sometimes some of them may resist the [peer] influence at the beginning, but will later succumb to the pressure since it is becoming like a norm among school adolescents.

Students may respect the final choice of their peers to engage in premarital sexual behaviour than that of their parents because of peer pressure. Many adolescents engage in sex as a result of peer influence which has a negative and detrimental effect on their sexual behaviour, as well as their way of life. Few parents and teachers from some of the secondary schools observed that

peer group members serve as model, and influence behaviour and attitudes of adolescents through persuasion by using words or action to encourage unwilling peers to have sex. In some instances, peer group members pressure unwilling peers through threats or derision to have sex. This corroborates findings by Allen, Porter and McFarland (2016) who had earlier noted that behaviour problems that occur during adolescent (particularly problems such as risky sexual practices and violent behaviour) is product of peer influence and friends.

Most participants in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were of the opinion that peers influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area is high. A female student from Government Secondary School, Laranto observed during a focus group discussion that:

So many of us learn about sexual activities and behaviour from our friends in school and at home or sometimes even from our extended family members who are our peers.

A male student from Government Secondary School, Tudun Wada, in Jos, stated during a focus group discussion:

I learn so many things about sex from my male friends. Sometimes they share the books, movie, or materials with me. Sometimes I learn from our discussions.

Some participants in focus group discussions mentioned that peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary is not restricted to peers or friends in schools, family members who are of the same age group with adolescents but out of school also influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary school.

Table 2: Ways peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in schools Jos North LGA

Ways	Frequency	Percentage
Persuasion	151	68.6
Forcefully	42	19.1
Others	27	12.3
Total	220	100

Peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area through persuasion, forcefully or through other means. In table 2, majority (n151=68.6%) participants believed that peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area through persuasion. Borges (2007) reported that some adolescents initiated sexual intercourse just because they needed

to be accepted into a peer group. Furthermore, 19.1% (n=42) participants believed that peers influence sexual practices of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area forcefully. The World Health Organization (2017) maintains that sexual initiation in young adolescent age is usually due to a form of sexual violence or coercion. Alex-Hart, Okagua, and Opara (2015) had earlier noted that sexual coercion as a reason for initiating sexual intercourse early was particularly high among adolescent females; and it reflects the burden of sexual abuse of female children in our society, Nigeria. For 12.3% (n=27) participants, other ways peers influence sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area include: intimacy with the opposite sex, social and print media. Our finding here corroborates that of Allen, Porter and McFarland (2016), who found that students having continuous contact with peers and friends in the surrounding environment increased the likelihood of indulging in risky sexual behaviour. Peers groups play important role in sexual socialization, in the process, adolescents adopt attitudes regarding sexual behaviour and relationships through discussions, sharing messages, watching of pornography video with peers or coercion. Eyiah-Bediako et al. (2021), Widman et al. (2016), and Kelly (n.d.) have noted that peer pressure causes adolescents to engage in sexual intercourse even when they are not prepared for it because adolescents have the potential of internalizing the opinion of their peers and externalizing the same when exposed to destabilizers and triggers such as the presence of a sexual partner.

Many parents and teachers who participated in in-depth interviews lamented the wave of peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area. However, some of them reiterated the role of the social media. Some students who participated in IDI also noted that the internet and social media contribute to sexual activeness of adolescents. One of these was a seventeen-year-old female student in SSS 2 from Anwarul Faidah Academy, a private secondary school in Angwan Rogo in Jos, who revealed that:

There are different sites and groups on social media and the internet that we go to get all manner of things related to sex. Nude pictures and groups where issues like that are discussed.

In the same vein, an eighteen-year-old male student in SSS 2 from Government Secondary School, Tudun Wada, Jos, noted during an in-depth interview that:

We are usually introduced to different sites and links by friends on social media. And sometimes from one site you are given the option to link up with more sites. This makes us know a lot about sex.

A female teacher in Government Secondary School, Gangere in Jos lamented that "...the social media provide all sorts of information to very young male and female students. One of these information is pornography; and it is peers that introduce them to innocent young ones". Peer group members serve as model and influence behaviour and attitudes; they provide easy access to information, encouragement and appropriate social setting for consumption of sexual materials and sex.

Table 3: How often peers in secondary schools Jos North Local Government Area discuss sex

How often	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	105	47.7
Often	51	23.2
Sometimes	32	14.6
Rarely	17	7.7
Never	15	6.8
Total	220	100

How frequent adolescents discuss sex can influence their sexual behaviour. Participants' opinions in table 3 shows that very often (n105=47.7%) or often (n51=23.2%) adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area discuss sex. Some participants (n32=14.6%) noted that adolescents in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area sometimes discuss sex, or rarely do so (n17=7.7%). However, 6.8% (n=15) participants held that adolescents in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area newer discuss sex.

Many participants in in-depth interviews and focus discussions noted that discussions between adolescents in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area mostly centered on sex. For instance, a seventeen-year-old male student in SSS1 from Saint Paul's College, a secondary school owned by the Catholic church in Jos revealed:

You see, most of us students are always discussing issues relating to our girlfriends and boyfriends. Whenever you see two or three school adolescents 'gisting', it is mostly about issues related to sex, except for just few among us who students refer to as 'holy' 'holy'.

Discussions between peers which centre on sex would most likely influence sexual behaviour of adolescents; and, information on sexual matters comes from peers who may be equally inexperienced, uninformed, incorrectly informed or from the media (introduced to some adolescents by their peers).

Table 4: Peer groups which influence adolescent students' sexual behaviour

Groups	Frequency	Percentage
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Male to male	20	9.1
Female to female	28	12.7
Male to female	172	78.2
Total	220	100

Male to male relationship among adolescent peers in secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area has low (n20=9.1%) influence on sexual behaviour (table 3). Similarly, female to female relation among adolescents in secondary schools within the local government area does not have much influences (n28=12.7%) on sexual behaviour among peers. However, majority (n172=78.2%) of participants in the study believed that male to female relationships or interactions among adolescents in secondary school influence sexual behaviour among students in Jos North Local Government Area. Gonzalez-Rivas and Peterson (2018) also found male to female group or relationship has more influences on sexual behaviour, causing adolescents to be sexually active, improving sexual knowledge, attributes and behavioural practices. Adolescents, regardless of the sex difference, moving with friends who engage in sexual activities are influenced to engage sex.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study conclude that peers negatively influence sexual behaviour of adolescent students in secondary schools within Jos North Local Government Area. However, peer influence on sexual behaviour of adolescents in secondary schools within the local government area is most associated with male – female relationships; it has greatest influence on sexual behaviour of members. Within peer groups, members persuade or coerce each other to engage in sexual activities. This is a worrisome trend that needs to be curtailed. Consequently, the study recommends that sex education should be incorporated into curriculum of secondary schools to educate adolescents on best practices with reference to sex and human sexuality. Lack of correct information and proper guidance about sex and sexuality make young people vulnerable to diseases, prone to physical, emotional and economic exploitation.

In addition, parents have a moral duty to sex-educate their children on dangers of early sexual activities; and to censor the kind of friends their wards keep to avert negative peer social influence on them. The relationship adolescents have with parents may be a mitigating factor of the negative influence by peers. Communication between parents and adolescents can serve as a protective factor for sexual misconduct (Newman, Harrison, Dashiff & Davies, 2008; Klu, Agordoh, Azagba, Acquah, Doegah, Ofosu, Ansah, & Gyapong, 2022). Intimate family interaction can create a closer

relation between parents and adolescents, thus, strengthening a positive relationship and avoiding certain risky behaviour.

There should also be greater parental monitoring. The greater the parental monitoring, the lower the likelihood of adolescents' involvement in risk sexual behaviour would be. There is a positive influence associated with parental monitoring, it can help protect against premature and reckless sexual behaviour, but not condom use (Adegunju, 2020; Klu, et al, 2022). By parental monitoring we mean parents' knowledge about their children's activities, where they go, who they hang out with and what they do. Parental monitoring and communication with adolescents can protect peers from being involved in risky sexual behaviour.

Lastly, there is a dire need for urgent multiple intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral interventions involving schools, religious institutions, and the family to stem the trend and reduce the devastating negative psycho-social and health sequels of adolescents' early sexual engagement. This will help to reduce the devastating negative psycho-social and health consequences of adolescents' sexual behaviour.

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