



Onset Trajectories of Sexting and Other Sexual Behaviors Across High School: A Longitudinal Growth Mixture Modeling Approach

Growth mixture modeling was used to identify classes of onset trajectories for adolescent sexual behaviors and better understand the normative contexts and the development of sexting behavior.

Sexting behavior for this study was defined as:

“sending sexually explicit messages, images, or videos to a romantic partner”

This definition was derived from focus groups of middle and high school students, methods consistent with calls for a comprehensive and youth-defined rationalization.

429 high school students (54% female) completed annual assessments of sexual behavior over three-years



Sexting was examined within the context of other emergent sexual behaviors to shed light on developmental features of sexting.

Across classes, sexting tended to co-emerge with genital contact behaviors, regardless of differences in the timing or pace of emergent sexual behaviors.

Lifetime Incident Rates (%) Sexting by Grade



Roughly half the adolescents in our sample reported sexting by Grade 11, supporting a view of sexting as a normative type of communication between adolescent sexual partners

Four classes of behavior identified:

9% Postponement

9% of students had no behaviors other than hand-holding and kissing initiated by Grade 11

44% Gradual Onset

44% of students reported sexting and other sexual behaviors emerging incrementally across high school

31% Continuous Onset

31% of students reported sexting and other sexual behaviors within the first three years of high school

15% Early Onset

15% of students reported the initiation of sexting and all other sexual behaviors prior to or by the end of Grade 9