

# Department of Research Abstracts

## **PEDIATRICIAN'S ASSESSMENT OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL ACTIVITY: WHAT'S ABUSE?**

**WHAT'S NOT?** Nancy D. Kellogg, Tammy P. Hurley, Karen G. O'Connor.. Center for Miracles, San Antonio, TX; American Academy of Pediatrics, Elk Grove Village, IL. **Presented at the 2008 Pediatric Academic Societies Annual Meeting.**

**Background:** There has been a trend in recent years in which state laws requiring the report of sexual abuse are interpreted to include adolescents' consensual sexual activity. Little is known about how pediatricians assess an adolescent's sexual activity and determine whether it is abusive and reportable.

**Objective:** To measure pediatricians' reported attitudes regarding factors in the decision to report adolescent sexual activity as abuse.

**Design/Methods:** National random sample, mailed Periodic Survey of American Academy of Pediatrics U.S. members, 2007 (N=1605; response=54%). The survey focused on sexual violence prevention and included questions assessing attitudes toward reporting adolescent sexual activity as abusive. Analyses were limited to pediatricians who provide health supervision (HS) (n=542).

**Results:** Pediatricians consider a number of factors besides the age of the adolescent in deciding whether to report sexual acts as abuse. Only 26% of pediatricians think that all sexual activity involving a child under age 17 should be reported as child abuse. On a 4-point scale ranging from not at all to very important, about 70% each think it is very important to consider the following in deciding whether to report the sexual activity as abuse: age of the other individual engaged in the sexual act(s), the presence of bodily injuries and/or the presence of genital injuries. More than half (56%) say it is very important to consider the adolescent's ability to consent to the sexual activity, and 49% think age of the adolescent is important in deciding whether abuse has occurred. Fewer pediatricians think adolescents' understanding of risks involved (35%), or physical maturity (26%) are very important factors in deciding whether to report.

**Conclusions:** Pediatricians do not rely solely on age criteria in deciding whether to report adolescent sexual activity as sexual abuse. They consider the presence of injuries very important; however, since the literature shows that bodily and genital injuries are uncommon in abuse and can occur with either abusive or consensual sexual contact, educating pediatricians on the appropriate interpretation of injuries, or lack thereof, may improve their ability to assess whether adolescent sexual activity is abusive and reportable.

