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Association between emotional intelligence and adolescent risky sexual behavior

Zależność między inteligencją emocjonalną i ryzykownymi zachowaniami seksualnymi u młodzieży¹

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Abstract: Risky sexual behavior of young people have a number of adverse consequences in the health, psychological and social dimension. Therefore, it is extremely important to undertake actions promoting proper sexual behaviors among young people and more conscious and responsible attitudes towards this sphere of life. In order for the introduced educational and preventive actions to be effective, it is necessary to precisely recognize the factors protecting from risky sexual behavior and the factors increasing the risk of such behaviors. The paper attempts to answer the question about the role of emotional intelligence of adolescents as a protective factor against risky sexual behavior. The first part outlines the problem of risky sexual behavior of adolescents - its types, sources and consequences. Next, the most important models of emotional intelligence are presented, and its relation to the effectiveness of functioning on different levels of life is discussed. Finally, the article describes the relations between emotional intelligence of adolescents and the tendency to engage in risky sexual behavior, referring to both psychological theories and empirical data.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, risky sexual behavior, adolescents

Abstrakt: Ryzykowne zachowania seksualne młodzieży niosą szereg niekorzystnych konsekwencji w wymiarze zdrowotnym, psychologicznym i społecznym. Stąd też niezwykle ważne jest podejmowanie działań propagujących u młodzieży właściwe zachowania seksualne i bardziej świadome oraz odpowiedzialne postawy wobec tej sfery życia. Aby wprowadzane oddziaływania edukacyjne i profilaktyczne były skuteczne, konieczne jest dokładne rozpoznanie czynników chroniących przed ryzykownymi zachowaniami seksualnymi, oraz czynników zwiększających ryzyko takich zachowań. W artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o rolę inteligencji emocjonalnej młodzieży jako czynnika chroniącego przed ryzykownymi zachowaniami seksualnymi. W pierwszej części zarysowano problematykę ryzykownych zachowań seksualnych młodzieży – ich rodzajów, źródeł oraz konsekwencji. Następnie przedstawiono najważniejsze modele inteligencji emocjonalnej oraz omówiono jej związek z efektywnością funkcjonowania na różnych płaszczyznach życia. Wreszcie opisano zależności między inteligencją emocjonalną młodzieży a tendencją do podejmowania ryzykownych zachowań seksualnych, odwołując się zarówno do teorii psychologicznych, jak i danych empirycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: inteligencja emocjonalna, ryzykowne zachowania seksualne, młodzież

¹ Polska wersja: <https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/Presentations0/2021-3-Knop.pdf>

1. Adolescent risky sexual behavior - types, causes and consequences

Adolescence is a special developmental period in human life. This is when transition from the world of children to the world of adults takes place then. Adolescents seek their place in life, intensely shape their value system, and try to form their place in the social environment. It is a time of intensive learning, experimenting and making important decisions. As Jankowiak and Gulczyńska (2014, p. 173) write, the personal identity that emerges at that time "is the result of integrating personal choices with the expectations of society, accepting some alternatives and rejecting others." These important decisions also involve the sexual sphere, as adolescence is a time of discovering one's own sexual identity, engaging in new sexual behaviors, and engaging in first intimate relationships (Jankowiak, Gulczyńska, 2014). The transition from childhood sexuality to adult sexuality is one of the important developmental tasks of adolescence, and the correct course of this process is crucial for the later sexual and procreative health of a person (cf. e.g. Woynarowska, 2015). The appearance of sexual desire in this period results in increased interest in this sphere of life and motivates adolescents to undertake various forms of sexual activity. One of the most important tasks an adolescent has to face is acquiring the ability to create an intimate relationship integrating physical and emotional closeness as a whole composed of qualitatively different but equivalent elements (Jankowiak, Gulczyńska, 2014). However, this is not easy primarily because of the marked sexual disintegration of adolescence, i.e., the disjunction between emotionality, arousal, and desire (see, e.g., Izdebski, Wąż, Mazur, Kowalewska, 2017). Probably in no other developmental period is the disproportion between sexual maturity and psychological maturity as great as in adolescence. Biological maturation then significantly precedes emotional, social, and moral maturation (Izdebski, Niemiec, Wąż, 2011).

Tremendous developmental challenges combined with emerging physical and psychological maturity, make adolescents particularly vulnerable to a range of dangers and behavioral disorders. As research indicates, individuals in this developmental period are particularly predisposed to risky behaviors (Gołembowska, 2017; Lewczuk, 2018), i.e. actions that carry the risk of negative consequences for the individual's physical and mental health on the one hand, and for their social environment on the other (Dzielska, 2017; Ostaszewski, 2017; see also Baranowska, 2016).

According to research, these types of behaviors tend to be cumulative - engaging in one type of risky behavior can increase the likelihood of engaging in other risky behaviors, further increasing health risks (Imacka, Balsa, 2012; Lemańczyk, 2019; Ostaszewski, 2017). For example, researchers point out that the use of various types of psychoactive substances promotes risky sexual behavior in adolescents. This was evidenced, among other things, by a

study by Donovan and colleagues (Donovan et al., 1991), which found that precocious sexual activity, alcohol and marijuana use, and delinquency were linked.

Among the various types of risky behaviors, those that relate to the sexual sphere are often mentioned. Broadly speaking, risky sexual behaviors are "behaviors that have repercussions for the individual and their environment in the area of sexuality" (Lubelska, 2010, p. 138). A similar definition is cited by Baranowska (2016, p. 520) according to which these are "sexual activities that cause many repercussions for the physical, psychosocial and sexual development of the individuals who engage in them". Machaj, Roszak, and Stankowska (2010) list the following criteria for recognizing risky sexual behavior: 1) threat of loss of health or life, bodily harm, 2) evocation of difficult emotions and adverse psychological states, 3) exposure to unplanned, unwanted pregnancy, 4) lack of control over one's own body and/or mind, 5) pursuit of non-sexual goals by sexual behavior. 6) transgression of general human values (e.g., coercion, violence), 7) violation of norms of social coexistence. In the literature on the subject, risky behaviors of adolescents often include precocious sexual initiation, not using or using ineffective methods of contraception, cohabitation with multiple partners, frequent changes of partners, casual sexual contacts, engaging in various types of erotic games, during which sexual intercourse takes place, including group sex, sexual violence, sponsorship, sexting, i.e. sending to others via instant messaging content, photos or videos of a sexual nature with one's own participation (Baranowska, 2016; Imacka, Balsa, 2012; Lewczuk, 2018; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, Peeters, 2016).

Adolescent risky sexual behavior is a growing social, psychological, and health problem. It carries a number of risks, such as increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, risk of unplanned, too early pregnancy (and related complications for mother and child, such as prematurity or higher infant mortality), risk of abortion, as well as a number of psychological consequences (e.g. increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, aggression and low self-esteem; Imacka, Balsa, 2012). Negative sexual experiences often evoke strong emotions, e.g., anxiety or repulsion, disturb the process of forming proper bonds with others, contribute to lower mood and deterioration of psychological well-being, and may lead to the formation of neurotic sexual attitudes (Lewczuk, 2018; Moore, Harden, Mendle, 2014; Wróblewska, 2021). At the same time, data collected in various countries, including Poland, show that the propensity of adolescents to engage in risky sexual behavior is increasing. In the last two decades, the percentage of adolescents initiating sexual life has increased, and at the same time the age of this initiation has decreased (e.g., Lewczuk, 2018; Woynarowska, 2015). This raises the question of the sources of risky sexual behavior in adolescents..

Determinants of risky sexual behavior can be found on several levels. First, the cause may be insufficient sexual education at school and in the family (e.g., Coakley et al., 2017;

Długołęcka, Lew-Starowicz, 2010). Second, the family situation of the young person may be important, e.g., family structure, relationships between individual family members, parental attitudes of the mother and father, etc. (e.g., Izdebski, Wąż, Mazur, Kowalewska, 2017; Przybysz-Zaremba, 2017). Third, peer group influences are not insignificant (e.g., Keto, Tilahun, Mom, 2020; McCord, 1990). Peers can not only act as counselors and impart knowledge about sex, but also provide certain patterns of behavior in this sphere. Social influences, however, cannot be limited only to the environment closest to the young person. We should also remember about the influence of the general socio-cultural context in which young people are brought up. Some researchers draw attention to the phenomenon called "sexualization of culture" or "sexplosion", i.e. "widespread invasion of the topic of sexuality in the arena of social life, which takes place through the mass media (...), conveying a simplified image of sexuality, its banalization and trivialization" (Królikowska, 2009, p. 20; see also Lewczuk, 2018). This oversaturation of the content available on the Internet, television, youth press, etc. with sexual themes may have a negative impact on adolescents, making them more inclined to initiate intercourse at a very young age and to undertake more advanced, often risky sexual activities, and may additionally cause sex to become mutonomized, i.e. detached from other spheres of functioning (Jankowiak, Gulczyńska, 2014; Imacka, Balsa, 2012; Lewczuk, 2018). In addition to the aforementioned social influences, adolescents' risky sexual behavior is also conditioned by individual factors. Among them, those related to the emotional sphere are often mentioned - emotional immaturity, inability to control emotions, irritability, explosiveness, hyperactivity, tendency to aggression (e.g. Baranowska, 2016).

While describing factors predisposing to risky sexual behaviors, it is also worth mentioning protective factors. These include, among others: individual characteristics (e.g. level of intelligence, learning abilities, attention skills, verbal skills, self-control mechanisms, social skills), supportive relationships with close people and positive features of the family environment (e.g., secure attachment between parents and child, emotional support shown to the child by the parent(s), democratic style of upbringing) and support coming from outside the family environment and features of the local environment, e.g. safe neighbourhood, good school climate, teacher support (Ostaszewski, Rustecka-Krawczyk, Wójcik, 2009).

Researchers agree that in order to function properly in the sexual sphere, it is necessary to achieve a certain level of psychological maturity (Machaj, Roszak, Stankowska, 2010). Emotional maturity seems to be of particular importance here. Imieliński (1984) believes that such emotional dimensions as: the predominance of higher, social feelings over lower, egoistic ones, emotional balance, i.e. the ability to control strong negative emotions, emotional independence from influences and pressures of the social environment, the lack of aggressiveness and sense of low value, the ability to adapt to life in society by shaping

tolerance, understanding and empathy, striving for personality development (altruistic feelings) are decisive for correct sexual functioning. Such emotional maturity is manifested by the maturity of relationships, and thus responsible functioning in the sphere of sexual life (Machaj, Roszak, Stankowska, 2010). On the other hand, the lack of emotional maturity predisposes to engaging in risky sexual behaviors that serve the purpose of coping with negative emotions, eliminating emotional tension, building self-esteem, and establishing social relations, which, however, are inappropriate because they are based on, for example, subordination, violence, or cruelty (Machaj, Roszak, Stankowska, 2010). As the literature on the subject consistently refers to emotional maturity and the possession of certain emotional abilities as factors potentially reducing the likelihood of adolescents undertaking risky sexual behaviours, in this context it is worth taking a closer look at the meaning of emotional intelligence.

2. Emotional intelligence and its role in human functioning

Currently, two opposing approaches dominate in considering emotional intelligence. Some researchers define it very broadly, including in its scope not only cognitive abilities but also personality traits, i.e. dispositions that determine tendencies (e.g., Matczak, Knopp, 2013). These types of models are referred to as mixed models. For example, Goleman (1999), perhaps the most well-known representative of this trend, defines emotional intelligence as self-control, drive, persistence, and motivational ability, while in his later work he writes about its five areas - understanding emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing others' emotions, and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Another researcher, Bar-On (1997), defines emotional intelligence as "a range of noncognitive abilities, competencies, and skills that enable an individual to cope effectively with environmental demands and pressures" (Bar-On, 1997, p. 3). The researcher lists five areas of functioning that he believes are components of emotional intelligence and are important for success. These are intra- and interpersonal skills, adaptability, stress management, and overall mood.

On the other hand, in the second approach emotional intelligence is understood in accordance with the traditional way of defining intelligence, as a set of abilities, or dispositions of an instrumental, agility nature, determining the ability to process emotional information (e.g., Matczak, Knopp, 2013). Representatives of this current are Mayer and Salovey (Mayer, Caruso, Salovey, 2016), who believe that emotional intelligence includes: the ability to accurately perceive, evaluate and express emotions, the ability to assimilate emotions into cognitive processes, the ability to understand and analyze emotions and use emotional knowledge, as well as the ability to regulate emotions and emotional control.

A similar distinction was introduced by Petrides and Furnham (2001), who draw attention to the difference in constructs such as emotional intelligence understood as an

ability and emotional intelligence understood as a personality trait. The former determines so-called "maximal behaviors," i.e., behaviors that an individual displays under particularly motivating conditions, while the latter determines typical behaviors, i.e., behaviors that are most often displayed in everyday life situations. In other words, emotional intelligence-ability determines one's capabilities, while emotional intelligence-trait determines one's preferences, so it is not an instrumental disposition, but a motivational one (e.g., Petrides, Furnham, 2001; Matczak, Knopp, 2013). It should be added that mixed models refer rather to emotional intelligence understood as a trait, while Salovey and Mayer's model - to emotional intelligence understood as an ability. The distinction between the two types of emotional intelligence is extremely important, because despite the use of the same term - "emotional intelligence", depending on the approach, it may be understood in completely different ways.

According to research, both emotional intelligence understood as a trait and emotional intelligence understood as an ability are associated with the effectiveness of human functioning in various areas of life. However, the most significant role of emotional intelligence is revealed in relation to interpersonal relations. It turns out that people with high emotional intelligence are more positively perceived by others, more popular, and their relationships with other people are more intense and characterized by greater durability and higher quality (Alonso-Ferres, Valor-Segura, Expósito, 2019; Antonysamy, Asgarali Patel, Velayudhan, 2020; Gündüz, 2019; Negi, Balda, 2019; O'Connor, Izadikhah, Abedini, Jackson, 2018; Szczygieł, Weber, 2017; Wollny, Jacobs, Pabel, 2020). They also cope better with conflict and interpersonal problems (Alonso-Ferres, Valor-Segura, Expósito, 2019; Monteiro, Balogun, 2015; Vashisht, Singh, Sharma, 2018). Emotionally intelligent people are more likely to engage in altruistic and cooperative behaviors (Barragan Martin et al., 2021; Enwereuzor, Ugwu, 2021; Huang, Shi, Liu, 2018; Mandal, Mehera, 2017). At the same time, they themselves are more likely and willing to use social support, have a better perception of the available support network, and are more satisfied with it (Gecaite-Stonciene, Levickiene, Mickuviene, 2016; Malinauskas, Malinauskiene, 2020; Metaj-Macula, 2017; Rey, Extremera, Sánchez-Álvarez, 2019). However, the role of emotional intelligence cannot be reduced only to functioning in interpersonal relationships. Research shows that it also promotes psychological well-being and physical health (Antiniene, Lekavičiene, 2017; Baudry, Grynberg, Dassonneville, Lelorain, Christophe, 2018; Delhom, Gutierrez, Lucas-Molina, Meléndez, 2017; Extremera, Quintana-Orts, Mérida-López, Rey, 2018; Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera, 2016; Gascó, Badenes, Plumed, 2018; Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, 2016). Furthermore, emotional intelligence is positively associated with levels of self-esteem, feelings of happiness and life satisfaction, greater resilience to stress, and adaptive coping styles (Afolabi, Balogun, 2017; Cejudo, Rodrigo-Ruiz, López-Delgado, Losada, 2018; Davis, 2018; Extremera, Rey, 2016; Lea, Davis, Mahoney, Qualter, 2019; Park,

Dhandra, 2017; Pérez-Fuentes, Molero Jurado, del Pino, Gázquez Linares, 2019; Szczygieł, Mikolajczak, 2017; Vashisht, Singh, Sharma, 2018). Emotional intelligence may also be one of the accurate predictors of school, academic, and career success (Aritzeta et al., 2016; Nguyen, Nham, Takahashi, 2019; Vratskikh, Al-Lozi, Maqableh, 2016; Urquijo, Extremera, Azanza, 2019). In turn, its deficiencies may increase the risk of psychiatric disorders, suicide attempts, aggressive and pathological behaviors, and the use of stimulants and addictions (Domínguez-García, Fernández-Berrocal, 2018; Extremera, Quintana-Orts, Mérida-López, Rey, 2018; García-Sancho, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal, 2017; Gonzalez-Yubero, Palomera, Lázaro-Visa, 2019; Leite, Martins, Trevizol, Noto, Brietzke, 2019; Megias, Gómez-Leal, Gutiérrez-Cobo, Cabello, Fernández-Berrocal, 2018; Trinidad, Johnson, 2002). The cited studies show that the importance of emotional intelligence is revealed in virtually all spheres of human functioning. Based on this, it can be hypothesized that it will also play a role in behaviors of sexual nature. The next part of the article will be devoted to this issue.

3.The relationship between emotional intelligence and engaging in risky sexual behavior in adolescents

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to date on the relationship between emotional intelligence and sexual risk behaviors. Most of the available data concern either risky behaviors in general or non-sexual risky behaviors. Nevertheless, first conclusions can already be drawn from them.

As mentioned earlier, empirical evidence shows that individuals endowed with higher emotional capacities are less likely to engage in behaviors that threaten their mental health and well-being. Emotional intelligence is inversely associated with, among other things, the use of psychoactive substances, addictions, and actions that violate social norms or criminality. Such behaviors can be considered risky.

One component of emotional intelligence seems particularly important here - the ability to regulate emotions. As Mayer and Salovey argue (e.g., Mayer, Caruso, Salovey, 2016), the essence of this ability is, among other things, coping with negative emotions, the ability to modulate their intensity, to control them, while being open to them and avoiding suppressing them altogether. The literature theorizes that deficits in this ability - dysfunctional emotion regulation styles and highly emotionally motivated behavior - may be an important predictor of risky behavior in adolescence (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, Albino, 2003). Adolescents who lack the ability to manage their emotional experiences may have a stronger tendency to engage in risky behaviors in an attempt to cope with negative affect or in an effort to block, suppress their feelings (e.g., Hessler, Katz, 2010). Research has found that both total surrender to emotions, a complete lack of control over them, and avoidance or suppression of emotions are detrimental. Both extremes of abnormal emotional regulation

increase the tendency for risky behavior (Cooper, Shapiro, Powers, 1998). For example, a link has been shown between deficits in the ability to cope with one's emotions and reaching for stimulants to relieve unpleasant experiences (Cooper, Russell, Skinner, Frone, Mudar, 1992; Farrell, Danish, 1993; Wong et al., 2013). Experiencing strong anger or sadness may be particularly relevant here. A number of studies have found that if an adolescent is unable to cope with these emotions, the likelihood of them turning to psychoactive substances increases (Swaim, Oetting, Edwards, Beavais, 1989). In turn, better awareness and the ability to regulate experienced anger have been associated with a lower likelihood of reaching for hard drugs (Hessler, Katz, 2010).

Empirical data suggest that low emotional regulation abilities may also be a significant predictor of adolescents' sexual risk behaviors (Hadley, Houck, Barker, Senocak, 2015; Rizor, Callands, Desrosiers, Kershaw, 2017). This is explained, among other things, by the fact that in adolescence the capacity for emotional regulation is still in the formative stage (Cole, Martin, Dennis, 2004), and thus individuals in this developmental period are still characterized by increased impulsivity, sensation seeking, and a general tendency to take risks, which forms the basis for sexual risk behavior (Giugliano, 2008).

In addition to emotional regulation skills, the ability to perceive and understand one's own and others' emotions, as well as the ability to express emotions, also play an important role in adolescent functioning. Deficits in these lead to problematic behavior and disrupted relationships with others (e.g., Hadley et al., 2015; Hessler, Katz, 2010; Rizor et al., 2017). Researchers have argued that engaging in risky sexual behaviors, including sexual compulsivity and intense sexual sensation seeking, may be one way that adolescents with deficits in emotional expression skills cope with negative affect and distress (Gross, 2014).

Rizor and colleagues (2017) examined the relationship between the two aforementioned components of emotional intelligence, the ability to express emotions and the ability to regulate emotions, and risky sexual behavior in adolescents and young adults. The results confirmed that deficits in both abilities are associated with an increased tendency to engage in risky sexual behavior. A unique part of this research is to examine the impact of the emotional intelligence of the intimate relationship partner on a person's sexual behavior. They found that teens may take more sexual risks when their partners are characterized by low emotional regulation and expression. The researchers explain this by saying that deficiencies in these abilities in a partner cause more conflict in the relationship, higher levels of stress and tension, which the adolescent may try to alleviate through risky sexual behavior.

Significant relationships between emotional intelligence and engaging in risky sexual behaviors were also observed in a study by Ugoji (2009) among adolescent Nigerian secondary school students. The researcher examined the influence of religiousness, emotional intelligence, students' self-esteem and the role of media messages on adolescents'

engaging in risky sexual activities. Although each of these factors was found to be significant, religiousness and emotional intelligence were most strongly associated with risky behaviors, with the direction of the relationships being negative.

Research among adolescents has consistently found associations between levels of emotional intelligence and number of sexual partners. Lando-King and colleagues (2015) examined associations between three components of emotional intelligence as defined by Bar-On (1997), namely interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, and stress management skills, and risky sexual behaviors in 253 sexually active adolescent girls aged 13 to 17 years at high risk for pregnancy. Indicators of sexual behavior were number of partners, engaging in conversations with partners about the risks of sex, and use of contraception. Each of the components of emotional intelligence measured was found to be significantly associated with another of the indicators listed. Girls with higher intrapersonal skills had significantly fewer sexual partners in the past six months. Interpersonal skills, on the other hand, were a significant factor in the subjects initiating conversations with their sexual partners about the risks of sex, while higher stress management skills translated into more frequent and more consistent use of contraceptives (condoms). Based on the results, the researchers concluded that a high level of emotional intelligence may be a kind of protective buffer against risky sexual behavior.

Similar results were obtained by Hessler and Katz (2010), who found that adolescents who were better able to manage negative emotions (e.g., anger and sadness) had fewer sexual partners. In turn, having more sexual partners was associated with difficulty regulating emotions in both childhood and adolescence. Additionally, these researchers found that deficits in emotional regulation skills already present in middle childhood were a significant predictor of risky sexual behavior in adolescence.

The studies cited above suggest that deficits in emotional intelligence may predispose adolescents to engage in risky activities. On the other hand, there is empirical evidence that high levels of emotional intelligence may serve as a protective factor for adolescents because they are associated with better social functioning, higher ability to cope with stress and problems, and greater social support (Barragan Martin et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2018). The sphere of sexual functioning is inextricably linked to the emotional sphere (e.g., Silva, Pereira, Esgalhado, Monteiro, Afonso, Loureiro, 2016). Sexual behaviors are often performed in a highly emotionally charged context. The relationship between emotional intelligence and adolescents' risky sexual behaviors can therefore be traced at many levels. Several of these will be discussed below.

As mentioned earlier, adolescents often engage in risky situations or behaviors in order to suppress negative emotions, detach from them, or dampen their intensity (Rizor et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 1998). If adolescents lack the ability to express and cope with negative emotions, they may seek to relieve stress through more immediate, short-term strategies to

reduce tension, such as substance abuse or sexual behavior (Flanagan, Jaquier, Overstreet, Swan, Sullivan, 2014; Rizor et al., 2017). This often leads to more impulsive, risky sexual decisions. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are able to appropriately internalize these emotions, and they are more efficient at regulating their emotions - able to modulate their intensity and exert control over them, so they do not need to resort to risky sexual behaviors to cope or lower their stress levels.

People who have difficulty entering and maintaining interpersonal relationships sometimes try to establish or maintain them through sexual behavior. The research cited earlier shows that people with high intelligence have better interpersonal relationships, better understanding of relationships, and longer-lasting and higher-quality relationships with others, so they do not need to resort to or consent to sex just to maintain the relationship at all costs and avoid loneliness (e.g., Hessler, Katz, 2010).

Another explanation involves the fact that a better understanding of one's own emotional experiences and those of others enables one to "listen to oneself" more deeply, to consider one's real needs and motivations, to understand other people's intentions, and to assess risks more adequately. Thus, it fosters more thoughtful and mature decisions related to the sexual sphere. Emotional intelligence may foster a better understanding of sexual issues and, in particular, sexual risk behaviors because interactions with sexual partners and decisions about sexual activity are usually accompanied by emotions (Lando-King et al., 2015). In addition, the ability to emotionally self-regulate and accurately interpret one's own and others' emotions may influence better communication with one's partner, which is especially important when dealing with sensitive issues such as the topic of sex, and may thus foster decisions about safer sexual practices (Lando-King et al., 2015).

Sometimes decisions about sex are made by young people under external pressure, such as peer pressure. Meanwhile, research on emotional intelligence shows that it promotes greater assertiveness and resistance to peer pressure. For example, Mayer and colleagues (Mayer, Perkins, Caruso, Salovey, 2001) found that in a variety of real-world social situations, students with higher emotional intelligence were better able to resist friends' requests to participate in activities that they found distressing, disruptive, and disapproving. Students with lower levels of emotional capacity, on the other hand, generally did what their friends asked them to do, even if they felt the behaviors were inappropriate. Other studies have found that adolescents with higher emotional intelligence may be more resistant to peer pressure to smoke and drink alcohol (Trinidad, Johnson, 2002). Similar relationships can be expected with regard to sexual behavior.

Another issue concerns the social support received by adolescents. Let us remind that help and understanding from the environment are important factors protecting from risky sexual behaviors. At the same time, as research shows, people with higher emotional intelligence have a wider social support network, more often receive help and are more eager

to use it. They also have better relationships with others, and their interpersonal relationships are less superficial and more lasting. Therefore, they are more likely to receive help, information and advice from those around them, and they are more willing to use this support and make better use of it, which may reduce the risk of making inappropriate sexual decisions.

Concluding thoughts

As the problem of risky sexual behaviours of young people seems to be growing, it is necessary to undertake actions promoting proper sexual behaviours and more conscious and responsible attitudes towards this sphere of life. Risky sexual behaviors of young people have many adverse consequences in terms of health (both physical and psychological well-being) and social. That is why it is so important to recognize the sources of such behaviors and to search for protective factors. With such knowledge it will be possible to introduce educational interventions promoting appropriate sexual behaviors and protecting against unfavorable ones.

In the light of the data presented above, it is justified to include elements of emotional education and to stimulate the development of abilities that are components of emotional intelligence. It turns out that emotional abilities - mainly the ability to regulate negative emotions, but also the ability to perceive and understand one's own and others' emotions as well as the ability to express emotions adequately - are among the factors reducing the tendency of adolescents to engage in risky sexual behaviors. There is hard scientific evidence for the high effectiveness of intervention or prevention programs that focus on building emotional skills in youth (e.g., Houck et al., 2016; Houck, Barker, Hadley, Menefee, Brown, 2018). Building adolescents' social and emotional skills, then, may be an effective strategy for preventing their risky sexual behaviors.

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