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THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

The Impact of Parent-Child Communication on Adolescent Sexual Health

Hannah Adams



ABSTRACT

Having “the talk” with children can be difficult and uncomfortable. However, recent behavioral research indicates that having this conversation, and having it often, is important for raising sexually healthy adolescents. This paper provides an overview of the literature surrounding the role of parent-adolescent communication in the development of sexually healthy young adults, including benefits for LGBTQIA+ youth. The findings suggest that non-judgmental parental communication can encourage condom use, delay initiation of intercourse, and reduce mental health issues arising from a perceived lack of support for sexual choices.

Parenting children is a complex business, and raising sexually healthy adolescents is no simple task. Both parents and peer groups have been shown to be significant predictors of the sexual behaviors of adolescents, making these groups two of the best resources in the fight against risky sexual behaviors and the promotion of healthy attitudes (Sneed, Tan, & Meyer, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature concerning the role of parent-adolescent communication in the development of sexually healthy young adults. Sexually healthy people, as discussed in this paper, refers to individuals who engage in low risk behaviors while expressing themselves sexually with a consensual partner. These low risk behaviors include the use of condoms, limiting substance abuse, delaying sexual activity, and reducing the number of sexual partners. The factors focused on include parenting style, communication behaviors, and their effects on condom usage in the adolescent and young adult population.¹ The research also analyzed the mental and sexual health impacts that exist within these relationships between adolescents who do not identify as heterosexual and their parents.

IMPACT OF PARENTING STYLE ON CONDOM USE

One of the most preventable epidemics facing teenagers today is the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The use of condoms and other barrier methods greatly reduce the risk of contracting an STI, making them one of the most important ways to promote sexual health. However, not all adolescents who engage in intercourse are using one of these methods; in June 2015, about 40% of adolescents reported not using a condom during sexual intercourse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2015a). While more adolescents in the past two decades have reported using condoms, young adults ages 15–24 represented over half of the 20 million newly diagnosed STD cases in 2015 (HHS, 2015b).

One factor for reducing these numbers is the employment of authoritative parenting methods. Two of the core values of this style are warm, facilitative communication between parent and adolescent and parental monitoring² of teen behavior. Both of these elements are needed to effectively employ the authoritative parenting style. Askelson, Campo,

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the term “adolescent” refers to any child of high school age, specifically ages 13–18. Some studies referenced in this paper refer to behaviors and practices of “young adults,” or persons aged 18–26. The term “parent” refers to the primary caregiver of an adolescent. While primary caregivers are often biological mothers and fathers, they can also be nontraditional caregivers, such as grandparents, foster parents, or adoptive parents.

² “Parental monitoring” refers to parents engaging in active conversations with their teen about certain behaviors. The term can also include monitoring teens’ interactions with peers, with others on social media, and with sexual or non-sexual partners.

and Smith (2012) studied this method as it occurred between mothers and daughters. They found that an authoritative style generally leads to more parent-child communication about important sexual topics, such as sexual intercourse, STIs, contraceptives, and menstruation. Parent-child communication on these topics educates adolescents and consistently leads to better health outcomes. The study also revealed that this type of communication between parents and adolescents leads to “delay[ed] sexual activity and an increase in contraceptive and condom use” (Askelson, Campo, & Smith, 2012, p. 439).

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Parents who had a more authoritative parenting style were also more effective in reducing other risk behaviors (Baxter, Bylund, Imes, & Routsong, 2009). Teenagers of authoritative parents were less likely to engage in risky substance use, including alcohol and tobacco, and more likely to use condoms during intercourse (Baxter et al., 2009). These behaviors can lessen risky sexual choices, such as unprotected sex.

In a separate study looking at the communication between generations in families, the researchers found that parental monitoring was a vital aspect to effective parenting. The researchers looked at Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American families, and concluded that African American families who had open conversations about sex in conjunction with frequent parental monitoring, or authoritative parenting, raised adolescents who reported an increase in condom usage, though results were inconclusive for Caucasian and Hispanic families (Nappi et al., 2008). The conclusions of these studies suggest that communication about these topics is crucial to decreasing risky sexual behaviors, but regulation and monitoring is also necessary.

Condoms are effective at preventing more than just unwanted disease; they are also highly effective in preventing pregnancy. In 2013, 276,203 babies were born to mothers under the age of 20 across the United States, with over 3,000 of those children born to mothers under the age of 15 (HHS, 2015c). While a small portion of these babies were planned, most were not, creating a costly problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) estimated that in 2010 approximately \$9.4 billion went to the direct and indirect costs associated with teenage pregnancy.

Communication between parents and adolescents about family planning has been shown to help decrease this issue. In a study looking at the communication between a father and daughter after watching the popular television shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, researchers found that more frequent communication about sex between fathers and daughters led to a decreased chance of sexual intercourse (Wright, Randall, & Arroyo, 2012). While no correlation was found between mother-daughter conversations and the chance of sexual intercourse, the study seems to imply that the father plays an important role in the developing sexuality of his teenage daughter.

Another study found that community-based workshops promoting conversations between parent and child greatly decreased the incidence of teenage pregnancy and helped the teen learn important lessons about sexuality (Green & Documét, 2005). These “Parent Peer Education” workshops were successful in educating parents about how to talk to their children about these sensitive topics. Educated parents are more likely to raise healthy young adults, influencing better sexual behaviors in their teens.

EFFECT OF PERCEIVED PARENTAL SUPPORT ON MENTAL AND SEXUAL HEALTH

Mental health is closely linked to sexual health, partly due to the emotional connections many people feel after sexual experiences. Specifically with the LGBTQIA+ population, perceived parental support of sexual identification can either harm or help the psyche of developing teens. In general, lesbian women and gay men perceive lower levels of parental support and family connectedness than heterosexual women and men (Needham & Austin, 2010). Both of these groups are also shown to have more suicidal thoughts on average than their heterosexual counterparts (Needham & Austin, 2010).

Teens value parents being prepared, nonjudgmental, and willing to initiate the conversation, while parents value knowing more about their teens.

Teenagers within a sexual minority face unique challenges, and the parental communication style and messages conveyed are important to the sexual health of the teens as they grow up. In a study looking at African American young men who have sex with men, researchers found that teens who have positive perceptions of communication with their

parents reported less risky sexual behaviors (Rose, Annang, Spencer, & Lindley, 2013). Some of the topics discussed between parents and adolescents included both HIV/AIDS and sexual orientation—crucial issues where formal education can sometimes be lacking. After these talks, both the parents and the young men reported increased knowledge and connectedness, and the young men felt that they could turn to their parents as a source of support and guidance (Rose et al., 2013).

Rose et al. (2013) also looked at factors that would inhibit these talks. Some of the perceived obstacles included discomfort for both parties, as well as lack of knowledge, and fear experienced on the part of the teen. Some of the parents indicated they felt that there were no barriers inhibiting the communication process, which presents an issue if their teens feel differently. The researchers also gathered recommendations for communication improvement between parent and child. They found that teens value parents being prepared, nonjudgmental, and willing to initiate the conversation, while parents value knowing more about their teens (Rose et al., 2013).

One of the biggest trials non-heterosexual adolescents can experience is disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents. Commonly termed “coming out,” this event usually is significant in adolescents’ lives. In a study looking at the parents’ reactions to their teens coming out, researchers found that the children of parents who reacted in opposition were at a higher risk for a myriad of health complications, and were more likely to engage in riskier behaviors such as binge drinking and illicit drug use (Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012). The study also found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens who had yet to disclose to their parents reported much higher rates of risk behaviors and poorer overall health than those teens who had come out (Rothman et al., 2012). Both the nonverbal tone of the communication as well as the message can play a major role in the future sexual health of adolescents.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Going forward, there are large gaps in research that need to be addressed. These include, but are certainly not limited to, studying how parents affect the mental health of adolescents in relation to sexual practices and looking at specific communication patterns that can further decrease the risk for unwanted sexual outcomes, such as sexual violence. The majority of the research looked at two sexual health predictors: condom use during penile-vaginal intercourse and delay of initiation of penile-vaginal intercourse. However, it would be prudent to focus research on other risky sexual behaviors, such as oral and anal

sex. There has been little research on specific parental behaviors that decrease STIs spread by these methods, which parents and teens alike often view as less risky than vaginal intercourse because they cannot lead to pregnancy.

Parents who communicate with their children about sex more frequently in a receptive manner have a greater chance of raising sexually healthy adolescents and young adults.

There also seems to be a lack of longitudinal research looking at specific sexual health consequences as teenagers become adults. Attention to the concern would be especially useful for parents who have non-heterosexual children and do not know the best way to protect them. Lastly, there is a huge research gap when it comes to parent-teen communication about gender identity. This relatively new concern is not yet heavily researched. Further studies could help determine whether the health of the adolescents is impacted by parental reactions to non-conformational gender identification.

CONCLUSION

One main theme runs through all the recent research: parents who communicate with their children about sex more frequently in a receptive manner have a greater chance of raising sexually healthy adolescents and young adults. The research looked at the effect of parental communication on condom use (for protecting against both STIs and unwanted pregnancy) and risk behaviors associated with a lack of parental support for an adolescent's sexual orientation. Because of all the recent research on these topics, there are many different education programs, such as "Talking Parents, Healthy Teens" and "Keepin' it R.E.A.L.," that hope to teach parents how to better educate their children on healthy sexual behaviors. These programs pave the way to a future where healthy sexual attitudes prevail in families and communities around the world.

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