

## Values that Fathers Communicate to Sons about Sex, Sexuality, Relationships, and Marriage

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### **Abstract:**

African American males between ages 13 and 24 are disproportionately affected by unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS; indeed, they account for 50% of HIV infections among all youth. Clear communication between parents and their youth about sex is associated with higher rates of sexual abstinence, condom use, and intent to delay initiation of sexual intercourse, which can prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy. However, barriers exist for parents to educate their youth about sexual health. The purpose of this article is to explore the values fathers communicate to their sons to prevent their risky sexual behaviors that lead to STIs, HIV, and adolescent parenthood. This was a qualitative study conducted from May and June 2015. African American fathers (N = 29) who had sons, ages 10 to 15 years, participated in five focus groups across metropolitan and rural North Carolina communities in barbershops. A qualitative content analysis revealed four themes regarding areas that fathers imparted their values onto their sons to protect them from sexual health risks: (a) sex, (b) sexuality, (c) relationships, and (d) marriage. The findings have implications for social work and public health practice.

**Keywords:** Youth HIV Prevention | father-son communication | minority health disparities | youth sexual health

### **Articles:**

### **Introduction**

Preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teen parenthood in African American male youth has become a national priority because of the high risk and burden for HIV for African Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011; Office of National AIDS Policy, 2015). African American males between ages 13 and 24 are disproportionately affected by unintended pregnancy and STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS; indeed, they account for 50% of HIV infections among all youth (CDC,

2016a; Satterwhite et al., 2013). Research indicates that African American youth initiate sexual activity earlier in adolescence than youth of other races, which increases their risk (CDC, 2016b; Satterwhite et al., 2013). At-risk sexual behaviors include having more than one sexual partner; changing sexual partners frequently; having oral, vaginal, or anal sex without a condom; and using unreliable methods of birth control or using birth control inconsistently (CDC, 2016b; Satterwhite et al., 2013). In a representative study of ninth- through 12th grade students, African American male youth were found to be more likely than all other youth to have ever had sexual intercourse and more likely to have had sexual intercourse for the first time before age 13 (CDC, 2016b). They also were less likely than White male youth to use any method to prevent pregnancy (CDC, 2016b).

Clear communication between African American parents and their youth about sexual health is associated with higher rates of sexual abstinence, condom use, and intent to delay initiation of sexual intercourse, which can prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy (Akers, Schwarz, Borrero, & Corbie-Smith, 2010; Coley, Votruba-Drzal, & Schindler, 2009; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007; Jaccard & Levitz, 2013; Ohalet, Georges, & Doswell, 2010; Wyckoff et al., 2008). Moreover, researchers agree that preadolescence is the best time for parents to communicate with their children about preventing risky sexual behaviors, before the children become sexually active (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007; Jaccard & Levitz, 2013; Wyckoff et al., 2008). However, barriers exist for parents to educate their youth about sexual health. Research has shown that when talking with their youth about sexual health, parents felt uncomfortable (DiIorio et al., 2006), did not feel prepared to discuss factual information (Wilson, Dalberth, & Koo, 2010), did not discuss information about condoms as a means of prevention to STIs (Wyckoff et al., 2008), and communicated information that was not age appropriate (DiIorio et al., 2006) or suitable (DiIorio et al., 2006; DiIorio, McCarty, Resnicow, Lehr, & Denzmore, 2007) for their youth. Little research has been conducted specifically on African American fathers and their sons. The purpose of this article is to explore the values fathers communicate to their sons about sex, sexuality, relationships, and marriage.

## **Design**

This was a qualitative study of African American fathers (who have sons, ages 10–15 years) that was conducted in May and June 2015. Focus groups were conducted to elicit fathers' perspectives on what promotes and inhibits them from talking to their sons about risky sexual behaviors and their conversations with their sons about risky sexual behaviors. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for the proposed study.

## **Setting and sample**

There were five focus groups conducted across metropolitan and rural North Carolina communities in barbershops and nearby community settings. Each focus group consisted of approximately five fathers (total of 29 fathers) to participate in an audio-recorded semistructured interview about father–son communication about sex. Of the 10 available barbershops willing to participate, five locations were selected on the basis of adequate space and scheduling availability during the timeframe of the study. Barbershops assisted us by distributing

recruitment flyers to potential participants (i.e., fathers) so that they would have an opportunity to review the study details. The fathers called the project team members or contacted their barbershop to communicate their interest in being contacted by the project team. They also showed up to the advertised time and location to participate.

Participants were African American fathers who have sons who are between ages 10 and 15. The term *father* used throughout this paper includes *father figure*, defined as a relative or nonrelative male authority figure who has assumed the father role (common in the African American community). We used heterogeneous focus groups (e.g., nonresident, resident, married, single) because our primary interest was to obtain a broad spectrum of ideas relevant to an intervention on father–son communication about sex. Therefore, focus group participants were recruited from the barbershops using a purposive sampling strategy. We enrolled the first fathers from respective barbershops who contact us until we achieved our desired sample size. Participants were informed about the informed consent protocol and consented before taking part in the focus group.

### **Group facilitators**

There were two African American male group facilitators per focus group. Graduate research assistants served in the role as group facilitators. They received instruction from investigators that covered group facilitation, confidentiality, and research protocol. They were monitored by an investigator the first time that they lead a group and as needed throughout the study. They also received technical instruction about using the audiotape equipment to record the focus group discussions. We used the group facilitators' qualities described in Coard, Foy-Watson, Zimmer, and Wallace's (2007) guidelines for selecting group facilitators: (a) skilled in handling groups; (b) skilled communicator; (c) displays warmth; (d) well organized; (e) enthusiastic about the program, people, and the process; (f) ability to conduct role-plays; and (g) acknowledge and respect diverse family patterns. For each focus group, the first group facilitator was responsible for administering the family background information form to participants prior to the semistructured interview. The first group facilitator also was responsible for operating the audio-recorder equipment during the semistructured interviews. The second group facilitator was responsible for leading the discussion.

### **Data collection**

The focus groups were held in the targeted communities at barbershops with adequate capacity and central locality, which are familiar and accessible to participants. Familiarity is important so that African American fathers feel comfortable talking about their perceptions and experiences. Participants were asked to participate in semistructured interviews about an intervention and complete assessment measures. Each focus group lasted approximately 2 hours.

### **Measure**

Interview items were developed by the first three authors to explore important factors concerning father–son communication about sex as gleaned from the literature (Randolph, Coakley, Sears, & Thorpe, 2017). Items were refined using input from a trial-run focus group of African American

fathers of middle-school boys. Incorporating their input prior to using the items in the focus groups allowed the investigators to design a relevant and appropriate qualitative survey for African American fathers. The participants received a \$50 gift card for their participation in the study.

### **Data analysis**

Focus group interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. A qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes was conducted by two investigators and confirmed by a third. Each transcript was initially read multiple times to become familiar with each group's distinctive features followed by aggregating large portions of data into first level codes that share a central meaning. During this stage, inductive coding was used where NVivo (Version 10) codes were derived from the participants' own words. From this breaking up and breaking down of the data, the resulting inductive codes that shared commonalities were organized into categories (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). These emergent categories referred to obvious or visible descriptions (manifest content) whereas the themes generated next were linked to the underlying meanings of the categories (latent content; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Themes were formulated based on frequency, similarity of core concepts, and marked differences between categories. The resulting collection of themes was conceptualized as a whole and is discussed in the Results section.

### **Father characteristics**

The sample consisted of 29 African American men who were biological fathers, stepfathers, or father figures to age appropriate boys. The participants currently reside in North Carolina. The fathers' ages ranged from 27 to 48. Their mean age was 38.2 ( $SD = 3.69$ ). Most of the fathers (62%) lived in the same home as their son, whereas the remainder (38%) lived in a separate household. Fathers graduated from a 2-year college (17%), a 4-year college/university (28%), or completed graduate school (10%). Forty-one percent graduated from high school and 3% did not complete high school. The majority of the fathers were married (69%). Others were either single (24%) or divorced (7%).

### **Results**

A saturation of the themes was met with our sample of 29 fathers. Further, all themes were included, even if only one father expressed that view. This was important in order to accurately report the range of African American fathers' perceptions about talking to their sons about sex (Krefting, 1990).

The results revealed that fathers incorporated Biblical teachings and examples of morality into their talks with their sons about sex. Four themes emerged on the areas that fathers wanted their religious and moral values to impact in order to protect their sons from sexual risks: (a) sex, (b) sexuality, (c) relationships, and (d) marriage. There were subthemes for sex and relationships, which are discussed below under respective headings. Fathers' discussions with their sons about sex rarely were limited to health consequences, such as contracting an STI or impregnating a partner. Instead, such discussions were almost always colored by an underlying theme of

religious or moral values about sex and intimacy. As one father explained in general, “It’s important to raise your children up in the word of God—teach them the important values of life, especially when it comes down to sex.” Another father shared the following, “so my morals say to tell them the right thing to do but also prepare them for what may happen if you veer off that path.”

## **Sex**

It was important for fathers involved in this study to impress upon their sons the ability to make informed decisions about having sex. Discussions with their sons on the topic involved the virtue of individual free will, without passing judgment about the possibility that their sons would engage in sexual behaviors. One father stated, “I told them too, having sex, it ain’t going to send you to hell. I know a lot of people, they tell you you’re going to go to hell. I never read in the Bible.”

Although some advised their sons about sex according to their interpretation of the Bible’s teachings, others believed that ultimately, it was their sons’ choice, thus they only offered their prayers. Moreover, their stance was that their sons would have to accept the consequences that came with their decision to have sex. As one father explained:

We want to pray for them and it’s [the decision is] theirs. I’m not blind to the fact that he could be doing something—this, that, and the other. At a certain time, it has to be their responsibility. They have to own it. They have to understand, like you all were saying, about the consequences. As a father, we can just explain to them what can happen ... and then they can choose their own path at that point.

## **Risks**

Fathers addressed their sons’ potential role in the propagation of STIs. A father stated, “I tell my sons when you’re sleeping with somebody, when you’re sharing yourself, you carry what you gave.” Overall, they wanted their sons to use common sense to protect themselves from the “consequences” of STIs and unwanted pregnancy of a partner, either by abstaining from sex or by using condoms. One father stated, “That’s one thing I did instill in them—They don’t like that word ‘disease’— If you’re going to do that, look at all those things. Do you want her to be the mother of your child?”

Another father added his insight about what gets in the way of avoiding risks:

You’ve got a lot of people out here now that catch these diseases and everything. When they catch it, they’re to the point where that’s what I’m going to do, and they do it. I’m not trying to say just on his end, but on the other person’s end. We’re so dumb and so ignorant to where we be looking for love and comfort and all the wrong things in the wrong places.

Becoming a parent before one is prepared, and the limitations it imposes upon a young person, was another risk factor addressed by fathers.

We had this talk about how sex is like jail. I said, “You can get out here and do something for ten seconds and be in an orange suit before the night’s over with if the condom breaks—hole in the condom—something happens. And you hope that she’s not pregnant

Another father stated:

I tell my sons this all the time, “Be careful. If you do decide to do that, not that I’m promoting it, do you want that to be the mother of your child? Or do you feel like you want to see this woman for eighteen years or more of your life?”

Indeed, these fathers emphasized to their sons to consider potential long-term consequences of choices they make now about sex. As one father put it:

What I want him to understand is if he hasn’t already had sex, if he has it, he needs to understand when he does, if that opportunity comes up, how he’ll be bonded with that individual in some way or another. If you don’t want to be attached to that individual long term, you need to be honest about that. And then what comes along with that is the risk of pregnancy, the risk of STDs and things of that nature.

### Temptation

Fathers addressed the lure of casual relationships and sexual temptation as barriers to good sexual health.

And I know the deal out here with all these different people, like some things will look good—very good—dang good—I mean I’ve dealt with it before. I’ve been married for twenty-six years and been fortunate enough to be with the same woman. But you know, just knowing that there’s a lot out there. I mean there’s so much out there. We, as married men, as well for us, you know you’ve got these kids now. You know it’s got to be hard for them, because they’re out there.... So, I know the times are changing. You know, just weaker and wiser.... It’s not—it’s no joke. That’s real. There’s a sentence in the Bible that states it.

They also were fearful that their sons are dealing with more dangerous situations and more opportunity to encounter sexual risk via social media—for example, girls sending nude pictures and access to risqué pictures—at a young age.

I tell my son—he’s a little older now. But I tell him discretion. That’s the biggest thing. That’s something that I wish that I could have had. If I had discretion, I’d have been married longer. I wouldn’t have kids. I have [several children ranging from infancy to grown] and another ... about to come.

Another father related his experience as a youth to current temptations his son faces.

You’ve got to add that zero to them, I’m telling you. If she’d do that with those three, she’s done it before. And that’s the scary part. That’s the scary part. But, I would always talk to mine about penetration. I would talk about condoms. I would talk about risk. I

would talk about—she can sit there and tell you that she’s on the pill. You have to think your way out of this situation for yourself. Look, you’ve got enough book knowledge, but God gave you common sense for a reason. And if it troubles your soul when you involve yourself in a situation, you’d better get up out of it quick ... and we all know that when we first encountered it, I know for me it was like the neighborhood girl back in the day—one in the neighborhood, being with everybody, and you knew—you knew she would probably deal with some of your boys in the neighborhood. But it was the interest. It was just to say, “Hey, let me go ahead and add my name to the list.”

Although a father did not condone premarital sex, he stressed to his son to use a condom:

For my son, after I started knowing he was mingling with girls a little bit more ... I said, “Listen, this thing may approach you. Girls may approach you with sex. If they do, number one, you need to think twice. Two, if you find yourself in that predicament, you may want to be protected.” I’m not saying you want them to end up together, or we want our kids to do it outside of marriage, like you were saying. But if you find yourself in those kinds of circumstances, protect yourself, and protect yourself with your own protection.

Another father shared the above sentiment regarding young males taking responsibility to use a condom. He pointed out to his son potential risks even if he believed he was in a monogamous relationship:

I know with my oldest son, about two years ago—he’s been with his girlfriend since high school, but I don’t really trust that—you know what I’m saying—because I’ve been there, done that. And he’s like, “Well, she’s on the shot and everything.” Trust me. Just no. He was like, “Oh, well, I love her.” I know. It doesn’t matter because—look. She breaks up with him but he stayed with her. But I was like, “See what I was trying to tell you? You love her, but she didn’t love you enough to stay with you.... That’s what I told him all along. You can’t trust them. Just protect yourself—your heart, your body—everything. Protect yourself.”

One father stated:

I try to teach them the difference between love and game. Because at this age, they understand game. They know what that game is about, so when I teach them love, it’s almost like, “Oh, dad. You know. That’s for the older people.” But you’ve got to understand something. You have to recognize game to know what love actually is. And setting them down and helping them to understand, “Dude, when you just haul another girl out here—that’s just game. But when you respect her, that’s love.”

Similarly, another father stated:

I have joint shared custody, so sometimes their mom doesn’t always agree with the way I do things. So there are a lot of dynamics, man, and with my girlfriend. She has older children, so I just had to—common conversation with her son this weekend—prom—and I just was straight up with him. You good? You need anything? No, I’m good. Is she on

the pill? Okay. So that being said, I'm like, "I've got to holler at you again." And I said, "Let me tell you something. I'm really uncomfortable because I just feel like this little girl has moves. Her mom has moves." You'd have thought the mom was going to the prom.

Fathers also were concerned with the manner in which girls could influence their sons to have sex and the potential negative consequences. One father stated:

They dress differently. They teach them differently—some of these young ladies. And you have to know them also, because although your son may not be ready, the girls that are his age—and in some cases younger—are so much more advanced and fast and ready and willing. They start clubs and they will trap our men, our boys, our children. And then what happens, they'll say, "Well, the child was too young to consent." And then our children our children are charged, when it was a young lady who may have been—not always—but may have been the aggressor.

Another father added:

But that's important because the girls today are very aggressive, and sometimes, like you said, to get back to your point about your son just wants to run and shoot ball—you've got to have some degree of conversation with him so he knows what's inappropriate. Because if he—my oldest son—he's seventeen years old, and he's never said anything about a girl. And I was just telling a friend of mine last night, to a certain degree, I'm okay with that because I don't want him to be distracted because the minute relationships start coming into play, sex starts coming into play, then he doesn't care if he runs the four-five forty anymore.

A father ponders how his own experience would have been had his father talked with him about resisting temptation:

If my dad would have had that conversation with me, I think I probably had my talk when I was maybe around twelve. But I think if he would have had that talk with me when I was probably eight or nine and showed me pictures of different diseases—what it looks like, what could happen—I'd have stayed away from the neighborhood ho. Because after the fact, and after I started seeing this stuff and started having the talk with him, that's all I could think about—what this girl had. Because I was like, "You're nasty. You've been with everybody in the neighborhood. You are nasty." And then I'll never forget when my dad told me—he said, "And if by chance that you know she's been with 100 people, and you sleep with her, put your name on the list because it's just like you've been with that 100." And that really kept me out of a lot of situations. A lot of situations. I'm telling you, man.

Abstinence

Some fathers used the Bible to frame their wishes for their sons, specifically through the virtue of abstaining from sex until marriage. Further, they instilled in their sons to value themselves



through abstaining, but often while acknowledging the reality that their sons would become sexually active.

I want my son's sexual behaviors to look like he's responsible enough to handle the sexual attention that he's getting it from a woman. I want him to be able to abstain himself—you know—and be correct when he's having sex with this woman. Hopefully, he's wearing a condom at the same time.

But others emphasized the importance of maintaining one's virginity.

I want you to make sure that's your treasure. When you present it to your bride, you want it to be fresh. You want to be able to experience your first with the person you plan on being with the rest of your life. You have to learn together. But you expecting them to be a certain way and they don't know how to be that way because they've never been there, it's like you're ahead of them. It's going to be boring to you. It's not going to be a good experience for everybody because you're going to be trying to get yours, and they're trying to help you. But they really have no enjoyment in it. Sex is a beautiful thing. Sex was made by God.

Similarly, another father encouraged abstinence until marriage, "That's what I really want to drive home to my sons. Keep yourself pure. Even my older son, if he has sex or whatever, just refrain. Refrain from it." Another father preferred that his son refrain from premarital sex but informed his son anyway about how he could protect himself just in case his son decided to have sex:

This is what you should do and what you shouldn't do. Now that I've told you that you shouldn't do this, I know you may try it one day. So these are things you need to do to take responsibility for that situation when it comes up.

## **Sexuality**

All fathers in this study had a strong value system regarding same-sex relationships. A few fathers were more open to supporting their son's decision to have a homosexual relationship after discussing heterosexual behavior as the preference. Some fathers in this study did not condone homosexuality, with some using the Bible to support their view. When asked how they would go about discussing homosexuality with their son, one father replied, "I'd tell him, "Look, what you have is a choice. It's a lifestyle. A person cannot be born a certain way, so don't listen to that. You're not born that way. That's something you can change."

One father simply states his wish for his son, "What I would want is definitely, first and foremost, a heterosexual partner." Another father reported that he stressed to his son to "Marry a woman.... Your sex life needs to be with a woman." Another stated:

I want him to be happy and I'll love him no matter what. But my goal for him is to be heterosexual. I'll put that on the table, because I'm going to tell the truth. And so I'm going to love him no matter what. There's no question about it. I'm going to support him, advocate for him no matter what.

One father keyed in on how his family views same-sex relationships for females versus males:

I know because we've got like a family member female that's a [lesbian], and it's like—well, we see it. She even brought a girl around. It's nothing. But let a dude do that in my family? Man, we'd be like, man!

This implies that males in that family understand particular expectations concerning sexuality, which precludes a gay male youth from “coming out.”

## **Relationships**

Fathers shared their perspective about their sons dating. For instance, one father stated:

If you have a girl in mind, pray about it because you know the relationship you have with God. He's not going to give you anything that's not going to put you in a situation where you have to make the choice. He will give you everything you need for that choice to be there. And I've prayed about it. My wife has prayed about it. And I said, “Lord, help them to see you in her,” and I've always told him, “When you find a young lady who loves God more than you, you're on the right path, because if she loves you more than she loves God, she's not there yet.”

Additionally, they stated that they wanted their sons to treat girls respectfully because it would affect how their partners felt about themselves as young ladies. Again, the Bible was referenced as evidence by one father that a partner should be valued for who she is as a person rather than her physical features, “...It's Solomon, the wisest man in the world ... telling the story about a mother telling her son what to look for in a woman. And if you notice, although Proverbs 31, it never mentions her features.”

### Emotional attachment

Notably, the potential for emotional attachment that comes along with being sexually involved with a partner was not lost on the fathers in this study. As one father explained, “Married or unmarried, the sexual act is going to change your mental and thought process, regardless if it's with your wife or whoever. And I think a lot of times we don't discuss the mental piece of it.” Another father had a similar view, “And we're emotional beings, and we're emotional creatures. And sex will tear you up if you're not in tune with your emotions, and this majority is not.”

Another father expanded on this line of thinking, highlighting the potential interpersonal and social ramifications of sexual intimacy:

I think we all know that the emotions and feelings that come out of the interaction in itself can cause you to become something that you're not. We see it every day. Hate crimes, love crimes, passion crimes and all that kind of stuff—it is nothing but the sex.

Reiterating the notion was the idea that the responsibility of having sex involved more than just protecting oneself from STIs or unwanted pregnancies. A father stated:

I try to tell my son, “You have intercourse with a woman, she has given you a very big part of her. And so you have respect that, when she’s done that for you and not make her feel cheap or something like that. So it’s very important that you take the responsibility.

Another father shared a similar experience when talking with his son, “Women don’t look at it like we do. We want physical, but they’re more emotional. We look at the physical part, but they don’t look at it like that. It’s strange, man.”

One father discussed what he shared with his sons about dating:

I think the younger they are, they tend to find—like the little girlfriend thing is cute. Like my nine year-old. I’ve sat down and talked to him, but even with my fourteen year-old, I’ve always told them, “The only girl that comes in my house is education. And if I catch you cheating on her, you’re going to be in trouble”... I strongly believe in Proverbs 23:6 where it says, “Train up a child in the way they should go. When they get old they won’t depart from it.” It never says they won’t go through anything, but they won’t depart from what you’ve trained them to do.... And it doesn’t hurt to put a little bit of pressure on a child. Not to me it doesn’t. Because that’s how you make diamonds. The pressure does two things. It’ll either bust a pipe or it’ll make a diamond. And that little bit of pressure that you can apply can start chipping away at that stupidity at that young age, and they start to really develop into that diamond.

Another father stated:

I explained to my son, and I stressed the fact. Understand that relationship between you and her is going to be changed completely forever from that point. That’s not going to be your best friend any more. You’re not going back to just being friends, contrary to what you may think.

Fathers also attempted to educate their sons about the differences between casual sex and long-term commitments, acknowledging the influence of the male ego on decisions about sex. One father stated:

I was like, “Son, sometimes these women, they’ll get you in these situations. But sex is sex.” I was like, “This relationship, that’s all it’s based on right now. You’ve got to be safe when you do have sex between you and another woman.” I was breaking it down to him like that.

## Monogamy

Fathers felt that it was important for sons to value and practice monogamy, partly by communicating the drawbacks of having multiple partners:

If you’re going to have sex, then having sex with multiple partners in terms of just the whole piece with—not just the diseases but just the spiritual piece of it—you’re having sex with this person, that person, all those spirits are wrapped up into one. And that’s why so many people—you see the personality that’s out of character for him. It’s out of

character for her. So in terms of what I desire, I want them to be monogamy with one partner.

Another father added:

my man is sort of young, but we could probably all agree that at our age we could probably feel good and respect ourselves knowing we've always been with one woman as opposed to you start thinking back, like I'm going to stop counting. You would want that woman to respect you knowing that you and her are the only one. I would.

Similarly, another father added, "I also tell my kids that. I say, "You be with a woman, you don't want to offer them something that's wore down. You want to offer them your best."

Multiple partners

One father had a different viewpoint about what realistic expectations he has about boys. He stated, "Take sex out of a man's life and he will mentally shut down. I'm trying to tell you it's in our DNA." Another father had a similar view as he stated, "my goal for him is to be ... active—you know—and be prosperous while being responsible."

Another father shared his point of view regarding the pressure to have and reality of having more than one sexual partner:

Every time you see a chick, you feel like it's a competition. You've got to live up to what somebody else thinks of you. Even when I was married, I felt like I had to do it. I felt like I couldn't turn anything down. I'm like, man. My cousins, my brother—everybody—all them dudes is like—you know what it's like. It's like when you're married, it's like you're a dog sort of—a house dog—like you're a pet and you get your food every day, and they treat you really good, and you're indoors, and it's just really great. You know? But when you get divorced and you get kicked out of the house, you're like a wolf. Everybody thinks being the wolf is great, but they don't see it. Man, we'd be starving. We'd be eating bones. We'd be eating out of trashcans. Everybody always think you get the biggest, prettiest gazelles. You aren't getting any gazelles. You're getting deer with broken legs.

Negative view of girls

Additionally, fathers are concerned about how boys negatively refer to girls using and associating foul names and language that they associate with them. "I told them about—well, the first thing is respect and just being—just being a gentleman." A similar point came from another father, "And then the words that they call women nowadays—a ho back in our day was just—that was kind of—a woman didn't want to hear that. But now, it's just ridiculous."

Another father discussed how the media promotes a negative view of women and girls:

"I just happened to be scrolling through—there are some good things on Facebook, by the way.... They were having a panel discussion about hip-hop and its influence in the young culture. Rappers that are out there ... they're talking very derogatorily about

women and sexual actions with women. So the conversation I was having with my son the other day was about—just plain and simple—running (explicit) girls. I was like, “You know, if the girl wants to be with you and two of your other friends, that’s not a girl you want to be with.”

## **Marriage**

Several fathers stated that their sons ought to abstain from premarital sex and wait for marriage. For instance:

Well, my experience, my beliefs, I believe there’s no sex outside of marriage. It’s because of the simple fact—not all because of STDs and all this stuff, but it’s what happens. It’s always—it’s a consequence of whatever you do. Everything has a consequence.... If you have sex outside of marriage and you have a child, you’re starting a whole new kingdom. If you can’t be king of that kingdom, you can’t have a kingdom with no king. I ain’t trying to get spiritual, but in Judges 20 or 20:25 they said in those days there was no king. If there’s no king, there’s no guidance. If there’s no guidance, things are going to go backwards, go everywhere. Like the STD part, they hear that. I told him about that. But to me it’s greater than that, because that’s something that can be—well, some can be cured. That’s something that can be dealt with. But it’s your life that you give away. You doing that, it’s going to change your life in more ways than one.

Another father shared, “When it becomes husband and wife, it’s [sex] supposed to be a pleasurable thing. The Bible even talks about it as a good thing. But outside of that, it can’t be good.”

One father wants his son to wait to have sex until he is much older and married:

But I think it’s very important that you give them the reason for marriage, and it’s not for children. Marriage is not for children. It’s for adults. It’s for mature people. You don’t even mature until you’re twenty-five years old. Your mind doesn’t fully develop until you’re twenty-five years old.

A father commented on the difference between fathering a child as a teen versus having a child during marriage: “So, the thing is it’s—it’s important—it’s so important—it’s not just having a parent. You can be a parent easy, but it’s marriage that produces family.”

Several fathers wanted their sons to wait until they were married to have sex. This father stated:

I think it gives them a sense that I have a standard I would want them to live by, a standard of them not just settling for anything, not giving their bodies to any woman. It should be the first which is knowing spiritually that what you’re supposed to do is refrain from sex until you get married. That’s something I’d like for them to feel like is a very high standard, and they want to uphold that.

Similarly, another father discussed how his father encouraged him to abstain:

He taught me a lot about sex and stuff. And I have plenty of time to lose my virginity—plenty. But it wasn't a fear. It was honor. I wanted to stay—I wanted to like—I felt like my virginity was going to open some way to my—not destiny, but family.

Although several fathers wanted their sons to abstain until marriage, one father offered his son alternative advice:

Meet a girl, date, you get married, you consummate your marriage—that's when you've had sex. That's when that starts. But at the same time, I know the realist in me says that's how it should be. Now, if it doesn't quite go that way, here's Plan B. Plan B's a little more involved than Plan A. I've even gone down to tell them. I said, "The problem is that if you've had sex with several other people before you get married, when you get married, you're going to compare her to all those other people, which means if she can't do what the other ones did, you're probably going to go looking for somebody else that can. By the same token, so will she."

The compatibility between partners and the importance of the woman's role in married life was also a topic of concern.

Being married to a woman and being raised by my mom and my sisters, women are something special. That's what I tell my kids. You find your girl, and she's fine and everything, and then you go to their apartment, and they got clothes as high as you walk through. Are you going to bring kids up in that environment, you know what I'm saying? You are eating out every day, and they ain't got no money, because they can't cook. That's stuff you've got to think about.

Several fathers impressed upon their sons to look into the future and imagine the girl as the mother of his children and part of his family, permanently if he has sex with her and she becomes pregnant. A father stated:

He [his father] took me and said, "All right. Now you've got to decide what you're going to do with your family, because whether you're married or not, she's your family now." So I use those examples with my sons. If you do this again, she becomes your family. The crazy mother, the crazy father, cousins, aunties—that's your family. He said, "Well, they're your family, too." I say, "No, no. It's your family because as a grandparent at that point, I could pick the baby up and drop him back off. You'd better understand that. You're playing and running on the wrong streets—over."

Similarly, another father encouraged his son to consider how actions would lead to his being a family man, "I was in that situation where I had prayed about—I've always taught my children to pray for their wives and pray for their children."

Another father shared what he explained to his son about compatibility between his son's mother and him:

He [his son] said, "When you were with mom, you all weren't married." Right. He said, "I've seen what you go through with mom." I said, "Exactly. Nothing against your mom."

Actually, she's a real good friend of mine. But we found out that that [sex] was the only place we were compatible."

Similarly, a father reflects on his past mistakes and regret in rushing to get married and finding that he and his wife were not equally mature, and consequently they experienced problems. He stated:

I was like, "Come on, Lord. Seriously?" And he was like, "She was the one for you, but you outran me. You didn't give me time to prepare her for you. So now you have to deal with the consequences." And there were times in my marriage I felt like a college student going with a second grader. And it's almost like, seriously? I've got to go through this mess right here because of a dumb move that I did trying to be grown, trying to say that I'm grown? And I share that with my boys because I say, "Look, the importance of praying for your spouse and your children is so that God prepares her. That way, when you all come together, you're not unequally yoked."

### **Limitations**

The study findings are limited by the use of a heterogeneous convenience sample of African American fathers in the southeast region of the United States referred to as the "Bible Belt." Therefore, we caution the readers from generalizing the findings of this study to those fathers whose characteristics may not have been represented in the focus group sample. Fathers who participated in this study had various levels of experience protecting their sons from sexual risks. However, it is possible that the findings might reflect the accounts of those fathers who had a greater connection to their faith or church, thus more confident to share their religious and spiritual views regarding sexual communication with their sons. It could be that fathers who shared only moral values (and not religious) or offered no opinion at all were less religious or spiritual or did not have Christian beliefs. Further those who were more knowledgeable about the specific Bible teachings regarding sex and marriage (e.g., able to recite verses) could have been more enthusiastic in sharing their views. As a result, social desirability could have been a factor in the way other participants responded. Future studies could use a combination of religious focus groups and nonreligious focus groups as well as expert individual interviews to ensure the views are inclusive.

Another limitation of this study is the inability to link father's status of biological, step, or adoptive father with their responses. Therefore, we were unable to determine if there were themes that were more prevalent for fathers who had particular demographic characteristics. Future studies should consider using separate homogeneous groups of biological fathers, stepfathers, residential fathers, and nonresidential fathers to investigate the differences and similarities among groups.

### **Discussion**

As this study highlights, fathers possess strong views about instilling values about sex and intimacy to prevent risky sexual behavior that lead to various STIs and early parenthood. However, similar to previous literature on the barriers in father-son communication about sex

(DiIorio et al., 2006; Randolph et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2010), some focus group fathers were neither prepared nor comfortable with communicating about sex. Fathers' discussions usually consisted of their sharing their own experiences as a youth to influence their sons to make good decisions about engaging in sex. However, they rarely discussed with their sons the specifics about how they should respond when faced with temptation or peer pressure to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Instead, the depth of the guidance was limited to—"think twice" as a means to avoid STIs. Predominantly, fathers focused on telling their sons to be aware of girls' motives and resist girls' sexual advances. They provided numerous warnings about girls who would tempt their sons through their behavior or dress to engage in premarital sex, which is not congruent with their religious values.

Additionally, several fathers cautioned their sons about the potential long-term consequences of indulging in sex. They stressed that sex could lead to STIs, early parenthood, or being connected to a female for life who he might not want as a wife. However, concrete advice about how to respond in the moment was lacking in most of these conversations. In one exception, a father discussed having a back-up plan that entailed ensuring that his son understood to use a condom if he decided to have sex against his wishes for him to abstain. According to Jaccard and Levitz (2013), parents often emphasize the wrong topics in regards to the types of behavioral beliefs that were the basis of adolescent decisions to have sex. Parents tended mainly to talk with their youth about health concerns and pregnancy—long-term negative consequences of sex. However, youth's perceptions of the short-term positive consequences of the behavior such as the physical pleasure of sex or being revered in their community as a man had a greater influence on their decisions to have sex (Jaccard & Levitz, 2013).

There are implications for a multidisciplinary approach to enhance fathers' self-efficacy or confidence to begin and continue effective conversations with their sons about sex and provide them with adequate knowledge about STIs and prevention. We recommend that social work and health care practitioners who will work with African American fathers use innovative practices that recognize and incorporate their religious and spiritual values. For instance, many fathers advocate for abstinence based on their religious teachings. Practitioners should acknowledge this as well as offer additional precautionary insight that is aligned with their beliefs. For instance, discussions based on biblical scriptures that admonish premarital sex can be supplemented with information about the health and early parenthood consequences of risky sex and educate them on prevention methods.

Additionally, based on the interview results, there is a need to provide fathers with information about talking with their sons about their sexuality. Because fathers did not condone homosexual lifestyles, it is not likely that they will be prepared to discuss the higher risks for bisexual or gay males contracting HIV and STIs, and the necessary prevention. This is important to note, given that African American males who have sex with men have the highest rate of HIV infection in the United States, more than seven times higher than White males (CDC, 2016a). Working with African American fathers who possess strong religious as well as cultural values against homosexuality warrants a different, sensitive approach to ensure that they are doing all they can to protect their sons from risk, regardless of their sons' sexual orientation.



We recommend that practitioners help fathers address the risky sexual behaviors (e.g., anal sex) that lead to STIs and HIV rather than attempt to challenge or reconstruct their religious or moral values. When fathers can direct their focus on taking part in the process of learning helpful strategies for effective communication rather than on the morality of homosexuality, the goal of protecting their sons remains the priority. Further, fathers might be more apt to join a program or participate in an intervention centered on sexual risk protection instead of one focused on sexual orientation. The findings of this study have implications for practice regarding fathers becoming more accepting of their sons, which could lead to sons feeling more comfortable to talk and be open and honest about their sexual intentions and sexual activity (Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2008). Positive parental acceptance is associated with greater youth well-being. Moreover, parental acceptance serves as a protective factor to thwart negative mental health outcomes among sexual minority youth (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Yet, according to the literature on parenting sexual minorities, many parents' reactions to their youth's sexual orientation disclosure can be considered homophobic and rejecting (Conley, 2011; Rosenberg, 2003). Future research is needed to explore fathers' perceptions on communicating with their sons about sexual orientation and sexual health risks.

## **Conclusion**

As STIs and HIV continues to disproportionately affect young African American males, there is a critical need for social workers and public health professionals to address the importance of father–son communication as a protective factor against sexual health risks. The results of this study show that the substance of African American father–son communication was influenced strongly by moral and religious beliefs. These perspectives are valuable in that they provide a basis for understanding fathers' rationale for the topics concerning sex they are willing and able to discuss with their sons, as well as the extent of the conversations. Interventions targeted specifically to assist African American fathers should aim to enhance the practicality and specificity of communication to ensure fathers are comfortable and knowledgeable to communicate with their sons about preventing STIs, HIV, and teen parenthood. Social workers, community nurse educators, and other public health professionals are accessible resources within the African American community and are well positioned to help African American fathers embrace their role to protect their sons from sexual health risks.

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