

Parent-Child Sexuality Communication

Kristi Hargiss

Healthy Sexuality in Marriage – SFL 395R

Brigham Young University

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Parent-child communication is a topic of concern to many anxious parents when it comes to talking about the “S” words – sex and sexuality. This communication between parents and their children is crucial in helping children learn important information to help them make healthy sexual choices now and in the future. Whether it be an insufficient amount or barriers inhibiting open conversations, defective parent-child communication in the home impedes healthy sexuality among adolescents.

### Parent-Child Sexuality Communication and Research Findings

**Sexual education in the home.** Mothers are usually the primary educator within the family for both boys and girls, where as the father plays a less significant role in teaching, especially when it comes to daughters. However, adolescents want both parents to be the “primary sex educators” (Mueller & Powers, 1990). Perceptions of who is the main source of sexual information differs among parents and children. A study of college freshman and their parents at Illinois State University reports “three-fourths of the fathers and two-thirds of the mothers felt that they were the chief source of sexual information for their children” (Rozema, 1986, p. 536). Sadly, only 7 percent of young men and 29 percent of young women felt the same and many felt that their parents’ efforts were insufficient.

In a study by Megan K. Beckett et al. (2010), researchers examined the timing of when parents discussed sexual topics with their children in the home. It was discovered that parents tended to discuss up to 24 sexual topics and grouped them into three different sections in relation to the child’s sexual behavior during the ages of 13-17. The three age-based sections included: presexual stage discussing menstruation, kissing, or body changes; precoital stage discussing birth control, saying no to sex, and genital touching; and coital stage discussing more about birth

control, relationships, and healthy decisions. Interestingly, over 40 percent of children reported having intercourse before talking with their parents and a third of parents hadn't even discussed 14 of the 24 topics and were reluctant to do so.

**Barriers between parent-child sexual communication.** In the American Journal of Sexuality Education, Mona Malacane MA and Jonathon J. Beckmeyer PhD (2016) sought to discover why some parents are reluctant to talk with their teenagers about sex and sexuality, along with approaches to overcome these obstacles. The four barriers between parents and adolescent communication about sex were "limited sexual health knowledge, perceptions of adolescents' readiness for sex, parental comfort discussing sex, and demographic factors" (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016, p. 29). Using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), researchers came up with ways sex and family educators can help cultivate parent-adolescent communication. TPB's focus is about the behavioral intention or beliefs resulting in a desired behavior. In other words, sex and family educators can help shift parent's beliefs about the barriers they have that keep them from talking with their teens in order to increase frequency of communication about sexuality with their children.

According to Katrina L. Pariera (2016), the most common barriers reported are parents feel their child is too young, regardless of age, and that the child ignores what they have to say as the child gets older. This presents an issue because the CDC reported, "Nationwide, 48.0% of students [grades 9-12] had had sexual contact with only the opposite sex" (CDC, 2016, p. 5). Parents also expressed doubts in their own communication abilities to teach their children correctly and sufficiently.

**Affective and defective communication.** Hazel J. Rozema's (1986) findings also suggest that the communication climate between parent and child can play a major role as a

barrier or a facilitator to sex education within the home. Defensive communication climates resulted in children feeling unable to discuss topics of sexuality with their parents. Defensive climate was described as children feeling fearful, nagged, and condemned. Supportive communication climates can foster parent-child sexual communication. Supportive climates were described as empathetic, problem oriented, and descriptive (Rozema, 1986). Curiously, children seem to be the instigator of conversations about sexual topics, not parents. (Pariera, 2016).

Kay E. Mueller's and William G. Powers' (1990) findings suggest that teenagers and young adults whose parents approach them in a friendly, attentive, and impression-leaving style are less likely to participate in sexual activity in general. These types of communicators are seen as supportive, non-threatening, and non-controlling. However, teens who perceived parents as these types of communicators also "reported lower sexual information accuracy" (Mueller & Powers, 1990). On the other hand, teens who perceive their parents as being contentious, dramatic, or dominant report higher sexual activity. These types of parent communicators are seen as controlling, thus resulting in teens pulling away and acting contrary to what parents asked of them. Overall, if parents do not create an inviting, open, and supportive line of communication, their children will be less likely to approach them about sexual information and parents lose an opportunity to help their children make healthy sexual decisions.

### **Correlating Sources of Knowledge**

While the specific topics and methods differed, these articles' findings correlate with one another and support the idea that parent-child communication about sexuality in the home is not up to par. Much of the research points toward that parents who do not talk with their children soon enough or are defective in their communication, miss out on a key opportunity to discuss healthy sexual choices and expectations. Thus, leaving the source of sexual information up to the

child's discretion, which could lead to misinformation or unhealthy choices resulting in STIs and teen pregnancy (Pariera, 2016).

Pariera (2016) and Malacane and Beckmeyer (2016), both mention common barriers such as parents feel embarrassed and don't know how or what to say to their teens when it comes to sex and they perceive their child isn't ready to talk about sex. In fact, "parents have reported being concerned that these discussions could expose their children to topics that are inappropriate for their age or tacitly encourage sexual behavior" (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016, 29). However, research says otherwise. Teens are not going to participate in sexual activity just because they learned about it (Busby, 2016). In fact, educating children based on a sexual wholeness approach by discussing the physical, spiritual, and emotional dimensions can produce positive outcomes in a child's sexual decision making and attitudes. As the child grows older and faces their sexual thoughts, actions, and emotions, parents should approach sexual communication with their children as "acceptance based with the goal of increasing trust and connection" (Busby, 2016). By creating this supportive climate and communicating in a non-threatening way, children are more likely to feel comfortable approaching and listening to their parent about sexuality (Rozema, 1986; Mueller & Powers, 1990).

Too many parents wait too long to talk about sex with their children or do not cover multiple topics. It often is a one-time conversation (Beckett et al., 2010). Pariera's (2016) points out that repetition and early sexual communication with children is important because it can help youth avoid early sexual behavior and it can "set the stage for future open communication between parents and children" (Pariera, 2016, p. 281). This is consistent with what Tammy Hill (2016) suggests in educating children with age appropriate information while they are young, about five years prior to their first sexual desire, which usually occurs between ages 9-12. Hill

also suggests having frequent conversations that consist of dialogue between parent and child instead of just the parent lecturing the child. If there is more of a defensive climate, as described by Rozema (1986), where a child feels fearful, nagged, or condemned, this would fall under more fear and shame based teaching methods that do not help a child develop healthy sexual attitudes (Busby, Carroll, & Leavitt, 2013). In order to help children foster healthy sexual attitudes, during frequent conversations parents should express gratitude for the body, sexual capacity, and the child's willingness to talk to them about the topic at hand (Hill, 2016; Busby, 2016). This type of affective parent-child conversation in the home can help create the supportive climate and positive communication needed. As parents overcome their own barriers and seek to have open and frequent communication, children will have the tools necessary to make healthy sexual decisions in regards to their own sexuality.

### **Personal Discussion**

There are many things I want to apply in my future and current family when it comes to parent-child sexuality communication. I want to have conversations about sexuality with my children early. I know I will probably have to overcome my own barriers as a parent, but I came from a home where sex and sexuality was not discussed. I plan on changing that in my home.

In the highly religious culture that we live in, I feel it is even more important to talk about sexuality with my kids so they feel like they can approach me with questions and I am their first and primary educator, not the internet or their peers. I want to start early by using correct terminology and age appropriate information. I will be there at the crossroads when they come home from school. I plan on asking questions, listening, and expressing my gratitude to help create a supportive and safe climate for them. So instead of feeling fearful or ashamed, I can help them develop a healthy sense of their sexuality.

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