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Comparing Sexuality Communication Among Offspring of Teen Parents and Adult Parents: a Different Role for Extended Family

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Abstract

This brief report examined teenagers' sexuality communication with their parents and extended families. It compared who teens of early parents (those who had children when they were adolescents) and teens of later parents (those who were adults when they had children) talk to about sex. Eighth grade students ($N=1281$) in 24 schools completed survey items about their communication about sex. Structural equation modeling was used to predict communication profiles, while adjusting for the nesting of students within schools. After controlling for teens' age, gender, race/ethnicity, grades, parent/guardian closeness, and social desirability of survey responses, as well as family status and median family income, results showed that teens of early (teen) parents were more likely than teens of later (adult) parents to talk with both parents and extended family about sex and less likely than later parents to talk only with parents. These findings indicate that realities of teen sexuality communication for teens of early parents may extend beyond a parent-teen model to include extended family. Extended family involvement in educational outreach is a potential untapped resource to support sexual health for teens of early parents.

Keywords

Sexuality communication; Extended family; Teen parent; Urban youth; Adolescence; Extended family

Family sexuality communication can reduce teen sexual risk-taking behavior (Murry et al. 2014; Trejos-Castillo and Vazsonyi 2009). Most research on family sexuality communication has focused on parents as the primary partners for teen conversations about

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Compliance with Ethical Standards The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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sex (DiIorio et al. 2003). However, studies suggest that many adolescents view other family members as resources for information about sex, particularly among urban youth (Harper et al. 2012; Teitelman et al. 2009). This communication may be especially relevant for adolescents, whose increasing autonomy and agency and growing social networks (Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins 2003; Zimmerman and Cleary 2006) can provide new opportunities to engage with extended family networks. These networks often include relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, as well as godparents and neighbors (Levitt et al. 2005; Pernice-Duca 2010). Consistent with prior findings, our use of the term “extended family” encompasses the larger family ecology of family members and non-family adults who participants identify as key sources of sexual communication. Extended family sexuality communication may be particularly prevalent among families of teen parents (referred to as “early parents” in this paper), who often have high levels of extended family involvement and support for child-rearing (Gordon et al. 2004; Pinzon and Jones 2012). High rates of teen sex and pregnancy among adolescents of early parents as compared with teens whose parents were older when they had children (referred to as “later parents” in this paper) (Johnson and Tyler 2007; Sipsma et al. 2010) also provide impetus to explore the potential of extended family sexuality communication as a resource to support sexual health for this group. While many systemic issues, such as poverty and lack of educational and employment opportunities, contribute to intergenerational patterns of teen parenthood (Kearney and Levine 2011), understanding family sexuality communication may serve as a potential protective resource to support the sexual health of teens with early parents.

Despite the high risk of early sex and pregnancy for teens of early parents and high levels of extended family involvement for teens in this group, little research has explored extended family sexuality communication for these teens. In one of few studies of this topic, qualitative research on urban parents found that early parents reported greater extended family sexuality communication with their teens than later parents (Grossman et al. 2013). These parents identified extended family as a resource to support their teens’ healthy development and reinforce messages about delaying sex. These parents may be drawing on extended family members as a way to increase their teens’ access to supportive resources for sex education to reduce the likelihood of early parenthood in the next generation.

A conceptual model for family sexuality communication has been formulated by Jaccard and colleagues to understand how parents talk with their teens about sex and relationships (Jaccard et al. 2002). This model identifies key elements to understand how family sexuality communication can influence adolescents’ sexual risk behavior. The theory draws from five basic elements of how individuals communicate with one another: the source of communication (who talks to the teen), the message communicated, the channel through which the message is transmitted, the recipient of communication (i.e., the teen), and the context of communication (social or cultural settings of communication, such as household structure). While this communication model has been used in prior research on parent-teen sexuality communication (e.g., Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2006), the current study extends exploration of two aspects of this model by investigating who in the family teens talk to about sex (the source of communication) among teens with early and later parents (context of communication).

We posit that early vs. later parent status serves as a critical context of teens' backgrounds, which shapes whether they talk about sex with parents, extended family members, both parents and extended family members, or no one in their family. The goal of this brief report is to assess whether teens of early parents differ from teens of later parents in their parent and extended family sexuality communication among a diverse group of 8th grade students. Based on the importance of extended family among families of early parents, we hypothesize that teens of early parents are more likely to report talking about sex with both parents and extended family and with extended family only, and would be less likely to report talking with parents only than teens of later parents.

Methods

Survey Participants

This study used secondary data from a randomized control longitudinal evaluation of a sex education intervention. The long-term goal of the intervention, Get Real: Comprehensive Sex Education that Works, is to promote sexual health through delaying sexual activity and increasing correct and consistent use of protection among teens who are sexually active. This evaluation involved 24 schools in the greater Boston area. Schools were eligible for study participation if they were located within a 25-mile radius of Boston, included sixth-, seventh-, and eighth grade classrooms, and had between 2 and 10 6th grade classrooms. For the 6th grade survey, 19 schools opted to use passive parental consent, while 5 schools chose active consent. By 8th grade, all schools opted to use passive parental consent. Consent forms were sent home to parents in multiple languages along with a project description in each year of the study. Approximately 5 % of parents either did not return consent forms (in schools choosing active consent) or opted out (in schools choosing passive consent). Less than 1 % of students chose not to take the survey and were taken to another classroom when surveys were administered. The survey took about 45 min to complete. Survey data were collected from fall 2009 to spring 2012 by evaluation team members who introduced the study and were available to answer questions and collect completed surveys. Identifying information was separated from students' survey responses and kept in a locked cabinet. The research was approved by Wellesley College's Institutional Review Board and by relevant review bodies for participating schools. See Erkut and colleagues for a full description of recruitment and data collection procedures (Erkut et al. 2013).

The analysis for the current study used the 8th grade survey data from the larger study because extended family sexuality communication questions were only asked in the final year of the survey.

Measures

Age—Age was calculated using date of birth.

Race/Ethnicity—Students reporting a single race/ethnicity were categorized in their self-identified group. Those reporting multiple groups were identified as biracial. Following Census definitions that Hispanics can be of any race (Ennis et al. 2010), students who self-identified as Latino with or without another racial identification were coded as Latino.

Family Status—Students were asked “Who do you live with?” Responses included “two parents in one place,” “one parent,” “two parents in different places,” “grandparents or other family members,” or “other.” We used a “two-parent vs all others” dichotomy as a covariate in the analysis.

Median Household Income—Family income level was obtained for the Census tract associated with student reported home address.

Grades—Students reported their “typical” grades ranging from “Mostly As” to “Mostly Ds and Fs.”

Parent/Guardian Closeness—Students were asked how close they felt to their parent/guardians (scale 1–5, not close at all to very close).

Teen Parent—Students were asked to report whether their mother or father became a parent when they were a teen. Students answering “yes” were categorized as having a teen parent.

Family Sexuality Communication—Students were asked “Which adults in your family have you talked to about sex? Check all that apply.” To include kinship networks (such as godparent, family friend), we also included a parallel question about whether teens had talked with a “friend of the family” about sex. Family options included mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunts, uncles, older sister, older brother, and cousin. These items were used to create family sexuality communication profiles described below.

Social Desirability—An abbreviated version of Baxter and colleagues’ (2004) social desirability index was used. Item scores were summed, with higher scores representing higher social desirability.

Analysis

Logistic regression analyses were conducted in a structural equation modeling framework using the Mplus statistical package (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2012) in order to adjust for the nesting of students within schools, which we treated as a design characteristic. This model was a multiple groups (2 groups: adolescent has/does not have an early parent) multinomial regression model predicting the relative likelihood of an adolescent belonging to each family communication profile: “parents only,” “extended family only,” and “both parents and extended family.” “Neither parents nor family” was the fourth group, which served in these models as the comparison category. Analyses controlled for teens’ age, gender, race/ethnicity, grades, parent/guardian closeness, and social desirability of survey responses, as well as family status and median family income. Teens’ grades were included as a covariate because poor academic achievement is associated with early sexual activity (Frisco 2008), which may predict higher levels of extended family sexuality communication (Grossman et al. 2014a, b).

Due to limitations in the sample size for teens of early parents, race/ethnicity was only included as covariate, rather than exploring interaction effects between race/ethnicity and

early parent status. To ensure that participation in the sex education intervention (which included parent activities, but did not include an extended family component) did not affect study associations, we completed regression analyses with and without intervention vs. comparison group status as a covariate. Intervention group status did not change the model, so was left out of the final analysis.

Model parameters and sample descriptives were used to calculate predicted probabilities of a teen having a particular sexuality communication profile. We conducted post hoc tests of these predicted probabilities and their parametric standard errors, conditioned on having an early parent. Each pair of predicted probabilities was statistically compared using a Wald test of equality.

Results

Analyses included all students who completed survey items regarding communication about sex and having an early parent ($N=1281$, 79 % of the 1626 students who took the 8th grade survey: 162 with early parents and 1119 with later parents). The sample was 52 % female; 35 % Latino, 31 % Black, 17 % White, 15 % Biracial, and 3 % Asian; and had a mean age of 13.97 years ($SD=0.70$). Average grades received in 8th grade were mostly Bs or mostly Bs and Cs. Most teens reported feeling close to their parents/guardians and just under half (46 %) reported living in a two-parent family. The median household income was \$49,562 ($SD=\$21,259$). Seventy-five percent of teens with early parents and 58 % of teens with later parents reported talking with some extended family about sex.

Table 1 shows the results of the multiple group logistic regression models. Examination of covariate effects show that girls were more likely than boys to talk to parents only ($B = 0.60$, $SE=0.17$, $p<0.01$, odds ratio=1.83), extended family only, ($B=0.66$, $SE=0.19$, $p<0.01$, odds ratio=1.94), and both parents and extended family members ($B=0.65$, $SE=0.16$, $p<0.001$, odds ratio=1.91) rather than neither parents nor extended family. Latino and Black teens were more likely than White teens (the comparison group for race/ethnicity) to talk with extended family only as opposed to talking with neither parents nor extended family (Latino: $B=0.96$, $SE=0.42$, $p < 0.05$, odds ratio = 2.61; Black: $B = 1.01$, $SE = 0.42$, $p<0.05$, odds ratio=2.75). Latino teens were also more likely than White teens to talk with both parents and extended family ($B=0.90$, $SE=0.34$, $p<0.01$, odds ratio=1.46). Teens living in areas with a higher median income were more likely to talk with parents only ($B=0.12$, $SE=0.03$, $p<0.01$, odds ratio= 1.12) or to both parents and extended family rather than neither ($B=0.10$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.05$, odds ratio=1.11). Teens living with both parents were less likely to talk with both parents and extended family than with neither ($B=-0.46$, $SE=0.20$, $p<0.05$, odds ratio=0.63). Teens with poorer grades were more likely to talk with extended family members only than with neither ($B=0.14$, $SE=0.04$, $p<0.001$, odds ratio=1.15). Teens who tended to give more socially desirable responses were less likely to report talking with both parents and extended family than neither parents nor extended family ($B=-0.72$, $SE=0.16$, $p<0.001$, odds ratio=0.49).

Teens who feel closer to their parent(s) were more likely to talk to parents *only* about sex ($B=0.65$, $SE=0.10$, $p<0.001$, odds ratio=1.91) or to both extended family and parents ($B=$

0.31, $SE=0.08$, $p<0.001$, odds ratio=1.37) than to neither. Teens who feel closer to their parent(s) were just as likely to talk to an extended family member only as compared to neither parents nor extended family ($B=-0.10$, $SE=0.06$, ns , odds ratio=0.91), although this reached the level of a trend ($p<0.10$). Given the importance of teen-parent quality of relationships to teen sexual risk and prevention (Perrino et al. 2000) and the inconsistent findings for this variable in our analyses, we ran post hoc analyses to further explore these associations. Post hoc tests revealed that the effects of parent closeness differ significantly across communication profiles (0.65 vs. -0.10 : Wald=64.02, $df=1$, $p<0.001$; 0.65 vs. 0.31: Wald=14.15, $df=1$, $p<0.001$; -0.10 vs. 0.31; Wald=40.01, $df=1$, $p<0.001$).

Figure 1 shows that the omnibus test for differences in the predicted probabilities of belonging to the communication profiles across teens with early parents and those with later parents was significant (Wald=16.81, $df=3$, $p<0.001$). Post hoc tests of differences within each communication profile showed that adolescents of early parents were significantly less likely than teens of later parents to talk with parents only (Wald=5.96, $df=1$, $p<0.05$) and to talk with neither parents nor extended family (Wald=4.76, $df=1$, $p<0.05$) but were significantly more likely to talk with both parents and extended family (Wald=11.41, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). Teens with early parents were equally as likely to talk with extended family only as teens with later parents (Wald=0.30, $df=1$, ns).

Discussion

While urban teens show high rates of extended family communication overall (Grossman et al. 2014a, b), extended family communication may be particularly prevalent for teens of early parents. This study's findings suggest that a dyadic model for sexuality communication, that is restricted to parents and teens, may not reflect the realities of many families. Across this urban sample, a combination of parent and extended family sexuality communication was the most common profile. Consistent with Jaccard and his colleagues' theoretical model for sexuality communication (Jaccard et al. 2002), the findings support the importance of examining the life contexts of teens (in this case, having an early parent) and teens' sources of family sexuality communication (parents and extended family). Further, profile analyses suggest that communication differences are more nuanced than whether teens talk to extended family and need to be understood within a larger context of parent and extended family sexuality communication. Specifically, study findings showed support for hypotheses that teens of early parents would be more likely to talk about sex with parents and extended family and less likely to talk with parents only than teens of later parents. These findings suggest that family sexuality communication for teens of early parents is likely to be a group effort, with multiple family members (including parents) involved. This may in part reflect early parents' reliance on extended family support for childrearing in general, which has been well documented (Smith 2000). The results also fit with qualitative findings showing that early parents see extended family as a resource to support their teens' healthy development and actively engage family members in sexuality communication with their teens (Grossman et al. 2013). However, the hypothesis that teens of early parents would be more likely to talk to extended family only was not supported. It may be that the unique role of extended family for teens of early parents is primarily a collaborative one, rather than

one in which extended family members take on primary responsibility for sexuality communication.

Covariate associations of gender and racial/ethnic group with sexuality communication profiles were consistent with prior research. Girls showed higher levels of all types of sexuality communication as compared to boys, which fits with research findings that girls talk with their parents about sex more than boys (Omar et al. 2003; Swain et al. 2006). The current findings suggest that this may hold true for extended family as well. Findings that Black and Latino teens showed more extended family sexuality communication than White teens are consistent with research identifying the importance of extended family relationships in Black and Latino families (Jones et al. 2007; Stanton-Salazar 2001). There is little prior research regarding associations of other demographic variables, such as family structure, neighborhood income, and students' grades with extended family sexuality communication. The finding that teens who tended to give more socially desirable responses were less likely to report talking with parents and extended family than with neither suggests that teens who put a high value on how they are perceived by others may feel less comfortable discussing sexual issues with family members.

Findings that greater closeness with parents predicts higher likelihood of talking with parents only or both parents and extended family, but not extended family only suggest that teens who are close with their parents may be more comfortable talking with parents about sex. However, one might hope that teens who feel less close to their parents would view extended family as an alternative resource for talking about sex. This would fit with research showing that extended family members can fill in gaps as primary caregivers when a parent is unable to take on traditional caretaking roles (Bertera and Crewe 2013; Harris 2013). This was not the case here, although associations for less parent closeness and more extended family only sexuality communication reached a trend level. Post hoc analyses showed that parent closeness operates differently for each communication profile, with the strongest association with parent only sexuality communication, followed by both parents and extended family, and the weakest association with extended family only communication. It may be that a measure of closeness with extended family is needed to determine whether extended family can provide an alternative to parents in this domain.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by the use of secondary analysis, which entailed that the major constructs of interest needed to be measured by variables that were predetermined and only present in the final wave of survey data. Specifically, the data lacked information on when, why, and which sexuality-related topics teens discuss with extended family. The small sample size of teens with early parents for this study limits the potential to explore interaction effects of race/ethnicity with early parent status and associations between family communication profiles and teen sexual behavior. In addition, due to a lack of gender information about extended family members (e.g., whether a cousin or sibling is male or female), data was insufficient to explore interactions between the gender of the teen and the gender of the family member with communication profiles. Findings from the current study

and prior research indicate the importance of gender in family sexuality communication (e.g., Teitelman et al. 2009; Sneed 2008) and suggest this as an area for future study.

To more fully understand the health implications of extended family sexuality communication, particularly for teens of early parents, future work should include longitudinal assessment of urban teens' parent and extended family sexuality communication, early or later parent status, and teen sexual behavior. Prior findings that parent-teen sexuality communication can protect teens from risky sexual behavior (Murry et al. 2014; Usher-Seriki et al. 2008) suggest that talking with other family members about sex may have a protective influence. This may be particularly true for teens of early parents, where a broader family ecology, rather than solely parental relationships, may provide a base of family support. Future study of multiple family roles in sexuality communication also raises complexities regarding whether messages about sex differ across family members, as their protective impact may rest on the health-promoting and consistent nature of the communication. Longitudinal work that extends over teens' transition to sex is also needed given findings that some adolescents seek extended family as a more comfortable alternative to parents as they begin to explore sex and relationships (Crohn 2010; Teitelman et al. 2009). While extended family played a role in sexuality communication for many early adolescents in this study, it may be even more prevalent during middle and late adolescence as a greater number of teens become sexually active.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Sex education programs often focus on parents as the primary sex educators of their children (Kirby and Miller 2002). While parents play a critical role in talking with their teens about sex (Albert 2010), the findings from this study suggest the need for sex education programs to target a broader family system, especially for programs that include children of early parents. Sex education programs that include family components have shown effectiveness in delaying teen sex (Grossman, Tracy, Charmaraman, Ceder, & Erkut, 2014; Tortolero et al. 2010), but we know of no evaluations of programs that include extended family involvement. While programs have limited resources to reach out to extended family members, asking teens to identify which family members they trust to talk with about sex may help teens identify potential partners for assigned family activities (Grossman et al. 2014a, b). Including extended family members as recognized resources for family assignments could also expand students' participation in family activities, as teens may be reluctant to talk with parents about sex, especially when they become sexually active (Crohn 2010). Pediatricians also serve as resources for adolescents' sex education and may be able to share guidance for family sexuality communication with teens and their family members. Given that they identify talking about sex with their patients as a high priority need and an area of minimal expertise (Miller et al. 2008), they may be open to opportunities to learn how to support family sexuality communication. Trusted adults outside of the family, such as teachers and sexuality educators, have also been identified as resources for teen sexuality communication (Namisi et al. 2009; Teitelman et al. 2009) and may be valuable sources of sexuality communication.

While state policies vary in their parameters for sex education, many states identify parental involvement as a key aspect of effective sex education programs (National Conference of State Legislatures 2014). This study's findings suggest that policies that support parental involvement can benefit from an expanded understanding of "parental" to include extended family in sex education. This change in policy could provide opportunities for educators and health providers to enhance health-promoting extended family sexuality communication and to leverage existing communication in support of teens' sexual health. This may be especially true for offspring of early parents, who have high vulnerability for sexual risk behavior (Johnson and Tyler 2007; Sipsma et al. 2010), but also have a potential resource given their unique engagement with extended family sexuality communication.

Conclusions

This study suggests that family sexuality communication may differ for teens of early and later parents, with policy implications for teen sexual health and prevention. Parents serve a critical role in talking with teens about sex (Albert 2010) and existing sex education programs primarily emphasize parent-teen communication (Kirby and Miller 2002). However, this study's findings suggest the importance of broadening the focus to include extended family, particularly for teens of early parents. For them especially, greater involvement of extended family in educational outreach policy and practice may be a benefit in preventing teen risky behavior.

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Fig. 1.

Whom teens of early and later parents talk to about sex. These probabilities were calculated using the MODEL CONSTRAINT command in Mplus to specify the probability equations and the MODEL TEST command to statistically compare the resulting values across each pair. Omnibus: Wald=16.81, df=3, $p<0.001$; parents only: Wald=5.96, df=1, $p<0.05$; extended family only: Wald=0.30, df=1, ns ; both extended family and parent(s): Wald=11.41, df=1, $p<0.001$; neither extended family nor parent(s): Wald=4.76, df, $p<0.05$

Table 1

Profiles of communication about sex; omnibus test and post hoc tests of differences

	Parent(s) only vs. neither			Extended family vs. neither			Both vs. neither		
	B	SE	Odds ratio	B	SE	Odds ratio	B	SE	Odds ratio
Threshold (no early parent)	-0.20	0.11		-0.21	0.12		0.62	0.09	***
Threshold (have early parent)	-0.34	0.27		0.25	0.24		1.22	0.22	***
Age (8th grade)	0.04	0.12	1.04	0.24	0.13	1.27	0.20	0.11	1.22
Female	0.60	0.17	**	0.66	0.19	**	0.65	0.16	***
Biracial	0.21	0.36		0.65	0.42		0.66	0.34	1.94
Latino	0.61	0.41		0.96	0.42	*	0.90	0.34	**
Black	0.23	0.45		1.01	0.42	*	0.36	0.34	1.43
Two-parent family	-0.16	0.23		-0.18	0.20		-0.46	0.20	*
Median income	0.12	0.03	**	0.03	0.06		0.10	0.04	*
Social desirability	-0.10	0.15		-0.31	0.24		-0.72	0.16	***
Poor grades	-0.08	0.06		0.14	0.04	***	0.00	0.05	1.00
Parent/guardian Closeness	0.65	0.10	***	-0.10	0.06		0.31	0.08	***
									1.37

The multiple thresholds reported above reflect the freely estimated regression equations for the “no early parent” and “have early parent” groups predicting the multinomial dependent variable representing communication group (parents only, extended family only, and both, with neither as the comparison category). Threshold values are scaled such that lower thresholds translate to higher probability values

* $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$;

*** $p < 0.001$