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Youth Perspectives on Sexuality Communication With Parents and Extended Family

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Abstract

Objective—To explore extended-family sexuality communication and compare it with parent sexuality communication.

Background—Family communication about sex can protect teens from sexual risk behavior. However, most studies on this topic focus exclusively on the parent–teen dyad; few capture the broader context of teens’ family communication.

Method—Using a mixed-methods approach, a convenience sample of 22 teens from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds were interviewed. Participants were asked to identify family members with whom they talk about sex and relationships, topics discussed, messages shared, and the teens’ comfort talking about sex and relationships. Thematic analysis was used to explore participants’ shared meanings and experiences.

Results—Eighty-six percent of teens reported talking with both parents and extended family about sex. Teens were more likely to report that parents than extended family shared messages about delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy and gave advice or shared information about sex. Teens were more likely to view extended family than parents as easy to talk with and as having shared life experiences, and some reported avoiding talk with parents about issues related to sexuality due to feeling awkward or fearing a negative reaction.

Conclusion—Extended family may play a somewhat different role than parents in teens’ sexuality communication, but family members showed a largely common set of family values.

Implications—Extended family may be a valuable teen resource for sexuality communication, particularly when teens feel uncomfortable talking with parents.

Keywords

adolescence; extended family; qualitative; sexuality and related issues

High health and educational costs of risky sexual behaviors among teens, such as having sex without a condom and multiple sex partners (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

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2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2015), have prompted research on factors that can reduce these behaviors. Family sexuality communication is a key protective influence on teen sexual behavior (Grossman, Tracy, Charmaraman, Ceder, & Erkut, 2014; Murry, McNair, Myers, Chen, & Brody, 2014). However, most studies on this topic focus exclusively on the parent–teen dyad, and most commonly on the teen and mother (Wright, 2009). This nuclear-family research focus does not capture the demographic realities of family life (Gerstel, 2011). More than half of teens report talking about sex with extended family, such as stepmothers, grandparents, uncles, cousins, siblings, and fictive kin (Harper et al., 2012; Wallace, Hooper, & Persad, 2014). High rates of teen sexuality communication with extended family and its potential to protect teens from risky sexual behavior justify a deeper exploration of family sexuality communication within an extended-family context. If extended-family sexuality communication provides protective messages similar to those of parents, it could represent an underutilized resource to promote teens' sexual health. The gap in exploring extended-family sexuality communication and comparing it with parent sexuality communication is addressed in the present study.

Literature Review

Social capital theory suggests that individuals can access resources through close social relationships (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988), and extended family is a key component of many adolescents' social networks (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Pernice-Duca, 2010). Social capital from extended family can serve as an important asset, particularly among families that tend to have limited access to resources, such as single-parent and immigrant families (e.g., Barnett, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2010; Hayes, Blake, Darensbourg, & Castillo, 2015). The link between communication with extended family and teens' sexual behavior can be explained through the theory of reasoned action, which purports that individuals' behaviors are based on their attitudes and perceived social norms about the behavior, which are transmitted in part through conversations about a given behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). In the case of sexuality communication, extended-family social capital can provide a means through which conversations about sexual issues occur in a context where both knowledge and family values concerning sex are conveyed in an influential manner that can shape adolescents' sexual behavior.

Our definition of *extended family* includes the larger family context of nonparental partners in teens' sexuality communication: stepparents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, older cousins and siblings, and fictive kin. We consider stepparents as extended family (differentiated from parents) based on differences in mother–daughter sexuality communication with biological parents versus stepparents (Crohn, 2010). Specifically, Crohn found that young women talked to stepmothers more than biological mothers about sexuality because stepmothers were perceived to be less judgmental and less prone to worry than biological mothers. We include siblings as extended family because studies have differentiated siblings from parents in that they play more of a peer role in talking about sex than do parents, which can include both protective messages about abstinence and reducing sexual risk, as well as risk-promoting communication, such as encouraging sexual activity (Harper et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2014).

The frequency, content, and influence of family sexuality communication on teens may vary according to racial or ethnic background, gender, religiosity, and the generation of family members. For example, the high cultural value placed on extended-family involvement in many Black and Latino families (e.g., Bravo, Umaña-Taylor, Zeiders, Updegraff, & Jahromi; 2016; Gonzalez, Jones, & Parent, 2014) is congruent with the high rates of extended-family sexuality communication reported by Black and Latino teens (Harper et al., 2012). The gender combination of extended-family members and teens also seems to play a role in shaping the content of family sexuality communication (Deutsch & Crockett, 2016; Kuhle et al., 2015); for example, teens may be more likely to engage in sexuality communication with same-sex family members (Caughlin et al., 2000). Research suggests that parents' religiosity may also shape the content of conversations about sex (e.g., Hicks, McRee, & Eisenberg, 2013; Williams, Pichon, Campbell, 2015), but to our knowledge, this area has not been explored with extended families. Teens' sexuality communication with extended family also spans generations, including same-generation relatives (e.g., older siblings and cousins) and adults from their parents' generation (e.g., aunts and uncles) or older (e.g., grandparents; Killoren & Roach, 2014; Teitelman et al., 2009). Effects of conversations can differ depending on the generation of the conversation partner, as studies show that sibling and cousin sexuality communication can be either risky or protective for teen sexual beliefs and behaviors (East, Reyes, & Horn, 2007; Secor-Turner, Sieving, Eisenberg, & Skay, 2011), and grandparent messages are more consistently identified as health-promoting (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; Cornelius & Xiong, 2015).

Extended-family sexuality communication may be particularly relevant for teens as they begin to explore sexuality and relationships. During this developmental period, some young people show reluctance to talk with parents about sex out of embarrassment or fear that their parents might judge them or worry about their sexual behavior (Crohn, 2010). Daughters' perceptions that mothers attempt to control and restrict their developing sexuality can also be a barrier to talking about sex (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2007). Therefore, as teens develop, they may express more openness in talking about sexual issues with extended family than with parents (Killoren & Roach, 2014), seeing them as a trusted alternative for sexuality communication (Teitelman, Bohinski, & Boente, 2009).

Less is known about the content of teens' conversations with extended family than with parents. However, existing research suggests that there is much overlap in topics of conversation between these groups. Studies of teen-parent sexuality communication identify abstinence, safer sex, sexually transmitted infections, sexual values, and dating as topics of conversation (Stidham-Hall, Moreau, & Trussell, 2012; Wright, 2009). Similarly, teens describe getting advice and support on dating, relationships, sexual behavior, and safer sex practices from siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Cornelius, LeGrand, & Jemmott, 2008; Grossman, Tracy, Richer, & Erkut, 2015; Wallace et al., 2014). Studies that compare parent and extended-family sexuality communication identified common topics of dating and relationships, family sexual values, safer sex, and teen pregnancy (George et al., 2013; Harper et al., 2012). However, research has also identified differences between parent and extended-family sexuality communication. For example, one qualitative study compared how young adult daughters perceive sexuality communication with their mothers versus stepmothers and found that many participants discussed sexual experiences with their

stepmothers, but not their mothers, because stepmothers were perceived to be “more accepting of these confidences, not judgmental, and less inclined to worry than the mothers would be” (Crohn, 2010, pp. 359–360). Research is needed to expand this line of study by including teens’ perceptions of sexuality communication with other extended family members. To address the gap in comparing parent and extended-family sexuality communication and to explore the potential of extended-family sexuality communication as a health-promoting resource for teens, we conducted in-depth interviews with adolescents to explore similarities and differences in teens’ experiences and perceptions of sexuality communication with parents versus extended family members.

Method

Participant Recruitment

The data for this study came from follow-up interviews with a sample of students who were initially interviewed in 2012 while in seventh grade as part of an evaluation of *Get Real: Comprehensive Sex Education That Works*, which is a comprehensive middle school sex education curriculum developed by the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. Participants in the original study were drawn from a convenience sample of seventh graders in three urban schools in the intervention group. Active parental consent was required for interview participation; invitations and consent forms for study participation were distributed through students and school mailings. Overall, 177 students were invited to participate in interviews, and 34 consent forms with permission to participate were returned. All students with parental consent were contacted for an interview, and 32 students gave their assent and completed interviews, which took approximately 30 minutes each and were conducted either at school or over the telephone. See Grossman and colleagues (2015) for more detail on the Get Real curriculum and recruitment of interview participants. The original interviews focused on teen–parent communication about sex and relationships. However, during these interviews, participants also described conversations with extended family about sex. Thus, to gain further insight into extended-family sexuality communication, we invited teen participants from the original sample to complete a second interview with a focus on extended family.

To conduct the interviews for the present study, we re-contacted participants when they were in the 10th grade by telephone and e-mail using active parental consent as well as teens’ assent for participation. Of the 32 original teen participants, 23 participated—7 families were unreachable and two were unavailable or declined to participate—representing 72% of the original sample. Because of the study’s focus on comparing teens’ communication with parents and extended family, one interview was excluded from analyses because the teen did not identify a parent in his life on which to base responses to sexuality communication interview questions. Of the total sample of 22 teens, half (50%) were girls, and half (50%) were boys; all were 15 or 16 years of age. Half (50%) self-identified as non-Hispanic Black or African American, 27% were Hispanic or Latino, 14% were non-Hispanic White, and 9% were mixed race. Forty-six percent of teens reported living in two-parent families, 36% with a single parent (primarily mothers), and 18% with a parent and another adult family member (e.g., grandparent, aunt). Forty-one percent reported their parents had no education beyond

high school, 23% reported some college education, 27% graduated from college (or some had advanced college degrees), and 9% did not respond to this question (see Table 1). Although the sample size was too small for statistical comparison, demographics for participating teens suggested some differences between teens who participated in both Time 1 and Time 2 interviews and those who left the study after Time 1 interviews. More participants who left the study after Time 1 were male (71% vs. 52%), White (43% vs. 14%), and younger in age (11.5 vs. 12.0). Parental education was comparable between the two groups.

Interview Protocols & Procedures

This study was conducted in a manner consistent with a protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution. Interviews were conducted via telephone in English by the first author and other interviewers trained and supervised by the first author. Participants were asked to create their pseudonyms to protect confidentiality; those pseudonyms are used in this article.

In all interviews, participants were reminded that the purpose of the study was to better understand how teens and their families talk about sex and relationships. Teens were told that none of their answers would be shared with their parents unless there were concerns for their own or others' safety. Participants were reassured that it would be normal to feel a bit embarrassed or uncomfortable and that they could choose not to answer any questions. To help participants feel more at ease and for the researchers to understand the structure of participants' families, all interviews began with two questions: "Who do you live with?" and "Are there other people in your family who you're close with who don't live with you?"

Participants were then asked to identify family members with whom they talk about sex and relationships using the following prompt, "Could you name the people in your family that you talk to about sex or relationships? This could include people like your parents, your aunts or uncles, cousins, your brother or sister, or a godparent or friend of the family." For each family member identified, teens were asked about the person's age, the topics of conversation discussed, the most important messages the teen perceived from this person, and the teen's comfort talking with the person about sex and relationships. Teens were also asked to describe a recent conversation with this person about sex or relationships.

The interviews were 30 to 45 minutes in duration, and each teen was given \$25 in appreciation of their participation at the end of the interview. After the interviews, all participating teens were provided with a resource list with contact information for organizations supporting youth social, emotional, and sexual health.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to systematically identify themes in the cross-sectional interview data to explore shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author summarized preliminary reflections on each interview and developed initial descriptive and interpretive codes. Next, the first and second authors identified themes that represented meaningful patterns of parent and extended-family sexuality communication. They then coded study data, reviewed and revised these themes based on their fit with coded data, and

defined and named the themes (Sandelowski, 2008). The themes presented subsequently are not mutually exclusive because a single response could have been coded under more than one theme. For example, a teen could have described a conversation in which his aunt gave him advice about using protection, which would have been coded under two themes: *messages* and *process of communication*. NVivo 10.0 (QSR International, 2012) was used to facilitate coding, serving as a tool to organize data by group (e.g., parent vs. extended family) and to more clearly enable identification of similarities and differences in participants' responses. To further ensure trustworthiness by guarding against investigator bias, the first and second authors conducted reliability checks by each initially coding the same one third of the data then checking to ensure that the authors understood the codes in the same way. After comparing coding between authors for the first third of the data, we identified, discussed, and resolved differences in our perceived meanings and interpretations of codes. On the basis of these discussions and agreed revisions, we recoded additional data as needed. Interrater reliability was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula in which reliability equals the number of agreements divided by the total of agreements and disagreements. Coding calibrations ended when intercoder reliability reached 91%. Chi-square tests for independence were used to assess differences in thematic responses between teens' reports of parent versus extended-family sexuality communication.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

All participants reported talking with at least one person in their family about sex. Eighty-six percent of teens reported talking with both parents and extended family about sex, whereas 14% of teens reported talking with parents only. Teens were most likely to report talking with their mother about sex and relationships (95%), followed by father (38%) and older sister (33%), with similar frequencies for aunt, uncle, and older female cousin (all at 29%). Teens reported less communication with older brothers, older male cousins, and stepfathers (14%), and the least communication with grandmothers (10%), grandfathers (5%), and other family members (5%).

Coding of interview data resulted in four main themes related to parent and extended-family sexuality communication: (a) messages portrayed during conversations, (b) why talk with family about sex, (c) why not talk with family about sex, and (d) processes of communication about sex. Within each theme, subthemes showed similarities and differences between how teens perceived conversations about sex with parents and extended family (see Table 2).

To provide a check on whether differences between teens' perceptions of parent and extended-family sexuality communication were related to age of extended family member, we coded whether each extended-family communication response referred to younger (teens' generation) or older (parents' or grandparents' generation) family members. A comparison of these codes for each theme and subtheme did not show differences for teens' communication with older or younger extended family members.

Interviews

Messages—This theme refers to teens' perceptions of the key values and information about sex and relationships that family members conveyed to them. We identified six message subthemes: (a) delay sex, (b) use protection, (c) avoid teen pregnancy, (d) be careful in relationships, (e) focus on school, and (f) avoid peer pressure. Teens were statistically more likely to report that parents conveyed messages of delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy compared to extended family. The frequencies of other subthemes were not statistically different between parents and extended family.

Delay sex—Teens reported more instances of parents conveying messages about delaying sex than of extended family members doing so, 59% parents, 9% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 12.24$, $p < .001$. This reflects a strong parental focus on waiting to have sex. Brian described his father's central message about sex: "Just have sex when you're ready, after you're married. Live your life first before thinking about all this stuff." Charles described a conversation he had with his mother about sex: "The other day when she was cleaning my room and she seen some condoms in my room, she was like, 'Whose are these? Ain't nobody having sex.'" Some teens reported extended-family messages that were similar to parent messages on delaying sex. For example, a participant who called herself "Student" said her aunt's main message was that "it's okay to have friends that are boys but not to automatically do sexual things with them."

Avoid teen pregnancy—Teens were more likely to report parent than extended family messages about avoiding teen pregnancy, 73% parents, 32% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 7.38$, $p = .007$. Zeek said of his mother that "She doesn't want me to fall into that stereotype group that every kid that lives here has to get pregnant at a young age." Jane said her father remarked, "Don't be like them" while they were watching a television show in which a young girl became pregnant. Similarly, Charles said his older brother had told him, "I don't care what the situation is, always protect yourself . . . because you don't want to be one of these young African American fathers who are teenage fathers."

Additional subthemes—The frequency of four other teen interview subthemes (i.e., use protection, be careful in relationships, focus on school, avoid peer pressure) was not statistically different between conversations with parents and with extended family. Participants described *use protection* messages from both parents and extended family. For example, Brittany said her mother's underlying message about sex was "Make sure that your partner is wearing a condom because you don't want to get a sexually transmitted infection." Similarly, McLovin's uncle acknowledged to him, "I cannot not stop you from having sex; it's inevitable, it's going to happen" so he focused instead on doing it responsibly: "Just use a condom. And if you don't, you know the repercussions." Other teens described messages they received from family about relationships, which collectively became the *be careful in relationships* theme in our data. The message Olivia received from her mother was "just protect myself and don't let anybody take advantage of me." Some teens identified a central family message about focusing on school rather than relationships (*focus on school*). Zeek's mother did not want him "dating in high school because of school; she thinks it's hard to have a relationship and school on top of whether or not you play like a sport or all this other

stuff.” Sara’s mother had also told her that she “shouldn’t put relationships before other things like school” and more generally that she should “keep [her] priorities straight.” Lastly, some participants talked about family messages concerning peer pressure (*avoid peer pressure*). Jenny described messages from her family, including her mother and older brother, about avoiding peer pressure: “All of them say, always use protection, like birth control and condoms, and don’t let nobody peer pressure you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Why talk—Teens were asked about the reasons why they wanted to talk with family members about sex. We identified five subthemes: (a) learning from family members’ life experiences, (b) ease of conversation, (c) close relationship with the family member, (d) understands the teen, and (e) perceived trustworthiness and honesty. The frequency of learning from family members’ life experiences and ease of conversation were statistically different between parents and extended family members; both were more frequently used to describe sexuality communication with extended family than parents.

Life experiences—Teens identified family members’ life experiences, particularly having had life events similar to what the teen was experiencing or may experience, as a reason for talking with them about sex. Teens were more likely to attribute this reason for talking with extended family than with parents (55% extended family; 18% parents, $\chi^2(1) = 6.29, p = .012$) although their explanations were similar. Tony said he talks with his aunt about sex because “she has teenage sons, and she knows what they go through and what they do.” Other teens focused on shared experiences with same-gender family members. Jenny said she talks to her cousin because “she understands my point of view ’cause she’s a female as well, so she understands how everything works.” For Brittany, her mother’s gender and life experience made her a good resource: “We’re both women, and she’s already been through puberty and she’s been through a lot more than I have, [so] she knows what to do.”

Ease of communication—Teens were more likely to describe extended-family members as easy to talk to compared with parents, 41% extended family; 14% parents, $\chi^2(1) = 4.13, p = .042$. Leila illustrated this sentiment: “It’s easier for me to listen to [my older sister] and listen to what she’s saying because, like I said, we can relate on most things, so it’s easier for me to just process what she’s saying.” Zeek described comfort talking with his aunts because, “instead of like a mother to son, it’s more like a playful yet serious kind of tone with it, which is why it’s easy to talk to them.” Conversely, some teens described similar comfort talking with their parents. Tony, for example, described the ease of talking with his mother: “I talk to her probably more than I do with my dad . . . it comes easier when I talk to her [because] she listens a lot more to me.”

Additional subthemes—The three other subthemes for reasons why teens wanted to talk with family about sex—close relationship with family member, understands the teen, trustworthy—were not statistically different in terms of frequency between parents and extended family. Whether a parent or an extended family member, teens described close connections with the family member as a reason to talk with them. For example, Chris said, “My dad’s the closest to me so if I have any questions about [sex and relationships], it would

be him” with whom he would talk. John shared, “My aunt is like my second mother; she’s always there for me. So like anything I need, I can just ask her for it. So there’s no hesitation to ask her for anything.” Other participants described family members’ understanding as a reason to talk with them about sex. Raven said her mother had “been through stuff, so she’s understanding.” Stephen shared, “If I was to talk about certain things with my mom, she would get mad or something, but with [my cousin], he’ll understand.” Finally, participants talked about trust in family members as a reason to talk with them about sex. Brian said of his mother, “Because she’s my parent, I just have so much trust in her and I feel like she can really guide me.” Chris talked in a similar manner about his connection with his aunt: “I have a lot of trust in her and she’s always truthful and honest with me.”

Why not talk—When teens reported that they did not talk with some family members about sex, we asked them to explain this further. Two primary reasons surfaced: (a) awkward conversation and (b) fear of negative reactions. Teens were statistically more likely to describe avoiding sexuality communication with parents than extended family for each of these reasons.

Awkward—Some teens reported that talking with family members about sex was awkward or uncomfortable, and this sentiment was more likely to be expressed with regard to conversations with parents than with extended family members (41% parents, 14% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 4.13, p = .042$). As McLovin described, “I’d say with my mom, the only thing I’m uncomfortable talking about is sex, because any time the conversation comes up with her, it makes me feel awkward.” Sara said that “talking about [sex] can be kind of weird . . . [because] people act like you’re not supposed to talk about that stuff with your mom.” Fewer teens reported that talking with extended family was awkward. Charles, for example, said “it would be awkward” to talk with his older sister about sex because “I would make a joke and start smiling, and then she’ll start laughing with me and I just can’t take it seriously after that.”

Fear of negative reactions—Some teens reported that they do not talk to their parents about sex due to fear of negative reactions, which teens only described as a concern with parents, 23% parents, 0% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 5.64, p = .018$. Olivia said that in middle school she “wasn’t having sex, so it was like curiosity questions” when she would ask her mom about sex, but she felt more awkward talking about sex with her mom now that she was (apparently) sexually active: “The questions that I ask her now are more direct to me, so it feels a little bit like I feel like she’ll judge me somewhat rather than if I was asking just because I was curious.” Jane reported the same concern when describing why she does not talk with her father about sex: “Probably the way he responds, like I’m always worried about if he’ll respond and like, ‘Why are you asking that?’”

Process of talk—We identified six subthemes for how teens described the process of sexuality communication with parents and extended family: (a) adult gives teen advice, (b) adult shares information, (c) teen asks questions, (d) adult asks questions, (e) teen shares with adult, and (f) adult talks about experiences. The frequency of two subthemes was

statistically different between parents and extended family members: adult gives advice and adult shares information.

Adult gives teen advice—More teens reported that parents than extended family gave them advice about sex and relationships, 91% parents, 64% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 4.66$, $p = .031$. However, advice-giving was a frequent topic in both parent and extended-family sexuality communication, and the type of advice was similar across family members. Brittany shared her mother's advice:

When I turned 15, [my mother] was like, "Soon you're going to start dating but you have to be careful because that person might not turn out who you want—like who you expected them to be and they can hurt you emotionally and physically."

Leila's mother told her "to make sure you be careful and you use protection" when she engaged in sexual activity "because there's a lot of diseases and stuff in the world." Similarly, John's uncles advised him to "always stay protected [and] don't do it just to do it—do it because you want to do it."

Adult shares information—Teens reported that family members provided them with sexual health information, and they described more instances of parents than extended-family members doing so, 41% parents, 14% extended family; $\chi^2(1) = 4.13$, $p = .042$. The teen who called herself Student described how her mother reinforced the risks of unprotected sex when she learned about condoms in health class by telling her "what can happen if someone does have a sexually transmitted disease or an STI and if I have sex with that person and it's unsafe, what can happen to me and precautions I should take." Also on the topic of condoms, John described a conversation he had with his mother after a visit to the doctor: "She asked me if I knew how to put it on and what's the first thing to do before you actually use a condom. And she gave me the answers, because I didn't know at the time." Although less frequent than with parents, teens also described conversations where members of their extended family provided information about sexual issues. For example, McLovin described a conversation he had with his uncle about sex and pregnancy: "He was like, 'So you do know that if you have sex with a girl without a condom then you'll get her pregnant.' And then from there he was talking about like how babies are formed in the uterus."

Additional subthemes—The frequencies of four other subthemes captured within the process of sexuality communication—teen asks questions, adult asks questions, teen shares with adult, adult talks about experiences—were not statistically different between parent and extended-family conversations. Some teens described their experiences with asking family members questions about sex and relationships. Student said, "Now that I've got to high school . . . my questions are a little bit more detailed and specific than when I was in middle school." Raven said her "mom was telling me that she was going to put me on birth control" so she had asked her cousin questions like "Does it hurt? Do you really gain weight like everybody says?"

Conversely, teens also described occasions when family members either asked them questions (i.e., adult asks questions) or they shared personal information with an adult (i.e.,

teen shares with adult). For example, John described a time when his mother asked him about sex: “She asked me if I ever did it and I told her ‘No, but I feel like I’m ready to.’” Rather than being asked, Tony had “been honest with” his mother by telling her “what I have and haven’t done.”

Lastly, teens described times when family members talked with teens about their own experiences (i.e., adult talks about experiences). Lily’s mother told her “about when she got pregnant with me and stuff and how she was happy but yet she was wondering if she was going to be able to take care of me.” Sara’s cousin had experienced some unhealthy relationships, and based on that experience had advised her that “relationships always have to be healthy” and that she “shouldn’t put relationships before other things like school.”

Discussion

This study addresses a gap in research by exploring teens’ perceptions of the larger ecology of family sexuality communication, expanding on research on the teen–parent dyad. Findings show both similarities and differences in the content and process of teens’ sexuality communication with parents and extended family. Teens were more likely to report that talk about delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy, as well as advice about sex, occurred with parents than with extended family. However, extended family were said to share more valuable life experiences and be easier to talk with about sexuality compared with parents. Conversations about topics such as using protection, focusing on school, and being careful in relationships were similar in reported frequency between parents and extended family, and feelings of closeness and being understood were both common reasons for engaging in conversations on sexuality with parents and extended family members alike. Whereas the differences indicate that extended family may play a somewhat different role than parents in teens’ sexuality communication, the similarities indicate a largely common set of family values about sexual issues. Counter to the dyadic focus of traditional models of teen–parent talk about sex, these results suggest the potential for extended-family sexuality communication to complement teens’ conversations with their parents, together providing a larger family system of support for teens’ sexual health. The high level of communication with extended family about sex and relationships provides reason to consider the roles extended family members may play in sexuality communication and education for teens, particularly within Black and Latino families given that they comprised a large portion of the sample and extended family members tend to play a key child-rearing role within these cultures (Bravo et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2014).

One notable difference between sources of sexuality communication was that teens were more likely to report conversations about delaying the onset of sex with parents than extended family. It may be that parents and extended family perceive their roles in sexuality communication with teens differently; parents may feel a responsibility to promote messages related to delaying sex, while extended family may feel less restricted in their role. Whereas parents’ communication with teens about the importance of delaying sex can be protective for teens (Bersamin et al., 2008), accompanying these messages with guidance about protection becomes more critical in high school as more teens become sexually active (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Further, parents’ focus on delaying sex

may at times reflect an underestimation of their teens' sexual activity; a large-scale study found that for sexually active teens, 55% of their parents inaccurately reported that their teens had not had sex (Mollborn & Everett, 2010). This mistaken perception may hamper parents' tailoring of their sexuality messages to teens' age and sexual activity stage. Future research could assess whether extended family provide similar patterns of errors in assessing teens' sexual activity.

Our findings indicated that teens were more likely to describe conversations as awkward or uncomfortable with parents than with extended family. Teens may perceive their parents as authoritative figures who could react punitively toward them or be disappointed if they confide about their sexual experiences. This finding fits with prior research: For example, in Crohn's (2010) study, young women expressed reluctance to talk with their mothers about sex for fear they would worry about their daughters' sexual behavior. Discomfort in talking with parents about sex may also reflect a developmental shift as teens begin engaging in sexual activity. For example, one participant expressed concern regarding her mother's response to questions about sex that had been more hypothetical in middle school but were more directly relevant to her life in high school. A related finding is that participants were more likely to describe talking with extended family than with parents about sex due to shared life experiences and perceptions that conversations with them were easier. Shared experiences and understanding related to gender was also a common thread in teens' responses. Although mothers are typically the primary sexuality educators for their children (Aronowitz, Todd, Agbeshie, & Rennells, 2007; Teitelman et al., 2009), studies suggest that teens often prefer to talk about sexual issues with same-sex extended family members (Caughlin et al., 2000). Extended family may provide opportunities for teens' to obtain same-gender perspectives on sex and relationships that may not be available within their nuclear families, especially for teens in single-parent families. Conversely, teens in our study were more likely to identify parents as giving advice and sharing sexual health information compared with extended family. However, it remains unclear whether teens see parents more often as experts who have the answers and extended family in a less hierarchical role similar to a more experienced peer (Beam et al., 2002; Haddad et al., 2011) or whether teens feel lectured by parents who want to give advice rather than asking about their personal opinions and experiences.

Whereas teens identified some differences in sexuality communication with parents and extended family, responses show more similarities than differences in terms of the messages teens received from adult family members, why they talked to them about sex, and the process of this communication. This finding fits with prior research identifying commonalities in sexuality communication between these groups (Harper et al., 2012; Teitelman et al., 2009). Our findings for teens' reports—of close connections with extended family, high utilization of extended family resources for sexuality communication, and largely protective extended-family messages about sex—correspond with the view that extended family can be a source of social capital in the lives of children and adolescents. Consistent with the theory of reasoned action, these interactions may have the potential to promote teens' sexual health. As a next step, research is needed to quantitatively assess whether extended-family sexuality communication affects teens' sexual behavior over and

above parents' influence, as well as the influence of teens' conversations with different generations of extended family.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have several implications for practice. Some parents may fear that family members will share risk-promoting messages with teens, but our findings suggest a largely common set of family values about sexual issues. It may be helpful for parents to identify and reach out to specific family members who they believe can support teens' sexual health as resources for their teens' sexuality communication (Grossman et al., 2016). Extended family can also be a resource for teens' sexuality communication at times when talking to parents may feel awkward or uncomfortable. Further, teens may seek out extended family members in addition to parents as ways to obtain different perspectives, whether due to gender, age, or life circumstances (Killoren & Roach, 2014). Teens' openness with extended family provides a unique opportunity for relatives to share tools that teens need to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. Extended family may be a particularly important resource during the transition to becoming sexually active if teens find it difficult to talk with parents about sexual issues (Crohn, 2010).

There may also be opportunities to involve extended family in sex education programs. As this and other studies show, extended family members are often involved in sexuality communication with teens in their families. Yet these family members may feel uncomfortable discussing sexual issues with teens and lack resources to support this communication (Cornelius et al., 2008; Cornelius & Xiong, 2015). Programs often provide resources for parents on how to engage in health-promoting sexuality communication with their children (Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, 2017; Tortolero et al., 2010); this outreach could be extended to other family members. Encouraging teens to talk with extended family members about sex, particularly when teens are reluctant to talk with their own parents, may attune some teens to a resource that they were unaware of or had underutilized. Future studies are needed to determine how to effectively include extended family in sexuality education programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings are based on a cross-sectional convenience sample of teens who were willing to participate in interviews about family sexuality communication and likely represent a highly engaged and open group of teens and parents, which may not be representative of how other families communicate about sex and relationships. Large-scale quantitative studies could assess the generalizability of these findings. The size of our sample also limited our ability to explore differences within sample groups, such as gender, race and ethnicity, and age; variations according to these and other relevant contextual circumstances should be examined in future research. Lastly, to minimize participants' potential discomfort talking about sexuality communication, teens were not asked direct questions about their sexual behavior or orientation. Future quantitative studies that assess both extended family sexuality communication and teens' sexual behavior could discern the relative impact messages about sex and relationships have on sexual health behaviors when coming from extended family members versus parents.

Conclusion

This study provides an expanded window into the different yet overlapping family roles in teens' sexuality communication and offers growing evidence of family sexuality communication that extends beyond a nuclear family model. It also presents empirical support for the health-promoting potential of teens' conversations with extended family about sex and relationships: Extended family may provide an added layer of support to parents' efforts to promote sexual health among teens.

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Table 1

Demographics of Teen Sample (N = 22)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Male	11	50
Female	11	50
Race or ethnicity		
Black (non-Hispanic)	11	50
Hispanic	6	27
White (non-Hispanic)	3	14
Biracial or multiracial	2	9
Family structure		
Single parent	8	36
Two-parent family	10	46
Parent and other adult family members	4	18
Parent education		
Did not finish high school	3	14
Finished high school	6	27
Started college	5	23
Finished college	5	23
Degree after college	1	4
Did not respond	2	9

Table 2
 Teens' Perceptions of Parent and Extended-Family Sexuality Communication (N = 22)

	<u>Parent</u>		<u>Extended family</u>		χ^2	p
	n	%	n	%		
Messages						
Delay sex	13	59	2	9	12.24	<.001
Use protection	15	68	11	50	1.50	.220
Avoid teen pregnancy	16	73	7	32	7.38	.007
Be careful in relationships	4	18	5	23	0.14	.709
Focus on school	3	14	5	23	0.61	.434
Avoid peer pressure	3	14	2	9	0.23	.635
Why talk with family						
Life experience	4	18	12	55	6.29	.012
Ease in communication	3	14	9	41	4.13	.042
Close relationship	4	18	3	14	0.17	.680
Understands teen	6	27	4	18	0.52	.472
Trust/honesty	3	14	4	18	0.17	.680
Why not talk with family						
Awkward	9	41	3	14	4.13	.042
Fear of negative reaction	5	23	0	0	5.64	.018
Process of communication						
Adult gives advice	20	91	14	64	4.66	.031
Adult shares information	9	41	3	14	4.13	.042
Teen asks questions	8	36	8	36	0.00	1.000
Adult asks questions	8	36	8	36	0.00	1.000
Teen shares with adult	6	27	7	32	0.11	.741
Adult talks about his/her experiences	3	14	5	23	0.61	.434