



Original article

Quality of Parent–Adolescent Conversations About Sex and Adolescent Sexual Behavior: An Observational Study

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Studies suggest that the quality of parent–adolescent communication about sex uniquely predicts adolescent sexual behavior. Previous studies have relied predominantly on self-report data. Observational methods, which are not susceptible to self-report biases, may be useful in examining the associations between the quality of parent–adolescent communication about sex and adolescent sexual behavior more objectively.

Methods: With a sample of adolescents ($N = 55$, 58% male, 44% white, $M_{age} = 15.8$) and their parents, we used hierarchical logistic regression analyses to examine the associations between the observed quality of parent–adolescent communication about dating and sex and the likelihood of adolescents' sexual intercourse.

Results: The quality of parent–adolescent communication about dating and sex predicted sexual behavior. Specifically, lecturing was associated with a higher likelihood of adolescents having had sexual intercourse.

Conclusions: The quality of parent–adolescent communication about sex is a unique correlate of adolescent sexual behavior and warrants further investigation. Thus, it serves as a potential target of preventive interventions that aim to foster adolescent sexual health behaviors.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

The quality of parent–adolescent communication about sex may be uniquely associated with adolescent sexual behavior. Parents that were observed lecturing their adolescents about dating and sex had children who reported a higher likelihood of sexual intercourse. Family-based intervention services targeting quality of parent–adolescent communication are justified.

Parents' direct communication with their adolescent children about sex plays a key role in preventing adolescents' early and risky sexual behavior [1]. Most research on parent–adolescent communication about sex has focused on the frequency and/or content of their sex-related conversations [2]. Research has shown, however, that the quality of these conversations is also a reliable predictor of adolescent sexual health and behavior. Specifically, parent–adolescent communication about sex that is receptive, supportive, and open in moderate degrees is

associated with later age of initiating sexual intercourse [3], diminished sexual risk-taking [4,5], and early adolescents' greater valuing of sexual abstinence [6].

On the other hand, when this sex-related communication is parent-dominated or harsh, it may have the opposite effect. Lefkowitz et al. [7] observed mother–adolescent conversations about AIDS and found that mothers' domination of these conversations predicted greater discrepancies between mothers' and adolescents' knowledge about AIDS transmission and prevention. A follow-up study showed this same pattern in an ethnically diverse sample, specifically that mothers who dominated conversations about AIDS had adolescents who knew less about these same AIDS topics than those whose mothers engaged them with a more interactive communication style [8].

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Studies on other forms of adolescent problem behavior have shown a similar trend, specifically that caregivers' use of criticism and contempt to solve difficulties with adolescents may exacerbate problem behavior over time [9]. In sum, when it comes to parent–adolescent conversations about sex, the quality of parents' communication with their adolescent children may uniquely relate to how well adolescents internalize parents' messages.

Currently, most of the associations between the quality of communication and adolescent sexual behaviors are derived from retrospective and self-report data [2]. Such data are informative but are also susceptible to self-report biases that could misrepresent how parents and adolescents actually communicate about sex. Observational coding by independent observers may tap these communication processes with increased precision, an approach that has already been successfully employed in a number of studies [8,10,11].

Building on this research, we used trained observer ratings of parent–adolescent conversations about dating and sex to examine the associations between the quality of parent–adolescent communication and adolescents' engagement in sexual intercourse. Based on the literature previously discussed, we hypothesized that open and supportive communication characterized by reciprocity and teaching would be associated with adolescents' diminished likelihood of sexual intercourse, whereas harsh communication characterized by lecturing would be associated with an increased likelihood of sexual intercourse. We examined these relations while controlling for two general parenting variables, parental monitoring, and parent–adolescent relationship quality. Both these variables are protective factors in adolescents' sexual behavior and health [12,13]. Furthermore, parental monitoring and parent–adolescent relationship quality may manifest in how families communicate about dating and sex.

Methods

Participants

Participants were a subgroup of families from a randomized intervention study in which the family check-up intervention [14] was administered to 197 families of middle-school students. Of those families, 55 (28%) opted for additional follow-up support and comprise the current sample. The average age of the adolescents was 15.8 years (standard deviation [SD] = .59). Thirty-two of the adolescents (58.2%) were male; 24 (44%) self-reported as white, 14 (25%) as Latino/a, and 9 (16%) as African-American. The median gross annual income of the families was \$35,000–\$45,000, slightly below the national average of \$52,000 [15].

Procedure

After obtaining approval through the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board, participating families were visited in their homes or invited to come into the Oregon Child and Family Center laboratory, where they participated in a series of videotaped conversation tasks. First, they discussed expectations for their adolescent regarding friendships and dating for 5 minutes. Second, they discussed expectations around sex, alcohol and drug use, and risky behaviors for 8 minutes. At least one ($n = 36$; 33 mothers, three fathers) but sometimes both ($n = 19$) parents

were present for these conversations. Immediately after completing these conversation tasks, family members filled out surveys assessing a variety of health and problem behaviors.

Measures

Quality of parent–adolescent communication. The first two authors developed a coding manual that assessed global parent–adolescent communication processes. A subset of the coding manual was designed to examine the quality of parent–adolescent communication. Quality of communication about sex-related topics has typically been conceptualized as the degree of openness, mutuality, and comfort between the conversing parties [16]. Based on this conceptualization, we developed 19 items tapping various parent-based aspects (e.g., teaching, lecturing, interest/exploration, prying, limit-setting) and family-level aspects (e.g., reciprocity) of communication quality, all on a nine-point scale.

Two coders were trained for reliability purposes. These coders were instructed to code parent–adolescent communication only when dating and sex were the specific topics under discussion (i.e., coders did not code parent–adolescent communication when the topic under discussion was something other than dating or sex, such as friends or drug use). The topic of sex included topics about kissing; noncoital sexual behaviors such as petting, necking, and oral sex; sexual intercourse; contraceptives; and pubertal development. Dating included topics around attraction to another person, desirable qualities in a partner, romantic interests, “flirting,” going on dates, and having a committed dating relationship. During training, if coders' scores were discordant (off by more than two points), coding episodes were reviewed with the first two authors. Training meetings were held until an interrater reliability (intraclass correlation, or ICC) of .73 was reached. Thirty percent of the tapes were coded by both coders for reliability purposes.

After all 55 families' conversations were coded, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring) using an oblique (promax) rotation to identify the latent structure underlying the quality of parent–adolescent communication about dating and sex. Items loading below .40 and/or cross loading above .35 on any of the factors were removed from the model. One additional item was removed because it displayed poor interrater reliability. The final extraction revealed 12 items loading onto three underlying dimensions that explained 63.99% of the variance among the items (see Table 1). These underlying dimensions were *reciprocity*, *lecturing*, and *teaching*.

Reciprocity consisted of four items and represented the family members' positive and mutual participation in the conversation. Thus, reciprocity was coded as the degree of mutuality among family members verbally (e.g., all family members exchanging ideas) emotionally (e.g., positive or neutral emotional expressions among all family members) and behaviorally (e.g., complementary body language among family members). As a subscale, these items displayed adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .70$).

Lecturing consisted of four items and represented the parents' cautioning and warning about the negative consequences of dating and sex that was done in a harsh and/or demeaning tone. Thus, lecturing was coded when attempts were made by the parent to belittle or disempower the adolescent and his/her opinions (e.g., “...does the parent treat the child as if his/her

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