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Parent-Child Communication

Promoting Sexually Health Youth

THE FACTS

When young people feel unconnected to home, family, and school, they may become involved in activities that put their health at risk. However, when parents affirm the value of their children, young people more often develop positive, healthy attitudes about themselves. Although most adults want youth to know about abstinence, contraception, and how to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), parents often have difficulty communicating about sex. Nevertheless, positive communication between parents and children greatly helps young people to establish individual values and to make healthy decisions.

Parent-Child Warmth and Communication Promote Health, Achievement, and Self-Esteem.

- A major study showed that adolescents who reported feeling connected to parents and their family were more likely than other teens to delay initiating sexual intercourse.[1] Teens who said their families were warm and caring also reported less marijuana use and less emotional distress than their peers.[2]
- When parents and youth have good communication, along with appropriate firmness, studies have shown youth report less depression and anxiety and more self-reliance and self-esteem. They also report older age of first intercourse and lower frequency of sex during adolescence than their peers.[3,4]
- Lack of communication also affects behaviors and attitudes. In studies, young people who reported feeling a lack of parental warmth, love, or caring were also more likely to report emotional distress, lower self-esteem, school problems, drug use, and sexual risk behaviors.[1,2]

Parent-Child Communication About Sexuality Promotes Sexually Healthy Behaviors.

Confident, loving parent-child communication leads to improved contraceptive and condom use, improved communication about sex, and fewer sexual risk behaviors among adolescents.

Improved Contraception and Condom Use

- In a recent study, teens who reportedly had a "good talk" with parents in the last year about sex, birth control, and the dangers of STDs were two times more likely to use condoms at the last time they had sex than teens who did not talk to their parents as often.[5]
- In one study, when mothers discussed condom use before teens initiated sexual intercourse, youth were three times more likely to use condoms than were teens whose mothers never discussed condoms or discussed condoms only after teens became sexually active. Moreover, condom use at first intercourse significantly predicted future condom use—teens who used condoms at first intercourse were 20 times more likely than other teens to use condoms regularly and 10 times more likely to use them at most recent intercourse.[6]
- Consistent users of contraception are more likely to report frequent conversations with parents than are teens who were not using contraception.[7]

- One study showed that when parents of sexually active African American and Latino youth had skilled, open, interactive discussions with their teens about sex, the youth were significantly more likely than the teens of less skilled communicators to use condoms at most recent intercourse and across time.[8]

Improved Communication About Sex

- Adolescents who have repeated communications about sex, sexuality, and development with their parents, are more likely to have an open and closer relationships with them, in addition to being more likely to talk with their parents in the future about sex issues than adolescents whose sexual communication with their parents included less repetition.[9]
- Teens who reported previous discussions of sexuality with parents were seven times more likely to feel able to communicate with a partner about HIV/AIDS than those who had not had such discussions with their parents.[10]

Fewer Sexual Risk Behaviors

- Two studies show that when parents make consistent efforts to know their teen's friends and whereabouts, the young people report fewer sexual partners, fewer coital acts, and more use of condoms and other forms of contraception.[11,12]
- Youth whose parents are open, responsive, comfortable, and confident in discussions about sex and related issues participate less often in sexual risk behavior, suggesting that the quality of communication influences the message adolescents receive about sex.[13]
- A study found that experienced African American female teens living with their mothers in a perceived supportive family were 50 percent less likely than teens in non-supportive families to report unprotected sex in the last 30 days or to report sex with a non-steady partner in the last six months.[5] In another study of African American and Latina/Hispanic adolescent females, higher levels of mother/daughter communication about sexual risks were associated with fewer episodes of unprotected sexual intercourse.[14]

Parent-Child Communication About Sex Varies by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, But Parents Are an Important Source of Sexual Health Information for All Youth.

- Data has shown that 42 percent of Latino adolescents reported learning "a lot" about sexual health issues from their parents compared to 37 percent for white adolescents, but less than 60% of African American adolescents.[15]
- In one study, African American female adolescents reported more discussions about sex-related topics with their mothers than did male adolescents. However, males were just as likely to talk with mothers as with friends and only slightly less likely to talk with fathers.[16]
- In another study of African American and Latino adolescents, a significantly greater percentage of Latino teens than African American teens reported discussing at least two sex-related topics—HIV/AIDS and choosing a sex partner—with their father. Latino teens were also twice as likely as African American teens to discuss choosing a sex partner with their mothers.[17]
- Research shows that parents are the preferred source of information about contraception: 19.2 percent of students said they would prefer to get information about contraception from their parents rather than from community health centers, classes, hospitals, private doctors, television, or friends (12.5, 12.0, 11.1, 8.8, 7.9, and 6.9 percent, respectively).[7]

Negative or No Communication Can Lead to Negative Results.

- In studies, young people who reported feeling a lack of parental warmth, love, or caring were also more likely to report emotional distress, lower self esteem, school problems, drug use, and sexual risk behaviors.[1,3]

- One study of urban African American and Latino mothers and their pre-teen and early adolescent daughters found many mothers reluctant to discuss more than biological issues and negative consequences of sexual activity. Maternal communications about sex, often restrictive and moralistic in tone, deterred daughters from confiding in their mothers. Daughters, in reaction, sometimes became secretly involved in romantic relationships.[18]
- The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that Latina and Asian mothers were less likely to talk to their children about sex, but most likely to accurately report their daughters' sexual status, whereas the opposite was true for African Americans.[14]

Parents Play the Most Important Role in Sex Education, But Need Resources and Support.

Studies show that many parents face challenges in being prepared to have discussions with young people about relationships, development, and sex. Schools are an important partner in helping young people prevent negative sexual health outcomes through comprehensive sex education.

- Many parents are not able to provide all the information about sex that young people need. In one survey, only 38 percent of young women and 25 percent of young men said they had ever gotten a good idea from their parents that helped them talk about sexual issues with their girlfriend/boyfriend.[19]
- One study of 192 college student participants showed that 77 percent of their mothers engaged in some level of sexuality communication with them compared to only 37 percent of their fathers.[20]
- In a recent poll, 89 percent of Americans said it is important for sex education in schools to include information about contraception and preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.[21]
- Even though parents are the primary source of information about sexual and reproductive health for their children, few effective programs that help parents positively influence their children's sexual behavior yet exist. More research into science-driven, skills-based programs to support parent-child communication is needed.[22]

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