

Martavia Wynn

Article from the Journal of Adolescent Research

Mother-Daughter Communication about Sex among Urban African American and Latino Families

This article discusses communication between mothers and daughters, living in urban, poverty stricken areas. These adolescent girls are at a higher risk for contracting STDs and getting pregnant, so preventing sexual risk is an important topic.

There are three typical ways adolescents gain sexual knowledge: formal sex education, peers/family members, and parent-child communication. Of all these sources, peers are the most influential (Gibson & Kempf, 1990). Some research shows that open parent-child sexual communication changed some sexual behaviors, but other research did not find these results, raising the question about whether it is effective or not (O'Sullivan et al., 2001). There are four important parallels about parent-child communication in urban minorities that are comparable to national studies: parents typically speak to their children about sex, children are more likely to speak with their mothers about sex than their fathers, parents may not be the primary sources of sexual information, it's unclear whether communication influences the child (O'Sullivan et al., 2001).

This study focuses on mothers and daughters because mothers are the primary communicators in the family unit and girls are usually left with the responsibility of determining if sex will occur. Girls also have a higher risk for contracting STDs and can get pregnant. General, open communication proves to be more effective in preventing sexual risk than open communication strictly concerning sex. The three factors that are also important when communicating are: cues and timing of parent-child communication in the course of development, content of the conversation, and the approaches adopted by the mothers/daughters (O'Sullivan et al., 2001).

Mothers and daughters both develop antagonistic attitudes that may cause ineffective communication. Communication difficulties may also be a function of relationship tension associated with the autonomy that pubertal girls transition into. Mothers are typically torn between "maintaining 'childhood innocence' and the need to counteract peer sexual influence" (O'Sullivan et al., 2001). Girls are usually against talking to their mothers because of their restrictive tone and content about sex. Mothers also tend to avoid positive aspects of sexuality and psychosexual issues, such as romance, commitment, love, jealousy and desire. Instead, they discuss the dire consequences like career failure, pain, abandonment, STDs, shame, and humiliation of engaging in sex as a teen and the biological aspects of sexuality (reproduction and hygiene).

In conclusion, the most effective way to approach a teen girl when trying to get her to avoid sexual risks is to openly communicate with her about all things over her lifespan. Research shows that communicating with a knowledgeable adult, beside a parent would yield the greatest effect (O'Sullivan et al., 2001). The conversations should not make the girl feel negatively about herself, but should encourage sexual agency.