



Review Article

Parent-adolescent communication on sexuality issues: A matter to discuss

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical time of development, including risk-taking and experimentation. There have been increasing trends worldwide for teenage pregnancies, high-risk sexual behaviours, early initiation of sexual activities in teenage, and a decrease in safe sexual practices. Effective parent-adolescent communication is imperative in shaping adolescents' beliefs and behaviour about sexual practices. However, there are several barriers to this effective communication. Effective parent-adolescent communication on sexual topics can help reduce negative consequences of adolescent sexual behaviours. Culture and other social factors play a role in parenting practices and communication patterns. We review this area concerning communication gaps and barriers between parent-adolescent communications on sexuality issues with special reference to the Indian context.

Key words:

Adolescence, Sexuality, Parents, Communication

Introduction

Adolescence is an important period of development that sets the stage for healthy adult relationships. Adolescents make up

about 25% of the sexually active population worldwide. Global trends have shown sexual activity to begin from 15- 19 years of age with regional variations (Wellings et al., 2006). A shift towards later marriages has been shown to increase rates of premarital sex and unsafe sexual practices in the adolescent population in developing countries. Additionally, recent data suggest adolescents are at heightened risk of unintended/unwanted pregnancy (Centres for disease control and prevention, 2021).

Parent-adolescent communication on sexual issues is a significant factor in improving safer

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sex behaviour (Widman et al., 2016).In this regard, there is evidence to suggest that open communication between parents and adolescents is the key to better sexual health outcomes (Widman et al., 2016). Parents act as models for teaching behaviour as per the social cognitive theory (Evans et al., 2011). They can influence adolescents’ attitudes, behaviour, and risk-related beliefs (Diiorio et al., 2003).

Culture shapes parenting practices, and India is no different. Although much has been said about parent communication about sexual health in western countries, data pertaining to the Indian subcontinent is scarce. It has been often seen that open communication between parents and adolescents does not take place about sexual topics due to embarrassment, inaccurate knowledge, or their own belief system that “these topics should not be discussed at home or with children”.

Therefore, it has been reported across several studies that a substantial proportion of young adolescents (17% to 87%) often report that they have not discussed sexual topics with a parent ever, which is a great matter of concern (Diiorio et al., 2003).

We provide an overview of the basics of parent-adolescent communication and issues in adolescent sexuality with an addition to Indian research in this area.

1. Sexual topics and parents: It is important to have a comprehensive discussion about sexuality and its related aspects (Ashcraft and Murray, 2017). This would ideally include all of the following, as mentioned in Table 1.

Other topics that can be covered include relationships, self-image, the importance of open communication, etc. It is always

Table 1. Sexual topics for discussion between parents and teenagers

Topics	Related aspects
Anatomy	Age appropriate names for body parts rather than use of ‘distracting words’
Puberty	Development of secondary sexual characters specific to girls and boys
Menstruation	Normal cycles, maintaining hygiene
Masturbation	Normal outlet for sexual urges, appropriate time and place for engagement
Safe sexual practices	Use of contraceptives
Sexual orientation	Gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation
Vaccination	Human Papilloma Virus vaccine
Pornography/ Media	Screen usage, consequences of sexting and other practices using social media
Bad touch	Children from a young age should be taught that none is allowed to touch their private parts. Any touch causing discomfort should be considered bad touch and should be taught to say ‘no’ at these scenarios. They should be warned against such people insisting the child to keep this a secret from parents.
Sexual abuse/ exploitation	Informing parents when they feel insecure
Other sexual practices	Oral or anal sex

important to start by finding out what they already know. Parents should not judge their child on how the child knows so much about sexual topics. Rather they should try to find out misconceptions related to sexual topics and correct them. Parents should understand that in internet era, the growing adolescent mind's curiosity can find answers to their questions related to sex. Parents should also be ready to answer questions that the teens ask. The key is to listen out. Parents also need to understand that, at the end of the day, they cannot entirely control their teens' actions.

2. What is talked and what is not talked:

Parents tend to focus only on the negative aspects of sexuality like abuse, exploitation, unwanted pregnancy, or sexually transmitted diseases (STD). Positive aspects of sexuality like masturbation, healthy relationships, pleasure, and safe sexual practices are often avoided (Ashcraft and Murray, 2017).

Such a demarcation holds true from the adolescents' point of view also. A systematic review found that adolescents mostly discussed STDs or HIV/AIDS with their parents compared to other topics like contraception or safe sexual practices (Eshete and Shewasinad, 2020). Moreover, topics related to maintaining hygiene during menstruation, masturbation, night falls etc., are often not discussed between parents-adolescents.

Therefore, there is a need to develop holistic communication patterns that can address these issues.

3. Patterns of communication between parents and teens: Content, pattern, and quality of communication play a crucial role in shaping adolescent sexual practices. In terms of content, teens who received 'comprehensive sex education' were significantly less likely to become pregnant at an early age when

compared to those receiving 'no formal sex education' or even 'abstinence-only education' (Kohler et al., 2008).

Concerning pattern of communication, parents of adolescents who followed a 'dominant' or 'lecturing' pattern showed a higher likelihood of adolescents engaging in sexual intercourse (Rogers et al., 2015).

A recent meta-analysis of 19 articles on adolescent-parent communication on sexual and reproductive issues found that adolescents who lived in an urban locality, had good knowledge about sexual issues, agreed on the importance of discussion, and had experienced sexual intercourse were more likely to discuss openly with their parents (Eshete and Shewasinad, 2020). Further, females were more likely to discuss sexual issues with their parents than males (Mekie et al., 2020). Other factors which have been identified to play a role in parent-adolescent communication on sexual issues are the father's education, the perceived importance of sex education by parents, and the mother's openness to communicate about sexual issues (Bikila et al., 2021).

Higher quality of open, comfortable and respectful communication was found to be associated with greater safe-sex self-efficacy and less permissive sexual attitudes (Rogers, 2017). Often parents tend to use vague terms to convey their thoughts on sexuality. Their wards may not well understand this.

4. Barriers to communication about sex topics: Sex has long been considered a taboo. Parents reported a host of reasons which can be understood as barriers (Yibrehu and Mbwele, 2020). Parents tend to avoid or delay initiating the conversation on sexuality due to a fear of introducing sexuality before their teens are 'ready'. They expressed dilemma in the timing of initiation of such topics. They did not consider it their responsibility as related

topics are usually covered as a part of adolescents’ school curriculum. Some parents did not perceive it as ‘necessary’ while others feared that talking about it might ‘push’ children in the wrong direction. Fathers tend to maintain a distance in such matters compared to mothers, who played more active roles (Usonwu et al., 2021). Parents preferred discussion with adolescents of the same gender over the opposite gender (Miller et al., 1998).

From the adolescents’ perspective, there can be embarrassment or shame about the topic. There can be fear or criticism, or punishment upon revealing something sensitive. Most adolescents also felt that their parents may not be open to the topic or that they may refuse to

answer their queries (Ashcraft and Murray, 2017). Apart from this, socio economic, religious and cultural factors may act as a barrier to communication. Table 2 highlights some of the important communication barriers between parent-adolescent on sexuality issues. Some cultures allow free expression of speech between adolescents and parents, but in others, there is undue emphasis on blind obedience to parents (Kapetanovic et al., 2020). Communication practices in countries like Kenya and China follow an authoritarian style, decreasing adolescent autonomy (Smetana, 2017). Religious sentiments also hinder healthy discussion. However, no studies have exclusively looked into how culture influences communication on sexual topics.

Table 2. Some important barriers of communication between parent-adolescent on sexuality issues (Ashcraft and Murray, 2017)

Barriers from parents’ side	Barriers from adolescents’ side
Real/perceived ignorance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if I don’t know the answers ?</i>• <i>How to explain using the correct language without feeling offended or sounding vulgar ?</i>• <i>What if I say too much about sex?</i>	Real/perceived ignorance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>How to explain my parents using the correct language without feeling offended or sounding vulgar ?</i>• <i>What should I ask / Am I right in asking such questions to my parents?</i>
Fear of difficult questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>About sexual intercourse, abortion, pregnancy etc.</i>• <i>What if the son/ daughter ask about my teenage experience of sex?</i>	Fear of difficult questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if my father/ mother ask about my current sexual behaviour?</i>• <i>What if my father/ mother ask me and ultimately come to know about my sex secrets?</i>
Finding out something unknown about the teen <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if I get to know my child is already sexually exposed/ active?</i>• <i>What if I get to know about my child’s sexual orientation – is he gay/ is she lesbian?</i>• <i>What if I feel embarrassed after knowing my child’s sexual activities – watching pornography, have an active sexual partner?</i>	Finding out something unknown about the parent <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if I come to know about my father/ mother past/ current sex life?</i>• <i>What if I come to know about any history of abuse of my parent?</i>
Fear of teen’s reaction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if my child says I am oldfashioned?</i>• <i>What if my child feels uncomfortable and moves away?</i>• <i>What if my child discloses some form of abuse?</i>	Fear of parents’ reaction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What if I sound stupid?</i>• <i>What if my parents won ’t be open to the topic?</i>• <i>What if my father/ mother refuse to answer?</i>

5. Impact of strained parent-adolescent relationships: Adolescents are in a transition period where they tend to seek independence and autonomy. This change is not well met by some families leading to strained relationships. Strained parent-teen relationships have been associated with an increased prevalence of substance use in the latter (Mathibela and Skhosana, 2020). While an authoritative parenting style is considered a protective factor, a neglectful parenting style is a risk factor. This can also lead to a loss of trust in parents, leading to secrecy which further hampers the relationship. Adolescents confide in their peers, which may increase high-risk behaviour.

6. What questions to expect from the teens? : A substantial degree of worry and anxiety of the parents comes from the fact that “what questions to expect from the teens” when talking about sexual topics. Parents need to understand first how much knowledge about sexual topics their teen/child has till now. As evident from the research on children and adolescents’ sexual knowledge and sexual maturity, children and adolescents know different aspects of sex /sexual knowledge as per their age levels. Table 3 mentions some of the information about sexual topics that are expected to be known by the child as per his/her age and what questions the parents can expect at that specific age range (Ashcraft and Murray, 2017).

Table 3. How much/what the teens know about sexual topics and what questions the parents should expect from the children/teens

Age group	How much/What the teens know about sexual topics	What questions/topics the parents should expect from the children/teens
11 to 13 years (Early adolescence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Words for sex• Exposure to sex words/slang words• May use sexual words even though they might not be knowing their actual meaning• May have seen pornography• Body parts and their functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sex education in schools usually starts at 6th grade; parents should allow discussion on the topics the children had heard at schools• Topics on masturbation• Oral sex/ Anal sex• Sexual orientation – Gay/Lesbian – what does it mean• How does a girl get pregnant?• What is erection?• Night falls/Nocturnal emissions
14 to 16 years (Mid adolescence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most teens have begun masturbation• Few might have experienced sexual activities with partners (kissing, touching, intercourse etc.)• Some might have experienced feelings of love/infatuation/ ‘crush’• Sexual vocabulary may have increased• Understanding consequences of unsafe sex – pregnancy, diseases etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you had your first sexual encounter? – teens can ask parents if they are too close to parents• Condoms and safe sex practices• What is an orgasm?• Questions related to HIV/AIDS• Questions related to birth control pills/emergency pills• Questions related to infection related to sexual intercourse
17 to 18 years and above (Late adolescence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most teens have experienced love /dated with opposite sex partner• Peer group discussions on opposite sex bodies/behaviours/related to sexual intercourse• Sexual encounters and emotional attraction are common	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you know/feel when you are in love? – commonly asked by teens to parent with whom he/she can confide• How to tolerate heart break?• Love at first sight – does it happen?• What is romance?

Benefits of adolescent-parent communication on sexual issues/topics

Longitudinal studies have found that teenagers who perceive that they have a better level of communication with their parents have a delay in the onset of sexual activity (Karofsky et al., 2001; Okigbo et al., 2015). A met analysis of various studies spanning over 3 decades, conducted on over 25,000 adolescents, reported a small but significant link between parental-adolescent sexual communication and safer sexual behaviour (Widman et al., 2016). Larger effects were seen in communication with girls than boys and discussion with mothers than fathers. Few studies have also reported that successful parent monitoring of adolescent's whereabouts and activities outside home and fewer communication barriers led to less initiation of sexual intercourse at an early age (Rose et al., 2005; Sieverding et al., 2005). Additionally, parental interventions that promote successful communication between adolescents and parents have been shown to delay sexual initiation during adolescence (Sieverding et al., 2005).

Implementing programmes to help improve parent-child communication on sexual health has been underway. Evidence shows that most such programmes reduced risky sexual behaviour in adolescents (Gavin et al., 2015; Santa Maria et al., 2015). This holds well in a community setting which seems to be the need of the hour. It also provides better comfort in communication between parents and teens in the long run.

Indian scenario

The youth in India need adequate sexual health education. Among college-going students in India, the commonest source for knowledge about sexual health were peers, pornography, or books. Less than a fifth communicated with their parents regarding this (Aggarwal et al., 2000). Students also felt

that active parental involvement and open discussions were preferred to other sources of information (Brahme et al., 2020). However, there are various misconceptions that have been reported by adolescent school-going girls (about 49%) in an urban locality who felt that condoms should not be available to youth, suggesting poor knowledge and attitude towards common sexual issues and the need to implement gender-based sex education in schools and colleges (McManus and Dhar, 2008).

Additionally, in rural India, stronger cultural barriers prevent open communication (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). A recent study in which 78 mothers and 91 fathers of adolescents (12 -19 years) were interviewed reported that parents often feel that they lacked adequate information to communicate with their children (Sandra Byers et al., 2021). Parents also felt it was 'inappropriate' to discuss sexual health before marriage. Both adolescents and parents attributed being sexually active prior to marriage as a 'loss of honour' and disrespect to the entire family in the community. Among adolescents, fear of parental punishment was one of the main barriers. A common theme of abstinence before marriage was being imparted to adolescents. Parents' attitudes, knowledge, comfort, and history of sexual communication with their own parents were important factors limiting parent-adolescent sexual communication engagement (Sandra Byers et al., 2021). The parents' religion, caste, educational qualifications, and background further colours all the above mentioned findings (Abraham, 2001).

Few studies which had explored sexual behaviour/activity among school-going adolescents have reported that about 30% of boys and 17% of girls have experienced sexual contact, and about 1.3% of girls experienced sexual intercourse. However, they lacked adequate knowledge about sexual activity

(Ramadugu et al., 2011). Another recent qualitative study that used focussed group discussion on sexual topics among 74 college students (separately for boys and girls) revealed that a majority of adolescents favoured active involvement of parents, and school teachers in sex health education and also suggested that better-informed parents lead to better-informed adolescents (Brahme et al., 2020). However, still, there are various barriers to open discussion on sexual issues between parents and adolescents, and there is very low adolescent sex education in India, which needs more emphasis both at societal level as well as the family level (Ismail et al., 2015; Sharma, 2020). There are limited studies from India concerning parent-child communication on sexual issues, and this area needs further exploration.

Conclusions

Parent-adolescent communication on sexual issues is an emerging area of concern, which has potential benefits for the growing adolescent for a healthier parent-child relationship as well as for a healthier, disease-free life. While there are several studies from western countries, this area is still viewed as a 'no-discussion' topic or taboo to discuss in most Indian families. Both parents and adolescents need to break the communication barriers on sexual topics and freely discuss sensitive topics without feeling judged or embarrassed. India is growing fast in the direction of modernization, and adolescent sexual issues/exposure are on the rise. It is the need of the hour that Indian parents be sensitized to discuss sex education with their children and adolescents without any hindrance. Mass communication media can play a big role in educating parents and adolescents on these topics.

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