

**Which Issue is More Possible to Communicate with Parents?
A Study about Parent-Adolescent Sexual Communication**

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Abstract

Parent-adolescent communication and its correlation to adolescent sexual behavior has long time been thoroughly studied than any other parental influence related issues. Nonetheless, what kind of issues is more possible for adolescents to communicate with their parents has hardly discussed. Further, the reasons for these have little been explored. This study tries to fill up the gap between them. Data analyses were based on a random sample of 1,204 junior high school students at Taipei. The issues of sexual communication include physical development, sexuality, how to choose partner, frequency of making a date, with whom to have a date, and the intimacy when dating. Logistic regression analyses were conducted to investigate these six sexual related issues. The result showed that girls were more likely to communicate with parents than boys in all of these sexual related issues. However, the predictors for these issues were significantly different. Physical development, sexuality, and how to choose partner were the issues, which are more possible for adolescents to communicate with parents when their mothers keep good monitoring on them, or they had reasonable communication with mothers. In addition, talking about dating with whom was more likely only when adolescents had reasonable communication with mothers. The implications of these findings were discussed later.

Key words: parent-adolescent communication, sexual communication, sexual issue,
junior high school students, adolescent

Introduction

The importance of parents' role as communicators about sexuality is increasingly recognized, largely as a result of increased sexual behavior of adolescents. Parents play an important role as primary agents of sexual socialization. Adolescents shape their sexual attitudes and behavior through communication with parents.

Parent-adolescent communication about sexuality and its correlation to adolescent sexual behavior has long time been thoroughly studied than any other parental influence related issues. Much of the research on how parents affect adolescent sexual behavior has focused on communication, examining parents' explicit attempts to transmit values and share information (Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001).

Nonetheless, what kind of issues is more possible for adolescents to communicate with their parents and the influencing of sexual communication have hardly discussed.

Adolescents are not passive recipients of parental message; they shape their value through discussion with others. Given the pervasive role that parent play in their children's decision making, it is reasonable to expect that responsible sexual decision making will be facilitated by parental involvement, not only in the type of monitoring but also in the manner of general communication.

And the area of sexuality may not be one unified domain but may consist of a variety of different domains including physical development, and psychological or interpersonal issues. To understand the parent-child communication about sexual topics, we must focus on which issue is more possible for adolescents to communicate with parents.

In the present study, our primary goal was to describe the gender difference of sexual communicating with parents in different issues. A secondary focus was to validate the factors influencing the possibility of parent-adolescent sexual communication in different issues.

Methods

Subjects

A sample of 8th grade students, including 613 boys and 591 girls who lived with parents, was drawn from a panel study conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica. It came from 44 classes in 33 junior high schools. These schools were selected randomly to provide a socially and economically diverse sample of the whole Taipei metropolitan city.

Measures

Questionnaires included a demographics section, measure of adolescents' value, of maternal and paternal monitoring and general communication style, and the

frequency of adolescent sexual communication with parents.

Adolescents' estimated the importance of education, job achievement, good reputation, and school achievement from "very important" to "not at all" on a five-point scale. These four items were then summed and higher total scores represent higher level of traditional value.

Another two instruments were used to measure adolescents' perceptions of their parents' monitoring style and general communication pattern. The adolescents were asked to measure the frequency for four monitoring items and four general communication items. The monitoring items are "Father/mother knows where you are."; "Father/mother knows with whom you are."; "Father/mother discusses with you about your everyday experiences."; and "Father/mother knows that you have been home or sleeping." Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "always", then the four items were summed. The higher total scores represent higher level of strict monitoring. Cronbach alpha for father's monitoring was 0.81, and for mother's monitoring was 0.79.

General communication items included "If you are wrong, your father/mother will instruct you."; "Your father/mother will explain why to making a rule."; "Your father/mother will instruct you by analyzing, explaining, and chatting."; "Your father/mother will let you know he/she is satisfied when you behave as their expectation.". The four items were the same as monitoring items on a five-point scale. The higher total scores represent higher level of reasonable communication. Cronbach alpha for communication with father was 0.84, and with mother was 0.81.

In addition to obtaining information about their own value and their perception of parents' monitoring and pattern of communication with parents, we asked adolescents to describe the frequency of communication about sex-related issues. The set of questions sought information about 6 specific issues. These issues are physical development, sexuality, and partner choice, frequency of dating, with whom to date, and the intimacy during dating. For each of these issues, we asked participants, "How often has you talked about this topic with your father?", and "How often has you talked about this topic with your mother?" (1=never; 2=seldom; 3=sometimes; 4=often)".

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the relations of each parent's monitoring and general communication pattern and parent-adolescent communication about different sex issues.

Frequency of parent-adolescent sexual communication is presented in Table 1. Most of the adolescents had never talked about sexuality and dating with parents, the

rate was between 59.2% and 73.1%. And nearly half of the students(49.6%) had never discussed with parents about partner choice. They talked about physical development more frequently than any other topics.

Means and standard deviations for all other variables are presented in Table 2. Mean score of adolescents' value was 16.25, it showed the adolescents' value was more traditional, or conservative. The scores of father's and mother's monitoring and communication with each parent was 14.23, 15.53, 14.45 and 14.94 respectively. It meant that monitoring pattern was moderate trick, and communication style was moderate reasonable.

The gender difference of frequency in sexual communicating about different issues is included in Table 3. For all the six issues, girls talked more frequently with parents than boys.

We conducted 6 logistic regressions to identify each parent's influences on the outcome of sexual communication. Adolescents' reports of sexual communication frequency were coded as 1=sometimes or often and 0=never or seldom. Six logistic regressions were applied to identify influences of sexual communication; the results are presented in Table 4. As the results, girls were more likely to communicate with parents. Mother's monitoring and general communication style were significant predictors of sexual communication about physical development, sexuality, and partner choice. As for the other three issues, only mother's general communication style was significant predictors.

Discussion

This study has yielded some new findings and has also confirmed some earlier results. It found that the sexual communication frequency, including sometimes and often, was between 15.4% and 17.5% for issues of dating, 23.3% for issues of sexuality, 34.1% for issues of partner choice, and 48.1% for physical development. Whether the low frequency of communication is a reflection that adolescents think the issues of sex is unimportant or a reflection of anticipated embarrassment that they might feel in talking to their parent about such private and meaningful issues. Byers et al. (2003) found that the majority of middle school students rated the sexual health topics as important, and agreed that school and parents should share the sexual health education responsibility. The low frequency might not reflect the unimportance of sexual talking, but reflect the culture of Taiwan.

In Taiwan, most parents believe that sex is either a prudential issue involving potential dangers, or a moral issue based on religious and cultural values. In either case they may feel that it is inappropriate for them to communicate about sex with their children, but appropriate for them to instruct young people refraining from

dating. Under this context, adolescent might feel uncomfortable to communicate with their parents about sex.

And the difference of frequency between 15.4% and 48.1%, we would argue that the more personal areas are the ones adolescent regard parental input as unwelcome. During adolescence the children take initial steps toward more autonomy and independence from their parents and strive to achieve more control of their own lives. During this developmental period, communication between parents and adolescents tends to change dramatically as well. One such change is the tendency for adolescents to communicate less frequently with their parents (Noller & Bagi, 1985). And one way of a decrease in communication is through topic avoidance. Guerrero and Afifi(1995) found that adolescents tend to avoid certain topics of conversation, such as dating experiences. The results showed that the issues might cause privacy invasion were infrequent talking topics between adolescent and parents.

By presenting 6 specific topics, we found that the issues discussed in sexual communication cannot be characterized as a unified domain. Instead, two distinct groups emerged which were consistent across gender of adolescents and across monitoring pattern and communication style. The two groups reflect topics which may be focusing on sexual knowledge, or which are personal and private. The topics subsumed in the first group, including physical development, sexuality, and partner choice, were associated with maternal monitoring and communication style. The other three topics about dating were associated with maternal communication style, but not monitoring. The very differences between two groups were that the former were much external, and the latter were immediate experience of adolescents which might threaten their sense of privacy. The external topics can be taught through sex education, but the private topics must be shaped by value sharing through communication.

The important distinction between sex education and sex communication is that education is unidirectional, involving the provision of information in a top-down manner, whereas communication is bidirectional, involving two partners in mutual dialogue with the view-point of both being valued. Sex communication implies the co-creation of meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors between persons exchanging messages. Clearly, at the very least, the task of educating teenagers about sexuality involves not only the sending of accurate information by parents but it also requires receptivity on the part of the listener and mutual regulation of information flow as understandings change.

In summary, sex communications occurred more often in the parent-daughter dyad than in the parent-son dyad. Past research has shown that parents, particularly

mothers, discuss sex more often with their daughters than their sons (Moore, Peterson, & Furstenerg, 1986; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). Our traditional cultural emphasis on female virgin will promote parents to communication with daughter more frequently about sexuality.

We argue that parents cannot and should not impose their views on their teenage sons and daughters and that they need to consider whether their teenagers are willing recipients of parental communication, especially about matters which are regarded as personal and private. If parents start the high quality communication process early in their child's life and include sex as one of many matters worthy of discussion, they can establish a pattern of reciprocal sharing of information, values and beliefs before adolescents confront the twin tasks of integrating sexuality and dealing with issues of autonomy and independence.

Table 1 Frequency of Gender and Communication with Parents for Different Issues

	Frequency	(%)
Gender		
Boy	613	(50.9)
Girl	591	(49.1)
Physical Development		
Never	293	(24.3)
Seldom	332	(27.6)
Sometimes	297	(24.7)
Often	282	(23.4)
Sexuality		
Never	713	(59.2)
Seldom	211	(17.5)
Sometimes	154	(12.8)
Often	126	(10.5)
Partner choice		
Never	597	(49.6)
Seldom	196	(16.3)
Sometimes	205	(17.0)
Often	206	(17.1)
Frequency of date		
Never	874	(72.6)
Seldom	153	(12.7)
Sometimes	74	(6.1)
Often	103	(8.6)
With whom to date		
Never	832	(69.1)
Seldom	161	(13.4)
Sometimes	88	(7.3)
Often	123	(10.2)
Intimate experience of dating		
Never	880	(73.1)
Seldom	139	(11.5)
Sometimes	67	(5.6)
Often	118	(9.8)

Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables

	Mean	SD
Value(4-20)	24.2837	5.2925
Father's Monitoring(4-20)	14.2259	4.1532
Mother's Monitoring(4-20)	15.5257	3.7514
Communication with Father(4-20)	14.4510	4.0845
Communication with Mother(4-20)	14.9352	3.8871

Table 3 Different frequency of communication between boys and girls

	Boys		Girls		Chi-square
	n	%	n	%	
Physical development					123.725***
Never	210	34.3	83	14.0	
Seldom	197	32.1	135	22.8	
Sometimes	124	20.2	173	29.3	
Often	82	13.4	200	33.8	
Sexuality					50.767***
Never	420	68.5	293	49.6	
Seldom	96	15.7	115	19.5	
Sometimes	56	9.1	98	16.6	
Often	41	6.7	85	14.4	
Partner choice					41.935***
Never	356	58.1	241	40.8	
Seldom	97	15.8	99	16.8	
Sometimes	80	13.1	125	21.2	
Often	80	13.1	126	21.3	
Frequency of date					23.421***
Never	479	78.1	395	66.8	
Seldom	71	11.6	82	13.9	
Sometimes	28	4.6	46	7.8	
Often	35	5.7	68	11.5	
With whom to date					24.290***
Never	458	74.7	374	63.3	
Seldom	78	12.7	83	14.0	
Sometimes	35	5.7	53	9.0	
Often	42	6.9	81	13.7	
Intimate experience of dating					26.615***
Never	484	79.0	396	67.0	
Seldom	65	10.6	74	12.5	
Sometimes	24	3.9	43	7.3	
Often	40	6.5	78	13.2	

***P<0.001

Table 4. Logistic Regression for Predicting the Topics of Communication with Parents

	Physical development	Sexuality	Partner Selection	Frequency of date	With whom to date	Intimacy when date
Gender(boy/girl)	0.273***	0.418***	0.470***	0.473***	0.490***	0.452***
Value(7-35)	1.003	1.009	1.019	1.014	1.003	0.999
Monitoring(4-20)						
Father's	1.031	0.964	0.965	1.013	1.028	1.021
Mother's	1.095**	1.107**	1.088*	1.030	1.037	1.033
Communication(4-20)						
With Father	0.991	1.040	0.992	1.004	0.992	0.989
With Mother	1.139***	1.115*	1.174***	1.127*	1.127*	1.136*
-2Log Likelihood	1412.697	1180.480	1397.643	944.183	1046.217	967.436

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

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