

ADOLESCENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS ON SEXUAL TOPICS: A STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN TAIWAN¹

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Summary.—Communication between parents and adolescents about adolescents' sexual behavior has been studied. However, the types of issues on which adolescents are willing to communicate with their parents have been scarcely discussed. A survey was conducted among a random sample of 1,204 junior high school students in Taipei. The survey probed into adolescents' communication with their parents as related to sex, including physical development, sexuality, choice of partner, frequency of dating, whom to date, and intimacy during dating. Analysis showed that physical development was the topic most often discussed. Talking about dating was discussed less than the other three topics. Moreover, girls were more likely to communicate with their parents than boys about all six issues.

The correlation of communication about sexuality between parents and adolescents with adolescents' sexual behavior has been more thoroughly studied than most other factors of parental influence (Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2002). Factors influencing adolescents' sexual activity are complex. Given the pervasive role that parents play in their children's lives, it is reasonable to expect that parents would be the most important sex educators (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000). Researchers have found that the amount of parent-adolescent sexual communication may play a positive role in deterring adolescents from engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviors (Leland & Barth, 1993; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996; Miller, Forehand, & Kotchik, 1999).

Adolescents are not passive recipients of parental messages for they shape their sexual attitudes and behaviors through interaction with parents, peers, and their environment. Much of the research on how parents affect adolescents' sexual behavior has examined parents' explicit attempts to transmit values and share information (Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001). Thus, it appears that adolescents are willing to communicate with parents and can accept information through interaction. However, during adolescence, there is a tendency for adolescents to communicate less frequently with their parents (Noller & Bagi, 1985).

In Taiwan, under the edification of Confucian ethics, parents seldom or never communicate with their adolescents about sexual issues (Lin & Yen, 1999). However, Chang and Yen (1995) also reported that the topic of "ado-

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lescent physical development" of female students was the most frequent area of sexual communication. However, little systematic information is available regarding the topics that parents in Taiwan discuss with their children.

The goal of the current analysis was to extend the current understanding of sexual communication in families of Taiwan. Traditional Taiwanese culture is marked by differential treatment of male and female children (Shek, 1995), particularly in the areas of gender and sexuality. In western studies, daughters report more communication than do sons (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). The present study aimed to explore on which types of issues adolescents communicate more often with their parents, and the sex difference in sexual communication with parents on these issues.

METHOD

Subjects

Data came from a larger study conducted during 1996-1999 by the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica. The sampling method was two-stage PPS. In the first stage, two to four schools were drawn within one district of all 12 administrative districts. Then, there were 33 schools. In the second stage, one or two classes were drawn from each school proportional to the number of students. Then, there were 44 classes. The sample then provided a socially and economically diverse representation of the whole metropolitan city of Taipei.

A sample of Grade 8 students with 613 boys and 591 girls who lived with parents was drawn from the second year data.

Measures

We asked the adolescents to describe the likelihood of communication about six specific sex-related issues: physical development, sexuality, choice of partner, frequency of dating, with whom to date, and intimacy during dating. For each of these issues, we asked the participants, "If you have this problem, how likely will you talk about it with your father?" and "How likely will you discuss this topic with your mother?" (anchors: 1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the likelihood of parent-adolescent communication on the different sex issues. Frequencies by sex are presented in Table 1. The topic of physical development was the most often discussed among all topics; fewer than a quarter said that they had never talked about that with their parents. About half of the students did not want to discuss sexuality (59.2%) and choice of partner (49.6%) with parents. Talking about dating (including frequency of dating, whom to date,

TABLE 1
 FREQUENCY BY SEX AND COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS FOR DIFFERENT ISSUES

		<i>f</i>	%
Sex	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 Dating	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

and intimate experience of dating) was less likely than the other three topics. Over 69% of the students had never talked to their parents about these topics.

Table 2 shows the sex difference in likelihood of communicating about the different sexual issues. As can be seen, girls were more likely than boys to talk about all the six issues with parents.

As expected, the frequency of sexual communication was low, except for the issue of physical development. Byers, Sears, Voyer, Thurlow, Cohen, and Weaver (2003) found that the majority of middle-school students rated sexual health topics as important and agreed that school and parents should share the responsibility for sexual health education. The low likelihood might not reflect that talking about sexual topics is unimportant; rather it is the anticipated embarrassment that deters sexual discussion. Jaccard and Dittus (2000) found that the strongest predictors of adolescents' communication were concern about adolescents or their parents feeling embarrassed. Many studies have reported that parents often feel inadequately informed, embar-

TABLE 2
BOYS' AND GIRLS' RATINGS OF FREQUENCY OF COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

		Boys		Girls		χ^2 †
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Physical Development	Never	210	34.3	83	14.0	123.73
	Seldom	197	32.1	135	22.8	
	Sometimes	124	20.2	173	29.3	
	Often	82	13.4	200	33.8	
Sexuality	Never	420	68.5	293	49.6	50.77
	Seldom	96	15.7	115	19.5	
	Sometimes	56	9.1	98	16.6	
	Often	41	6.7	85	14.4	
Partner Choice	Never	356	58.1	241	40.8	41.94
	Seldom	97	15.8	99	16.8	
	Sometimes	80	13.1	125	21.2	
	Often	80	13.1	126	21.3	
Frequency of Dating	Never	479	78.1	395	66.8	23.42
	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	Never	458	74.7	374	63.3	24.29
	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	Never	484	79.0	396	67.0	26.62
	Seldom	65	10.6	74	12.5	
	Sometimes	24	3.9	43	7.3	
	Often	40	6.5	78	13.2	

† $p < .001$.

ressed, and ineffective and have difficulty finding the right place and time for communication (Rosenthal, Feldman, & Edwards, 1998).

Jaccard, Dodge, and Dittus (2002), in reviewing a wide range of studies, estimated that about 50% of adolescents reported engaging in such conversations with their parents. Our count is much less than 50% as only a quarter of these adolescents engaged in conversations with their parents about dating. Regnerus (2005) provided ample evidence that parental religious affiliation is related to the frequency of communication about sex. In Taiwan, most parents are restrained by the Confucian ethical code. People in Taiwan should speak and act in accordance with propriety. Under the edification of Confucianism, just like the religious influence, parents talk to their adolescents about the morality of sexual involvement. In this context, adolescents might feel uncomfortable in communicating with parents about sex.

During adolescence 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. For example, adolescents tend to communicate less frequently with their parents (Noller & Bagi, 1985); one way of decreasing communication is through avoidance of a topic. Guerrero and Afifi (1995) stated adolescents tended to avoid certain topics of conversation, such as dating experiences. The results showed that issues that might be thought private were least likely to be talked about by adolescents and their parents. However, about three-quarters of the adolescents had talked with their parents about physical development. Physical development may be an issue which includes both sexuality and health. When the adolescents had problems about physical development, they would be more likely to talk with their parents.

Past research has shown that parents, particularly mothers, discuss sex more often with their daughters than their sons (Moore, Peterson, & Furstenberg, 1986; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). Consistent with these reports, our findings suggested that communications on sex occurred more often in the parent-daughter dyad than in the parent-son dyad. Under the edification of Confucianism, female virginity is very important, so parents would communicate with daughters more frequently about sexuality.

Sex communication implies the cocreation 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 dissemination of accurate information by parents, but it also requires receptivity on the part of the listener and mutual regulation of information flow to understand changes. This research is important in identifying the kinds of information likely to be felt more acceptable by the adolescents.

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