

Family Planning Perspectives
Volume 30, Number 5, September/October 1998

Family Communication About Sex: What Are Parents Saying and Are Their Adolescents Listening?

By Kim S. Miller, Beth A. Kotchick, Shannon Dorsey, Rex Forehand and Anissa V. Ham

Context: Communication between parents and adolescents about sex, particularly in minority families, has been understudied; more information is needed both on which sex-related topics are discussed and on how their content is transmitted.

Methods: Parent-adolescent communication about 10 sex-related topics was examined in a sample of 907 Hispanic and black 14–16-year-olds. Chi-square analyses were performed to test for significant differences across the 10 topics in discussions reported by the adolescents (with either parent) and by the mothers. The openness of communication, parent-adolescent agreement about communication of topics and differences by gender and ethnicity were also examined.

Results: Significantly higher proportions of mothers and adolescents reported discussions of HIV or AIDS (92% by mothers and 71% by adolescents, respectively) and STDs (85% and 70%, respectively) than of issues surrounding sexual behavior, contraceptive use and physical development (27–74% for these other eight topics as reported by mothers vs. 15–66% as reported by adolescents). The gender of the adolescent and of the parent holding the discussion, but not the family's ethnicity, significantly influenced findings, with adolescents of both sexes more likely to report discussions with mothers than with fathers, and with parents more likely to discuss any of the 10 topics with an adolescent of the same gender than of the opposite gender. The likelihood of a topic being discussed and of mother-adolescent agreement that a topic was discussed both increased with an increasing degree of openness in the communication process.

Conclusions: Consistent with research among white samples, mothers of black and Hispanic adolescents are the primary parental communicators about sexual topics. To facilitate communication, educational programs for parents should cover not only what is discussed, but how the information is conveyed.

Family Planning Perspectives, 1998, 30(5):218–222

[Full text in PDF](#)

- » [article in pdf](#)
- » [table of contents](#)
- » [search the FPP archive](#)
- » [guidelines for authors](#)

Kim S. Miller is research sociologist at the Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, GA; Beth A. Kotchick and Shannon Dorsey are graduate students in psychology, and Rex Forehand is director of the Institute of Behavioral Research, all at the University of Georgia, Athens, GA; and Anissa Y. Ham is program analyst with the Division of Prevention Research and Analytic Methods, CDC.