

Parent-Child Communication: Promoting Sexually Healthy Youth

When young people feel unconnected to home, family, and school, they may become involved in activities that put their health at risk. However, when parents affirm the value of their children, young people more often develop positive, healthy attitudes about themselves. Although most adults want youth to know about abstinence, contraception, and how to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), parents often have difficulty communicating about sex. Nevertheless, positive communication between parents and children helps young people to establish individual values and make sexually healthy decisions.

Parent-Child Warmth and Communication Promote Health & Achievement.

- A major study showed that adolescents who reported feeling connected to parents and family were more likely than other teens to delay initiating sexual intercourse. Teens who said their families were warm and caring also reported less marijuana use and less emotional distress than their peers.¹
- Teens whose parents are warm and firm and grant them psychological autonomy achieve more in school, report less depression and anxiety, and score higher on measures of self-reliance and self-esteem than teens whose parents fail to demonstrate these elements.²
- African American teens are more likely to use discussion, self-affirmation, and disproving strategies to counter stereotypes and racism and to have higher self-esteem when their parents have discussed both achievement and discrimination with them than when parents ignore issues related to discrimination and racism.³
- In one study, Native American youth who reported that their families cared about and understood them had better emotional and physical health and resiliency than peers reporting less family closeness.⁴
- Sexually experienced African American female teens living with their mothers in a perceived supportive family were 50 percent less likely than teens in non-supportive families to report unprotected sex in the past 30 days and to report sex with a non-steady partner in the past six months.⁵

Lack of Communication Affects Behaviors and Attitudes.

- In studies, young people who reported feeling a lack of parental warmth, love, or caring were also more likely to report emotional distress, lower self-esteem, school problems, drug use, and sexual risk behaviors.^{1,2}
- In another study, mothers' hostility was significantly correlated with teens' distrusting their mother and perceiving little maternal support. These feelings, in turn, were significantly associated with siblings' reports that the affected youth showed negative social behaviors and with teachers' reports of peers not accepting the teens. Similar results occurred for paternal hostility.⁶

Parent-Child Communication about Sexuality Promotes Healthy Behaviors.

- In one study, when mothers discussed condom use before teens initiated sexual intercourse, youth were three times more likely to use condoms than were teens whose mothers never discussed condoms or discussed condoms only after teens became sexually active. Moreover, condom use at first intercourse significantly predicted future condom use—teens who used condoms at first intercourse were 20 times more likely than other teens to use condoms regularly and 10 times more likely to use them at most recent intercourse.⁷
- A study found that teens who reported previous discussions of sexuality with parents were seven times more likely to feel able to communicate with a partner about HIV/AIDS than those who had not had such discussions with their parents.⁸
- In another study, 19.2 percent of students said they would prefer to get information about contraception from their parents rather than from community health centers, classes, hospitals, private doctors, television,

or friends (12.5, 12.0, 11.1, 8.8, 7.9, and 6.9 percent, respectively). Consistent users of contraception were also more likely to report frequent conversations with parents than were teens who were not using contraception.⁹

- Studies show that when parents make consistent efforts to know their teen's friends and whereabouts, the young people report fewer sexual partners, fewer coital acts, and more use of condoms and other forms of contraception.^{10,11}
- In a study of sexually active African American and Latino youth, when parents held skilled, open, interactive discussions with their teens about sex, the youth were significantly more likely than the teens of less skilled communicators to use condoms at most recent intercourse and across time.¹²

Parent-Child Communication about Sex Varies by Race/Ethnicity and Gender.

- In one study, just over 54 percent of students reported discussing HIV with their parents. Percentages varied little by race/ethnicity (white, 54.1; African American, 55.7; Latino, 54.5; other, 55.5 percent) but varied significantly by gender (females, 59.7; males 49.2 percent).¹³
- In another study, African American female adolescents reported more discussions about sex-related topics with their mothers than did male adolescents. Although fewer male teens talked about sex-related topics with fathers, mothers, or friends, males were just as likely to talk with mothers as with friends and only slightly less likely to talk with fathers.¹⁴
- A study of urban African American and Latino mothers and their pre-teen and early adolescent daughters found many mothers reluctant to discuss more than biological issues and negative consequences of sexual activity. Maternal communications about sex, often restrictive and moralistic in tone, deterred daughters from confiding in their mothers. Daughters, in reaction, sometimes became secretly involved in romantic relationships.¹⁵
- In a study of African American and Latino adolescents, a significantly greater percentage of Latino teens than African American teens reported discussing at least two sex-related topics—HIV/AIDS and choosing a sex partner—with their father. Latino teens were also twice as likely as African American teens to discuss choosing a sex partner with their mother.¹⁶

Many Parents Need Help in Discussing Sex with Their Teens.

- Many parents do not provide all the information about sex that young people need. In one survey, only 38 percent of young women and 25 percent of young men said they had ever gotten a good idea from their parents that helped them talk about sexual issues with their girlfriend/boyfriend.¹⁷
- Most attempts by parents to impart sexuality information to young people tend to be in a 'top down' communication style that denies teens the opportunity to discuss their own thoughts, feelings, and desires or to draw links between their own and their parents' perspectives.¹⁸
- In a recent poll, 89 percent of Americans said it is important for sex education in schools to include information about contraception and preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.¹⁹

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