

IMPACT OF THE FAMILY ON THE SEX LIVES OF ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of three studies as they relate to the influence of the family on adolescents' sex lives. The first study examined sexual and contraceptive practices among girls aged 12-19 in Mexico City. It was found that both communication with the mother and pregnancy history of close female relatives were predictors of initiation of sexual relations, contraceptive use, and pregnancy. The second study examined differences between young men who had gotten their partner pregnant and young men who had not. Again, communication levels with parents were found to influence behavior. The final study examined levels of communication about sex as perceived by parents and their children. Mothers had higher levels of communication with their children about sex than did fathers, and fathers' perception of what they were communicating differed substantially from their children's perception. As a whole, the three studies' results support the hypothesis that the family has a substantial influence on adolescents' sexual and contraceptive behavior and provides justification for the incorporation of such issues as parent-child communication into sex education programs.

INTRODUCTION

Communication between parents and children about sexual themes is of great concern. It has been found that sexually active youth who use contraceptives have significantly better communication with their parents than do those who are sexually active but do not use contraceptives (Handelsman, Cabral, & Weisfeld, 1987; Fisher, 1987).

A study by Vance (1985) found several causes of adolescent pregnancy and indicated that probably the most influential factor was unsatisfactory interpersonal relations with family members (in addition

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to the absence of adequate information). Further, a study by Ostrov, Offer, Howard, and Kaufman (1985) found that sexual activity is clearly related to psychosocial factors of home life, scholastic performance, and dating habits.

A study by Abramson, Moriuchi, Waite, and Perry (1983) indicated that sexual expression is very closely related to culture, in particular to what is considered proper, and found that parents' attitudes and experiences have a significant influence on the transmission of prescribed cultural norms. In addition, Handelsman et al. (1987) concluded that cultural inhibitions and puritanical attitudes are obstacles to open discussion of sexual themes with adults (principally parents and teachers). This last point is particularly important in Mexican society where traditional conservative values prevail (Diaz-Guerrero, 1986).

However, some authors (Walters & Walters, 1983) have concluded that the family has a limited influence on children's attitudes and sexual behavior, precisely because there is little discussion, poor perceptions, and because the parents are only one source of information.

These studies indicate the importance of further exploring the family's influence on attitudes and behavior related to sexuality, emphasizing that the parents: (1) need to think carefully about their own attitudes and what they want to transmit to their children; (2) should know clearly if their intentions match their attitudes; (3) need to talk more openly about sex; (4) need to resist the tendency to be afraid of what their children may hear; and (5) must recognize that they are only one source of information for their children.

Among the most common problems in parent-child communication concerning sex are embarrassment, lack of knowledge, poorly defined values, fear of encouraging sexual activity, and inability to initiate and maintain a conversation about the subject (Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 1987). Other studies (Abramson et al., 1983) found that parents' educational level and religiosity affect communication.

Given the importance of the family in the Mexican culture and the increase in adolescents' sexual activity, the objective of this article is to show the role the family plays in the sex lives of adolescents by presenting the results of three studies with adolescents carried out in Mexico.

FIRST STUDY

The analyses presented here were part of the investigation entitled: "Adolescents in Mexico City: A Psychosocial Study of Contraceptive

Practices and Unwanted Pregnancy" (Pick de Weiss, Diaz-Loving, Andrade Palos, & Atkin, 1988). The objective was to compare female adolescents who had begun sexual relations to those who had not, those who had used contraceptives to those who had not, and those who had gotten pregnant to those who had not.

A representative sample comprised of 1,257 adolescents was used. All subjects were female, between the ages of 12 and 19, and in low and low-middle socioeconomic categories (based on a marketing map, BIMSA, 1982). The instruments used to measure the variables were derived from closed questionnaires developed and validated for Mexican adolescents. Among the variables analyzed were the family structure (who raised the adolescent, presence of premarital pregnancy of either the mother or a sister) and relationships with the family (perception of the quality of the relationship with the father and mother and frequency of communication concerning problems in general and specifically concerning sex).

Given that the descriptive analysis showed differences in the sexual and contraceptive conduct between girls 12 to 15 years and girls 16 to 19 years of age (Diaz-Loving & Pick de Weiss, 1988), the two age groups were analyzed separately. Since very few of the youngest girls had either used contraceptives or gotten pregnant, only two categories were compared in this age group—those who had had sexual relations versus those who had not.

The results of the logistical regression analysis regarding conduct that can be encouraged by programs (not initiating sexual relations early, using contraceptives, and avoiding pregnancy) were analyzed for their relationship with the family structure.

Not Having Initiated Sexual Relations

For the 16- to 19-year olds, the bivaried analysis showed that the girls with the lowest probability of having begun sexual relations by this age were those who had spoken frequently with their mothers concerning sex ($OR = 1.48$), did not have a sister who had been pregnant during adolescence ($OR = 2.26$), and whose mother was married at the time of her first pregnancy ($OR = 2.25$).

Among the 12- to 15-year olds, the same variables were found as predictors with respect to family structure and relationship.

Use of Contraceptives

As noted above, this and the following analyses were performed only for the girls aged 16 to 19. The bivaried analysis showed that adolescents with the highest probability of having used some form of contra-

ceptive were those who had spoken to their mothers about sex and boys ($OR = 2.30$) and those whose mothers were married at the time of their first pregnancy ($OR = 1.32$).

Never Pregnant

Adolescents who had the most communication with their mothers concerning sex ($OR = 3.20$), whose mothers were not single at the time of their first pregnancy ($OR = 1.37$), and who had a positive perception of their mothers ($OR = 1.71$) had the lowest probability of having gotten pregnant.

SECOND STUDY

Given that few studies worldwide have examined patterns of sexual and reproductive conduct among young men, this second study sought to compare characteristics of young men who had gotten their partner pregnant to those who had not. The data analyzed here regarding the family formed part of a study entitled: "Psychosocial Study Comparing Young Men Who Have and Who Have Not Gotten an Adolescent Pregnant" (Pick de Weiss, Andrade de Palos, Alvarez, & Gribble, 1990).

A total of 338 male adolescents participated in the study (159 who had gotten their partner pregnant and 179 who had not). The subjects were selected nonrandomly through hospitals and family planning clinics in Mexico City that provide services to adolescents. All pregnant adolescents attending five different facilities during one month were asked to provide the names and addresses of the sexual partners who had gotten them pregnant, or if the partner was present, he was asked directly to participate in the study. Sixty-two percent of the pregnant adolescents provided the information and all of the males who were asked to participate agreed to do so. These subjects were in turn asked to provide information about a peer who was sexually active but had not gotten an adolescent pregnant, and the new subjects were also asked to provide data about a friend. The two instruments used referred to family structure and the adolescent's relationship with the family.

To determine the variables that predict the sexual conduct of the adolescents, logistical regression analysis was used. First, the adolescents who had gotten their partners pregnant were compared to those who had not. Then, among the subjects who had gotten a girl pregnant, those who lived with their partner, were compared to those who did not.

The young men with the lowest probability of getting a girl pregnant had better communication with their mothers ($OR = 1.17$) and with their fathers ($OR = 1.12$) than those with a higher probability.

It was found that adolescents who live with their partner were more often raised by both parents ($OR = 3.67$) and had more communication with their mothers ($OR = 2.02$).

THIRD STUDY

A third study was designed to determine parents' attitudes toward their children's sexuality and sex education, contextualize the information gathered in the previous studies, and identify elements that could be incorporated between parents and children.

The information presented here forms part of a more complete study entitled: "Attitudes of Parents in Relation to the Sex Education of Their Children" (Andrade Palos, Pick de Weiss, & Alvarez, 1990).

A total of 1,587 subjects were interviewed—282 fathers, 580 mothers, and 725 adolescents. Of the total, 115 represent the triad of father-mother-child; 100 of the dyad of father-child; 382 the dyad of mother-child; 38 include only the father's data; 54 include only the mother's data; 29 include only the father and mother's data; and 128 include only the adolescent's data.

The instrument was applied to a representative sample of eighth-through twelfth-grade adolescents and their parents, chosen from 8 low and middle-low socioeconomic level schools in Mexico City.

The adolescents' parents were asked to attend a school meeting in order to administer the questionnaires. Those parents who were not present were interviewed in their homes. Up to four follow-up visits were carried out; 86% of the parents responded to the questionnaire; none refused.

Of the factors evaluated in this study, only one is referred to here: communication between parents and their children concerning sex and parents' difficulty in establishing this communication.

The results show significant differences between fathers and mothers concerning communication levels with their children, with the mother showing a higher level of communication ($\chi^2=7.57$ vs. $\chi^2=7.01$; $t = -2.34$; $p = .021$).

It is interesting to note the difference between the fathers' responses and those of their children. The children rated their level of communication with their fathers concerning sex lower than did the fathers. Similarly, children of both sexes reported more difficulty communicating with their fathers about sex than the fathers seemed to perceive (Table 1).

TABLE 1

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX BETWEEN FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

QUESTION	FATHER	DAUGHTER	t	p	FATHER	SON	t	P	THEORETICAL RANGE
Communication about sex	7.09 (67)	5.98 (67)	3.98	.001	7.25 (134)	6.39 (134)	3.10	.002	3 - 12
Difficulty in communicating about sex	4.03 (61)	4.49 (61)	-1.71	.09	3.25 (133)	3.83 (133)	-3.30	.001	2 - 8

With respect to communication between mother and child concerning sex, the same difference were found as between fathers and children among boys, but not among girls (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

These three studies confirm that the family plays a major role in adolescents' sexual conduct, and agrees with previous findings that parent-child communication concerning sexuality significantly influences the age of sexual debut in children (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1989), as well as adolescent pregnancy (Vance, 1985), and the use of contraceptives (Handelsman et al., 1987).

In addition, it is interesting to note the repetition of behavior patterns among close female relatives (mother, sisters), since those adolescents whose mothers and/or sisters had early pregnancies tended to repeat the same pattern.

The results of the second study show the importance of including young men in sexual education programs and reinforcing parents' communication with both their male and female children.

The findings suggest the need to design sex education programs not only for adolescent children, but for their parents. Sex education programs should routinely include strategies to encourage communication between parents and their children concerning sexuality.

Parents' sexual attitudes, knowledge, conduct, and expectations for their children also need to be evaluated to assure that the parents' point of view is incorporated into effective programs. As Walters and Walters suggested (1983), a panoramic study of the family's influence on children's sexual attitudes and conduct is needed.

It is also necessary to evaluate the cultural inhibitions and puritanical attitudes demonstrated by Handelsman et al. (1987), since they represent an obstacle to open communication about sexual themes. Finally, parents' attitudes toward sexuality and their children's sex education should be more deeply explored. The third study found that children evaluate parent-child communication about sex differently from their parents. However, we still need to determine whether the children are not perceiving what the parents are trying to transmit or whether the parents are not expressing what they intend.

TABLE 2
 DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX BETWEEN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

QUESTION	MOTHER	DAUGHTER	t	P	MOTHER	SON	t	P	THEORETICAL RANGE
Communication about sex	7.90 (192)	8.06 (192)	-.74	.46	7.23 (254)	5.85 (254)	7.73	.001	3 - 12
Difficulty in communicating about sex	3.57 (183)	3.65 (183)	-.55	.58	3.74 (253)	4.12 (253)	-2.65	.008	2 - 8

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