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Parental Attitudes and the Occurrence of Early Sexual Activity

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The assertion that parental communication and monitoring of adolescent children will discourage premarital sexual activity is examined among white 15- and 16-year-olds interviewed in the 1981 National Survey of Children. Analyses indicate little support for this hypothesis in the total sample. When the sample is partitioned according to whether the parents hold traditional attitudes, one group—the daughters of traditional parents who have communicated with them about sex or about television—are found less likely to have had intercourse.

As evidence has accumulated documenting the negative social and economic consequences of teenage childbearing (Mott and Marsiglio, 1985; Card and Wise, 1978; Moore and Wertheimer, 1984; Baldwin and Cain, 1980), debate has ensued regarding ways to lower the incidence of early parenthood. As Moore and Burt (1982) note, a birth to an adolescent is the culmination of a sequence of transitions, including the initiation of sexual activity, becoming pregnant, and resolving the pregnancy in a live birth. Interventions directed at affecting the probability of a teenage birth can be directed at any transition point in this process. Also, interventions can be made through programs, policies, or services at a variety of levels, ranging from the individual and family to the community, the state, and the nation.

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Laws, programs, and services operate primarily at the national, state, or community level; yet many acknowledge that persons and groups closer to the teen have greater influence on the decisions adolescents make about sexual activity, pregnancy, and pregnancy resolution. Moore and Burt (1982: 2) observe that “intervention is easier and less costly when it occurs earlier in the decision-making process and closer to the individuals involved—for example, before pregnancy and within the family or local community, rather than after pregnancy or at the national level.” This perspective points to the potential efficacy of family influences on the initiation of sexual activity. Communication of parental values is one of the primary means by which parents socialize their children. In view of this, it would seem that sex education in the family might be an important intervention for delaying the transition to sexual activity.

A number of researchers have explored the effects of parental communication and monitoring on sexual activity. For example, in a review of several studies, Fox (1980) reports that daughters who talked more with their mothers had attitudes and behavior patterns that lowered their risk of becoming pregnant. Similarly, Abrahamse, Morrison, and Waite (1985) found that teens who talked often with their parents were less likely to become school-age mothers. Also, Hogan and
Kitagawa (1985) report that black teens were less likely to be sexually experienced when parents monitored their early dating experiences. However, other analysts have not found that greater communication reduces the probability of early sex (Kahn, Smith, and Roberts, 1984; Newcomer and Udry, 1984, 1985).

In the studies cited above, investigators typically have assumed that parents are uniformly negative in their attitudes toward premarital sexual activity. However, parents' actual attitudes have not been studied directly. As the attitudes of adults toward marriage and premarital sexual activity have become increasingly diverse over the past several decades (Thornton and Freedman, 1982), it can no longer be assumed that all parents feel equally strongly that their children should postpone sexual activity until marriage or even until they finish high school.

Moreover, regardless of the views they hold, parents may or may not communicate their values to their children successfully. Numerous researchers have reported that few parents provide a detailed sex education and many do not broach the topic at all (Fox, 1980; Fox and Inazu, 1980; Furstenberg, 1976; Kahn et al., 1984). In addition, parents may place more emphasis on communication with their daughters. For example, researchers have repeatedly reported that parents are less likely to discuss sex with sons than with daughters (Freeman, Rickels, Huggins, Mudd, Garcia, and Dickens, 1980; Kahn et al., 1984; Ross, 1979).

In this study, we hypothesize that the effects of parent-child discussion and parental supervision on teens' sexual activity depend on the parents' own attitudes. Moreover, we expect that parental influence will be greater among families in which parents successfully communicate their values to their children. Thus we hypothesize that a combination of both traditional attitudes and effective communication practices is required to produce low rates of sexual activity among adolescents.

DATA

These analyses are based on data from 15- and 16-year-olds interviewed in the National Survey of Children. This survey was the second wave of a nationally representative longitudinal study designed to assess the physical, social, and psychological well-being of different groups of American children. The second wave, conducted in the spring of 1981, followed up a subsample of children originally interviewed in 1976. It focused primarily on marital disruption and its effects on children. Consequently the subsample was chosen to include all children in the first wave who were in disrupted and high-conflict families, with a subsample of those in low- or moderate-conflict families as a comparison group. Weights were developed to take account of this subsample selection and sample attrition. Most of the background and outcome measures used in 1976 were repeated in the 1981 survey. In addition, new data were obtained on outcome areas more relevant for teenage children, including sexual behavior.

All 15- and 16-year-old male and female respondents were asked about the sexual experience of their friends and about their own sexual and pregnancy experience. Of the 461 respondents in this age range, 120 reported having had sexual intercourse. Related analyses of these data have indicated that different factors predict sexual activity among adolescent blacks than among whites. Rather than take race differences into account here, we have chosen to limit this analysis to whites. Separate analyses were conducted for males and females, given our expectation that the effect of parental attitudes will differ for sons and daughters. Further information about sample characteristics and interviewing procedures is available (see Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore, and Peterson, 1985; or Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg, 1985).

Interview data were collected not only from the young person, but also from the most knowledgeable custodial parent—usually the mother. Among the questions addressed to the parent were several on marriage and family life that measured attitudes regarding divorce, the division of labor in a family, maternal employment, and marriage. From these, a subset of three items measuring traditional attitudes was selected on the basis of high and statistically significant inter-item correlations. We used a scale formed from these three items to divide the sample approximately in half—those youth having a parent with traditional attitudes and those having a parent with less traditional attitudes.

Finally, several measures of parent-child communication and parental monitoring were constructed, as follows: (a) the parent's report of the proportion of their child's friends that they know, as a measure of supervision; (b) the adolescent's report of whether his or her parents discuss decisions with and listen to him or her, as a measure of general communication; (c) the adolescent's report of whether he or she has discussed television with parents, as a measure of communication that is likely to involve lifestyle and moral issues; and (d) the adolescent's report of whether he or she has discussed sex with a parent, as a concrete measure of communication regarding sexuality.
In addition we included a measure of neighborhood quality—the parent's assessment of how good a place their neighborhood is for a child to grow up in. At the very least, this measure reflects the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood. Less clearly, it may also measure the parent's assessment of the extent to which the norms and activities of the neighbors are consistent with the parent's childrearing goals. Family income was also included in preliminary models; but because it had no impact on the results, it was deleted to preserve degrees of freedom.

RESULTS

In the first set of analyses, the parents' attitudes were not taken into account (see Table 1). These data are the result of multiple classification analyses, a form of multiple regression using dummy variables. The percentages shown for each variable are the adjusted percentages, taking into account all the other predictors in the model.

As shown in the table, all but two of the comparisons show small to moderate differences in the expected direction; however, only two of the ten comparisons are statistically significant (on the basis of a one-tailed t test with pooled variance estimates). Among males as well as females, children whose parents know all or most of their friends are less likely to be sexually experienced, although the association reaches statistical significance only among females. Sons whose parents tend to listen and discuss decisions with them are somewhat less likely to be sexually experienced, but no effect was found for daughters. Teens who discuss television with their parents are less likely to have had sex; however, the effect did not reach significance for either sex. Also, those daughters who reported that their parents had discussed sex with them are somewhat less likely to have had sex; however, a fairly large effect in the opposite direction was found among sons. (This reversal is discussed below.) Like previous investigators, we found that parents more often discuss sex with daughters than with sons. Two-thirds of these adolescent females reported such discussions, compared with only one-sixth of the males. Finally, a modest effect of neighborhood quality was found. Those youth living in neighborhoods that their parents defined as excellent or very good places for children to grow up in are somewhat less likely to have begun sex at an early age. The difference was significant for males.

The variation explained by these models is modest—3% for females and 5% for males. Among males the overall model is statistically significant, but only when we use a two-tailed test that includes the difference in the unexpected direction on the discussions-about-sex variable. On the basis of these results, it is difficult to conclude that parental supervision or communication by itself has a substantial effect on the incidence of early sexual activity.

Traditional versus Less Traditional Subgroups

In the next set of analyses, shown in Table 2, the male and female samples were each divided according to whether or not the family attitudes expressed by the parent were traditional.

Daughters. Parental traditionality per se is clearly associated with a lower prevalence of sexual activity among daughters. Those adolescent females whose parents expressed traditional attitudes about marriage and family life were only half as likely to report having had sex as those with less conservative parents (9% versus 20%). Among white males, however, parental attitudes are not associated with the reported prevalence of sexual experience. How do the several measures of communication and monitoring relate to early sex within the subgroups defined by parental attitudes?

Considering females first, we find that two of the three measures of communication are strongly
related to a lower probability of early sexual activity among daughters of traditional parents (both $p < .01$), while none of these variables is related to sexual activity in the less traditional group. Among the young women whose parents expressed traditional attitudes, only 1% of those who reported that they frequently talk with parents about the programs they watch on television were sexually experienced, compared with 24% of those whose parents did not discuss television. Among daughters with more liberal parents, discussing TV programs is not associated with the probability of early sex. Though we have no data on the substance of these discussions, we presume that parents transmit their values, since the low cell is the one for traditional parents who talk a great deal to their daughters.

Similarly, among daughters of traditional parents, only 3% of those who discuss sex with either parent report being sexually experienced, compared with 20% of the daughters who did not discuss sex with either parent. Again, discussion of sex is unrelated to sexual experience among daughters whose parents professed more liberal attitudes. The single low cell is the one for traditional parents who talked about sex with their daughters.\textsuperscript{2}

The third measure of communication—the adolescent’s report of whether her parents listen to her and discuss decision-making—bears no relation to daughters’ sexual experience. However, the bivariate results (not shown) did reveal an association on this variable among daughters of traditional parents: 3% of those whose parents listened and discussed decisions have had sex compared to 12% of those whose parents communicated less. No corresponding difference was found for daughters of more liberal parents.

The other variables, which are less specifically focused on communication regarding attitudes, show little interaction with parental attitudes. Whether the parent reported knowing the daughter’s friends has a modest impact, regardless of the parent’s attitudes, as does living in a neighborhood considered excellent or very good for children. (In both cases, there is a main effect for traditionality, but no interaction between traditionality and monitoring or environment.)\textsuperscript{3}

\textbf{Sons.} As previously noted, there is no overall effect of parental traditionality among sons. This may be because the parent interview was in most instances completed by the mother rather than the father, and the mother’s attitudes may be less relevant for sons than for daughters. However, another explanation may be that parents do not express their attitudes as readily or as explicitly to sons as to daughters (see Kahn et al., 1984). Only 17% of the sons reported discussing sex with either parent, compared with 67% of the daughters. In addition, parental communication ap-

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Percentage Sexually Experienced among 15- and 16-Year-Old White Adolescents, by Sex of Adolescent and Family Attitudes of Their Parents, 1981 National Survey of Children}
\begin{tabular}{lrrrr}
\hline
Measure & \multicolumn{2}{c}{White Females} & \multicolumn{2}{c}{White Males} \\
 & Traditional & Moderate-Liberal & Traditional & Moderate-Liberal \\
\hline
Parent knows child’s friends & & & & \\
All or most & 09 (66) & 16 (68) & 19 (60) & 18 (58) \\
Half or fewer & 13 (14) & 32 (22) & 31 (26) & 25 (28) \\
Parents listen and discuss decisions & & & & \\
Often & 11 (22) & 21 (26) & 02 (14)* & 23 (20) \\
Less than often & 08 (58) & 20 (54) & 27 (72)* & 19 (66) \\
Adolescent discusses TV with parents & & & & \\
Hardly ever, never & 24 (28) & 20 (36) & 21 (49) & 25 (46) \\
Often, sometimes & 01 (52)** & 20 (54) & 25 (37) & 14 (40) \\
Parents discuss sex with adolescent & & & & \\
At least 1 parent & 03 (49)** & 21 (61) & 53 (15)** & 18 (14) \\
Other or no one & 20 (31) & 17 (29) & 16 (71) & 20 (72) \\
Neighborhood & & & & \\
Excellent, very good & 06 (48) & 19 (71) & 21 (57) & 12 (63)** \\
Good, fair, poor & 14 (32) & 26 (19) & 27 (29) & 42 (23) \\
Mean & 09 (80) & 20 (90) & 23 (86) & 20 (86) \\
$R^2$ & .24 & .05 & .13 & .15 \\
Adjusted $R^2$ & .19* & .00 & .08 & .09 \\
\hline
\textsuperscript{*}p < .05, one-tailed $t$ test. \\
\textsuperscript{**}p < .01, one-tailed $t$ test.
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
appears to have little impact on sons, regardless of parental attitudes. In fact, among more traditional parents, discussing sex with a son is associated with a higher incidence of premarital sexual activity. Kahn et al. (1984) report that the more topics sons discuss with their fathers, the greater the number of sexual activities the sons have engaged in. In our sample, the positive association is found only among the sons of traditional parents, a result that suggests that these discussions may occur in reaction to sexual activity rather than being a form of inoculation ahead of time.

Overall, among sons with more liberal parents, none of the parent-child variables has any significant effect. The only significant association is for neighborhood quality: male teens living in an excellent or very good neighborhood are less likely to be sexually experienced. This association may reflect the lower levels of sexual activity among college-oriented white males from families in more desirable neighborhoods (Moore et al., 1985), or the influence of the peer group in less desirable neighborhoods. It does not reflect income, since controlling for family income (not shown) does not affect the neighborhood coefficient.

On the other hand, one of the other variables does provide some evidence that discussion may lead to less sexual activity among sons in traditional families. Sons who reported that their parents often listen to and discuss decisions with them are less likely to be sexually experienced, providing the parents hold traditional attitudes. (As noted above, the same association was found among daughters of traditional parents prior to controlling for other measures in the model.) This association between general communication and less sexual activity among the sons of traditional parents suggests that communication in these families may precede the initiation of sex and cause its postponement. Unfortunately, these data do not allow us to test causal ordering.

The overall results do not suggest that parents discuss sexual activity with sons prior to their becoming sexually active, thereby causing them to postpone sexual involvement. Instead it appears that few parents initiate discussions about sex with sons until evidence of sexual activity leads parents, especially traditional parents, to do so.

**DISCUSSION**

Parental communication with teenage children is often recommended as a means of discouraging early sexual activity. On the basis of this analysis, this recommendation would have to be modified. Among 15- and 16-year-olds in the survey, parental discussion is associated with less frequent initiation of sexual activity only for daughters of parents with traditional family values. Hence, the effect of family communication seems to depend upon parental beliefs and whether the adolescent is a son or daughter.

While this result is intuitively appealing, it remains for researchers to explore the content of parental communication in greater detail. Our findings suggest that future investigators should collect data not only on whether parents and teens discuss sex, but also on the topics they cover, the type of parental advice, and the parents' attitudes toward sex and family life. Information on the timing of the discussions and the timing of first and subsequent intercourse are also needed in order to establish the causal order of events. In the analysis reported in this paper, the sample was divided on the basis of several general questions about family values asked of only one parent. With a broader range of data on the substance, timing, and specificity of the parent-child discussions, it should be feasible to pinpoint more exactly which aspects of communication matter for the child's behavior.

Also, we have confined our attention to sexual experience, which, of course, is only the initial step in a sequence of behaviors that determine the incidence of adolescent parenthood. It may well be that traditional parental attitudes have different effects on contraceptive use, for example, than on sexual activity (Furstenberg, Herceg-Baron, Shea, and Webb, 1984). Thus, other outcomes also need to be examined.

Finally, these results suggest that the effect of parental communication varies not only by the attitudes held by parents but also by the sex of the teenager. Discussion seems to have little impact among the children of parents with less traditional attitudes. Among daughters of traditional parents, the incidence of sexual activity is lower when the parents discuss sex and/or television programming with their daughters. Moreover, the more that parents discuss decisions with their daughters, the lower the incidence of sexual activity among daughters with traditional parents (although this association disappeared when the other communication variables were controlled). Among sons, a tendency on the part of traditional parents to listen to their sons and discuss decisions with them is often recommended as a means of discouraging early sexual activity. On the basis of this analysis, this recommendation would have to be modified. Among 15- and 16-year-olds in the survey, parental discussion is associated with less frequent initiation of sexual activity only for daughters of parents with traditional family values. Hence, the effect of family communication seems to depend upon parental beliefs and whether the adolescent is a son or daughter.

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sexual activity primarily among the daughters of traditional parents.

FOOTNOTES

1. These items are “Marriages are better when the husband works and the wife runs the home and cares for the children”; “Children are better off if their mothers do not work outside the home”; and “When parents divorce, children develop permanent emotional problems.” Respondents answered that they “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” They could also respond that “it depends,” which was coded as the middle category. Scores on the 5-point scale were summed for the three items, and the sample was divided roughly in half on the basis of the parental attitudes. Since parental attitudes are skewed in the direction of being traditional, the traditional group is quite homogeneous in its attitudes, while the nontraditional group includes parents with both liberal and intermediate attitudes.

2. Results from a school-based sample of white adolescents studied by Newcomer and Udry (1984, 1985) indicate that parental communication has modest effects and is overwhelmed by the effect of the mother’s own behavior when she was a teen. We find the mother’s own age at first birth to be moderately associated with the probability that her daughter has initiated sex; but the association between communication and less sexual activity among daughters of traditional parents continues to hold when the mother’s own age at first birth is controlled.

3. We also ran this model controlling for family income; but since none of the relationships was altered more than slightly and none of our conclusions were affected, this variable was omitted from the final model to save degrees of freedom.

4. Another measure was also used to divide the sample: “Living together before marriage makes a lot of sense.” However, this variable did not discriminate as effectively as the more general traditionality scale. Newcomer and Udry (1985) also report a lack of effect for a very similar variable (whether the mother thinks it permissible for unmarried people to have sex). Hence we would suggest that future research should concentrate on measuring both items specific to adolescent sexuality and items that tap family values more generally.

REFERENCES


