The Role of Open Communication with Parents in Dating and Sexual Behaviors Among Female Adolescents

Roxanne Theofanous
California State University, Fullerton

Abstract
Among developed nations, the USA has the highest rate of pregnancy among 15-19-year-olds, which puts girls at risk of low academic achievement, poverty, and even death due to complications.1,2,3,4,5,6 This study was a secondary data analysis using the baseline wave of data from the Cross-Site Evaluation of the Title XX Adolescent Family Life Program in 14 States, which included a sample of 250 female adolescents who participated in the AFL sexual education program. A negative correlation was found between the frequency of dating someone 3 or more years older and willingness to abstain from sex.

Introduction
Purpose of Study: Examine role of open parental communication on teens’ sexual intentions
Research Questions: What is the effect of open parent-child communication on teens’ intentions to abstain from sex & use safer sex practices?
Hypotheses: Frequency of open parental communication has direct effect on intentions of teens to abstain from sex and use safer sex practices were not supported.

Methods
Type of Design: Secondary data analysis; cross-sectional study
Dataset: Cross-Site Evaluation of the Title XX Adolescent Family Life Program in 14 States (ICPSR 34398)
Sampling Strategy: Convenience Sampling
Data Collection Procedures: Data collected 2 months before AFL intervention began, using computer-assisted self-interviews & self-administered paper and pencil interviews

Dependent Variables:
1. Teens’ intentions to abstain from sex
   - Combines 3 variables from original data set
   - 1 = “strongly agree” to 5 = “strongly disagree”
   - Scores: 5-15 (higher scores = higher likelihood of abstinence)
2. Intention to have safe sex
   - “How likely is it that you will use birth control or pregnancy prevention when you have sex?”
   - 1 = “definitely likely” to 5 = “not at all likely”
3. Risky dating behaviors
   - “How many times have you gone out on a date with someone who is at least 3 years older than you?”
   - 1 = “never” to 4 = “more than 10 times”
   - Reverse coded: higher scores = less risky behavior

Independent Variable:
Open parent-child communication regarding sex

Scores of 15 items combined to create single variable
“How often in the last 3 months have you talked to one/both of your parents about...” topics including “reasons for not having sex” & “how babies are made”
0 = none; 1 = 1 time; 2 = 2-3 times; 3 = 4+ times
Scores: 0 - 45 (higher scores = more open communication)

Demographic Variables:
- Race/Ethnicity
- Other 15%
- Hispanic 22%
- Black (non-Hispanic) 24%
- White (non-Hispanic) 39%

Results
Spearman rho correlation coefficient computed to examine relationship between openness of parent-child communication and (1) willingness to abstain from sex; (2) likelihood of using birth control; & (3) frequency of dating someone 3 years older or more.
There was not a statistically significant correlation between parental communication and willingness to abstain from sex, likelihood of using birth control, or frequency of dating someone 3+ years older.
Hypotheses that the frequency of open parent-child communication would have a direct effect on the intentions of teens to abstain from sex and use safer sex practices were not supported.
Relationship between frequency of dating someone 3+ years older & willingness to abstain from sex examined using Spearman rho correlation analysis
Results indicated a negative and statistically significant association between frequency of dating someone 3+ years older and willingness to abstain: Higher frequency of dating someone 3+ years older was related to lower willingness to abstain from sex.

Discussion
Implications
Future research: how to improve quality of informal sexual education (parents’ communication skills)
Increase access to affordable, confidential, client-centered reproductive & mental health care services for adolescents
Social workers: encourage parents to be actively involved in children’s health, provide psycho-education on effective ways to communicate with about sensitive subjects (sex, relationships, dating)
Study Limitations
Lack of data on quality (as opposed to frequency) of communication; did not specify the emotional tone
Cross-sectional data: conclusions cannot be drawn regarding cause and effect; self-reported measures
Conclusion
New policies should be developed to provide services that focus on positive youth development to prevent risky sexual behavior
Comprehensive sexual education programs should address social factors (peer & partner influence)
Due to risks of relationships with older partners, interventions must empower teens with strategies to establish and maintain boundaries about sex

References