

TALKING ABOUT SEX: BEYOND THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

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FAMILY SEXUALITY COMMUNICATION

- Talking about sex with parents can:
 - delay teen sex
 - reduce unprotected sex
 - reduce number of sexual partners
- Less than 50% of teens and parents talk about sex (Robert & Sonenstein, 2010)
 - Some parents lack knowledge, skills, and confidence
 - Some teens avoid talking with parents

EXTENDED FAMILY DEFINED

- Non-parental adult relatives and those teens consider family including:
 - grandparents
 - aunts and uncles
 - step-parents
 - older siblings and cousins (18 or older)
 - fictive kin
 - godparents, family friends

EXTENDED FAMILY SEXUALITY COMMUNICATION

- Extended family play key roles in childrearing (Jones & Lindahl, 2011)
 - Black and Latino families
- Urban teens talk with extended family about sexual issues (Harper et al., 2012)
- Little research on who, why, and impact of sexuality communication

EXTENDED FAMILY SEXUALITY COMMUNICATION

■ Who teens talk to

- Stepmothers, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and “fictive kin”

■ Why teens talk to extended family

- Easier than talking to parents
 - Fear of disappointing parents, being judged
- Development: Expanding social circles

STUDY DESIGN

- Sequential exploratory design
- Qualitative
 - Interviews with 7th grade teens and their parents/guardians
- Quantitative
 - Survey with 8th grade students

BRONFENBRENNER'S PROCESS-PERSON-CONTEXT-TIME MODEL

- Identifies individual, systemic, & interactive factors that shape development over time
 - Process level
 - qualitative exploration of teen and extended family communication about sex across multiple perspectives
 - quantitative examination of associations between extended family sexuality communication and teen sexual behavior
 - Person level
 - Teens' active or passive roles in talking with extended family members about sex
 - Context
 - Look at family system
 - Teens define their own family

INTERVIEW SAMPLE

■ 32 7th graders & their parents/guardians

■ Teens

- 47% female
- 37% Black, 33% Latino, 18% White, 12% Biracial
- 24% report having had vaginal sex
- 72% report talk about sex with extended family

■ Parents

- 85% mothers, 10% fathers, 5% guardians
- 51% Black/African American, 14% Hispanic/Latino, 35% White
- 38% high school education or less

TEEN INTERVIEW QUESTION

- Are there other people who you think of as family who you talk to about sex and relationships? It could be someone like an aunt or uncle, sibling or cousin, godparent, or a friend of the family. What makes this a good person to talk to about this topic? Tell me more about it...

PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTION

- Is there someone else in your family who [your teen] talks to about sex or relationships? What do you think about it?

QUESTIONS OF INTEREST

■ Teens

- Why do teens talk with extended family about sex and relationships?

■ Parents

- How do parents perceive extended family communication about sex and relationships?

ANALYSIS

- **Content analysis (Patton, 2002)**
 - Identified themes
 - Developed codebook
 - Reliability check
 - Discussed and resolved differences
 - Intercoder reliability = .94

WHY TEENS TALK WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

- **Good connection with family member (44%)**
 - “When I’m talking, she lets me talk. She doesn’t interrupt and she doesn’t say everything. And like if I said something, she wouldn’t judge me.” – Leila (African American female) about her older sister
 - “Because they’ve been close to me for a lot of my life, and my brother is like a mentor to me so I feel like I can like share things with him that I don’t share with a lot of other people” – Tony (Latino male) about his grandmother and older brother

WHY TEENS TALK WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

- Learn from family member's knowledge or experience (31%)
 - “He’s a police officer, and so he taught me some stuff . . . like the rules of the road and stuff, like—if you had a girlfriend and how to treat her.” - Bentley (biracial Black and Native American male) about his uncle
 - “He went through this stuff when he was young, so he knows all about this stuff . . . he went through really bad things when he was young and did wrong stuff with girls.” - Isaiah (White male) about his step-father

WHY TEENS TALK WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

- **Don't want to talk with a parent (19%)**
 - “To be honest. I just go up to him (my uncle), talk to him, we laugh and have fun. And when I go to my mom...there's no fun with my mom. It's just like, I don't want to say strict, but it's just weird . . . I think she just has that fear that I can have sex and she doesn't want me to.” – McLovin (Cape Verdean male)
 - “He's always there just like my mom, but there's certain stuff I can't tell my mom like that I do wrong or whatever. But then at the same time when I tell him he tells her, and then sometimes she doesn't really get mad at me.” – John (Puerto Rican male) about his godbrother

HOW PARENTS PERCEIVE TALK WITH EXTENDED FAMILY (48%)

- “She’s just pretty open. . . . she’s just been there since um day one, and they [my children] trust her. So—and they’ve seen her like make mistakes. You know, we all make mistakes like in relationships and stuff, so they feel pretty comfortable asking her some questions.” Tiffany (Black/West Indian) about her sister
- “You know, I just say [to my son], ‘You could probably talk to your Uncle about this.’ And he’s all embarrassed or something. You know I could talk to them easily about anything but I don’t think he wants to talk to me about it (issues around his sexual orientation).” – Cordelia (White/Irish)

TAKE-HOMES FROM INTERVIEWS

- Fit with prior research
 - Comfort with extended family
 - Discomfort talking with parents about sex
- Close connections with extended family
- Agency of teens & parents
 - Actively seek out extended family involvement
 - Fits with theoretical frame (active vs passive)
 - Not just what parents *tell* teens about sex

IS THIS COMMUNICATION PROTECTIVE?

- Little research on protective associations
 - Talking with mom and sister about safer sex predicts less risky attitudes (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004)
 - Talking with family about sex predicts later age of first sex (Guzman et al., 2003)
 - Parents & extended family not distinguished

OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

- **What are the associations between extended family sexuality communication and teen vaginal sex?**

SURVEY QUESTION

- Which adults *in your family* have you talked to about sex? Check *all* that apply.
 - Parents
 - Extended family
 - Relatives who are not parents (e.g., aunt, uncle)
 - Fictive kin (i.e., godparent, family friend)
 - Other (open-ended)

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

- **1,494 8th graders**
 - **53% female**
 - **32% Latino, 30% Black, 20% White, 15% Biracial, and 4% Asian**
 - **21% report having had vaginal sex**
 - **59% report talk about sex with extended family**

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

- Profiles developed from the checklist
- Communication profiles
 - (a) parents only (b) extended family only,
 - (c) parents and extended family (d) neither.
- Logistic regression model
- Control variables:
 - age, race/ethnicity, family structure, household income, parent closeness, social desirability

FINDINGS

■ Who teens talk to:

- Mothers (56%), cousins (32%), fathers (29%), older siblings (24%), fictive kin (23%)

■ Communication profiles:

- (a) parents only: 22%
- (b) extended family only: 19%
- (c) parents and extended family: 43%
- (d) neither: 16%

FINDINGS

- Teens who talk only with extended family were most likely to have had sex (predicted likelihood = 0.37)
 - Teens who talked only with extended family were more than twice as likely as those who talked only with parents to have had sex
- Teens who talk only with parents were least likely to have had vaginal sex (predicted likelihood = 0.17)

WHAT FINDINGS MEAN

- Extended family plays a frequent and meaningful role in talking with teens about sex
- Extended family may gain importance as teens become sexually active
 - Avoid parents, who may provide more proscriptive messages
 - See extended family as trusted connections & resources

LIMITATIONS

■ Interviews

- Small, convenience sample
- Limited questions on extended family sexuality communication

■ Survey

- Cross-sectional
- No information on quality, content, & frequency of communication

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Is talking with extended family protective?
 - Need longitudinal studies
 - What aspects of this communication are protective?
- Look in depth at family system
 - Consistency of messages across family members
 - Parent perceptions
 - All extended family is not equal

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Need for increased extended family access to accurate information about sex to pass on to teens
- Educators & health care providers
 - Don't assume parents are the only source of family communication about sex
 - Ask teens who they talk to about sex – help them identify their resources
 - Provide extended family as an option for family components of sex education programs