

FACT SHEET



RURAL CENTER for
AIDS/STD PREVENTION

A JOINT PROJECT OF
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The Role of Parents in Adolescent HIV/STD Risk Prevention

While drug prevention efforts have embraced the family, the controversial nature of issues related to sexuality and the difficulty in having open discussions about these issues have adversely impacted HIV/STD prevention efforts, including within the family. Many experts agree that parents are the most powerful socializing agents in the lives of adolescents. Parents and other adults are in a unique and powerful position to shape young people's attitudes and behaviors, and to help them to become healthy adults. They do this in part by providing accurate information about risks, consequences, and responsibilities, and by teaching the skills needed to make responsible decisions about health. Relative to other information sources, parents have a unique opportunity to engage their children in dialogues about HIV/STD prevention and sexuality-related issues because the discussions can be continuous (i.e., not one-time events), sequential (i.e., building one upon the next as the child's development and experiences change) and time-sensitive (i.e., information is immediately responsive to the child's questions and anticipated needs rather than programmed, such as in a school curriculum).

Research Findings

Recent research has identified and examined familial factors which facilitate risk reduction behaviors in adolescents. Factors such as parental monitoring, communication and parental attitudes have been examined as correlates of risky sexual behavior and drug use in adolescents. One study found that greater parental monitoring was related to less deviance (using an index that included both sexual behavior and drug use) for both African-American and Hispanic adolescents.¹ Another study found that parental monitoring, the quality of mother-child interactions, and mother's attitudes about sexuality predicted adolescent's sexual behavior, but family structure variables including income, parental education, and maternal marital status, did not.²

Further research has examined specifically how the process of parent-child communication about sexuality impacts adolescents' risky sexual behaviors. Findings from this research suggest important areas that should be addressed in preparing parents to communicate with their children: (1) the importance of delivering a comprehensive message; (2) parental skill and sensitivity in discussing HIV/STD

prevention and sexuality; and (3) timing of the communication. Research findings indicate:

- More comprehensive or broader messages about sexuality delivered by the mother are associated with less sexual risk behavior among adolescents.³
- Mothers who are skilled communicators about sexuality-related topics are more likely to discuss a broad range of topics with their adolescent, and are more likely to be heard by their child during those discussions.⁴
- A measure that included both communication content and process was related to less adolescent sexual risk behavior even when controlling for mother's attitudes and sexual behavior.⁵
- Parent-adolescent discussions about sexuality and sexual risk were associated with an increased likelihood of teenager-partner discussions about sexual risk and of teenager's condom use, but only if parents were open, skilled and comfortable in having those discussions.⁶
- Mother-adolescent discussions about condoms that occur before the adolescent's sexual debut, when compared to discussions that occur after sexual debut or not at all, are associated with greater condom use during the teen's sexual debut. Using a condom at first intercourse sets the stage for continued condom use.⁷
- Not talking about sexuality-related issues can be consequential because the adolescent can be influenced by other sources such as peers. Teens who did not discuss sexuality issues or condoms with their mothers showed a stronger connection between peer norms and their own behavior compared to teens who did talk.⁸

Furthermore, parents often underestimate their children's involvement in sexual activities even as their children progress through adolescence, thus limiting their perceptions of the need to discuss sexuality with them.⁹ In sum, these findings suggest that giving parents general parenting strategies, information and communication skills can be an effective HIV/AIDS prevention strategy.

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(Continued from previous page)

Enhancing Parent-Child Communication

What parents say, how they say it, and when they say it, all impact the effectiveness of the parent-child communication. Specific strategies to enhance communication about HIV/STD prevention and sexuality-related issues include:

BE PREPARED. Parents should:

- * Recognize that many questions about sexuality start early in the life of the child.
- * Be knowledgeable so they can provide age-appropriate answers.
- * Determine what kinds of topics they will talk about (e.g. how to prevent HIV/STD), and topics they will not discuss (e.g. their personal sexual behavior).
- * Know their values and communicate them clearly.
- * Be prepared to initiate a discussion if one never seems to happen.
- * Understand that children are exposed to information about sexuality, even if parents aren't telling them. If parents don't talk with their children someone else will.

BE MORE COMFORTABLE. Parents should:

- * Practice talking with other parents and adults about HIV/STD prevention and sexuality issues.
- * Hold support group meetings. Learn from others who have been talking with their children.

LEARN TO LISTEN. Parents should:

- * Listen to their child's voice--to what their question is and possible motives for asking the question-- before giving an answer.
- * Listen to and respect their child's point of view.

TALK COMPREHENSIVELY. Parents should:

- * Talk about broader sexuality issues (e.g. the role and meaning of sexuality in life), rather than focusing only on the risks related to sexuality.
- * Talk about, for example, how to make good healthy decisions, about understanding your body and how it changes as you grow and develop, how to handle peer and partner pressures to engage in unwanted sex, and how to know when you are ready to be sexually active.
- * Use teachable moments to discuss relationships with friends, to model healthy behavior, to discuss how you handled a certain problem or pressure that may be unrelated to sex.¹⁰

TALK EARLY AND OFTEN

Parents should begin discussions about HIV/STD prevention and sexuality early in their child's life with the goal of normalizing such discussions so that they can occur naturally and often.

Groups that Can Help Parents

Several national organizations offer resources and information on parent-child communication dealing with sexuality. Particularly valuable information can be obtained from:

- The National Campaign to Prevent Pregnancy (<http://www.teenpregnancy.org/parents.htm>)
- Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation (<http://www.talkingwithkids.org/>)
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (<http://www.siecus.org/parent/pare0000.html>)

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