

with adolescents about sex, finding it uncomfortable or embarrassing.⁶⁹ Often, such conversations present challenges, as parents and children may experience a dialectical tension between perceiving sex talk as natural and open, and awkward and private. In a study of sexual communication between mothers and their late adolescent daughters, mothers and daughters both described the topic as natural but challenging to discuss, especially in the earlier years of childhood. Mothers reported feeling unsure about when to raise the topic and what sexual information to discuss.⁷⁰ Of course, mothers are not the only parents who find it difficult, at times, to talk about sex with their children. In the “Family Matters,” on the previous page, let’s take a look at what one researcher found about why parents hesitate to talk to their children about sex.

Parental talk about sexuality tends to influence their offspring’s behavior. For example, researchers have found that teenagers’ perceptions of their parents’ competence and effectiveness at communicating about sexual health emerge as significant predictors of teenagers’ sexual health.⁷¹ Likewise, researchers have established a communicative differential between mothers and fathers when it comes to talking about sex, finding that mothers tend to discuss this topic more frequently than fathers, particularly with their daughters. Girls who talk to their mothers about sexual topics are more likely to have conservative sexual values and are less likely to have initiated sex; in fact, girls who talk to parents about when to have sex are less influenced by peer behavior.⁷² Culture also plays a role in this communication; for example, Hispanic-Latina women have reported less parent–adolescent sexual risk communication than non-Hispanic peers. Mother–daughter discussions about condoms are associated with greater consistency of condom use.⁷³

Scholars studying gender differences in sex-related communication among urban mothers and their teenage children found that mothers talked more to their daughters than to their sons about topics of dating, when to have intercourse, and reasons not to have sex until one is older. Somewhat surprisingly, sons have reported discussing condom use more with their mothers (48%) than with their fathers (22%).⁷⁴ Such studies highlight the importance of comfortable and open parent–child discussions about sexuality and the important role many mothers play in socializing their adolescents and providing sexual risk information. Of course, studies like these do not always predict communication in any individual family system, but they can help you understand sexual communication within your own family.

Increasingly, fathers play a more significant role in the sexual socialization of their children through the discussions of sociosexual issues with daughters, such as “resisting pressure for sex” and “understanding men.”⁷⁵ Some fathers help daughters understand the communication strategies young males could use to persuade them to engage in sexual behaviors. A study of father–son communication about sexuality found that permissive values were a predictor of information sharing, but not a predictor of values sharing.⁷⁶ The authors speculated that sharing values could lead