

were sex talks and the topic of sexuality generally avoided by your parents? Parent-child discussions of sexuality support a sense of family connectedness and help prepare children for positive intimate relationships in adult life. In previous generations, parents were often uncomfortable or afraid to talk about sex or were misinformed about sex themselves. In contemporary families, however, conversations about sex occur more frequently due to greater societal openness, media treatment of sexuality, concerns about sexual health, and higher levels of parental willingness to discuss sexuality. Even though open conversations about sexuality occur more frequently, a large majority of parents still express discomfort in talking

FAMILY MATTERS: PARENTS HESITATE TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEX—BUT THEY SHOULDN'T

Each year in the United States, a significant number of adolescents experience unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Although some parents and children have discussed this topic with positive results, many parents do not talk with their children about STIs. In most cases when parents do talk with their children, the conversations are infrequent and often only one conversation occurs. As a communication researcher at the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences in Washington, DC, Katrina Pariera attempted to provide a more comprehensive look at why parents hesitate to discuss sexuality with their children. Using data from the Annenberg Health Communication Survey, Pariera studied a nationally representative, random sample of 186 American mothers and fathers who reported on 95 sons and 91 daughters. Parents were asked about a list of barriers to holding conversations about sex with their adolescents, to rate their sexual communication self-efficacy, and respond to prompts regarding the effects of parent-child communication.

According to her results, parents seemed to think there was a particular time for the “One Big Talk,” not believing that this particular topic should be discussed within a series of ongoing conversations. Pariera was surprised to find that gender is not a highly significant barrier or prompt of these conversations; rather, the most frequent barrier to talking about sex was parents feeling their children were too young for such a conversation. In discussing her findings, Pariera pointed to a circular problem: parents think their children are too young to talk about sex, but as the child gets older, parents perceive that their children do not want to hear what parents have to say.

Consequently, Pariera argued that there is a narrow window of time between the two barriers to talking to their children about sex. Parents of younger children need to understand why they should talk to their children before it's too late and accept the reality that their children need to start these conversations early. In addition, parents need to realize the extensive, positive effects such talks can bring. She concluded that interventions may be needed to help prepare parents to respond to unexpected questions from their children, and that schools should provide parents with resources on talking about sex before the school teaches a class in sex education. By illuminating the underlying hesitations and challenges to timing that parents experience when discussing sex with their children, Pariera's research demonstrated that family conversations about sexuality matter.

For further reading, see Pariera, K. L. (2016). Barriers and prompts to parent-child sexual communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*, 277–283.