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# Communicating about sexual matters within the family : Facilitators and barriers

A worksite-based parenting programme, to promote parent-adolescent communication about sexual health, was found to be effective in increasing communication between parents and their children (Schuster et al 2008). More recent research has found that children also have a preference for talking to their parents as well as learning from other sources (Turnbull, van Schaik & van Wersch, 2010). However, it has often been found that parents demur from discussing particular topics (e.g. sexuality) with their children because they feel embarrassed and experience discomfort when doing so (Burgess, Dziegielewski & Evans-Green, 2005; Dilorio et al 1996; Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000; Kahlbaugh, Lefkowitz, Au & Sigman, 1997; King & Lorusso, 1997; Lefkowitz et al 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Jordan, Price & Fitzgerald, 2000; Kakavoulis, 2001; Walker, 2001).

Sex is now more openly discussed even compared to a generation ago. Communication about sexual matters in Britain is attempting to mirror other European countries such as the Netherlands, France and Germany where teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections are lower (Lewis & Knijn, 2001; Van Loon, 2003; Bailey, 2005; Gallup-Black & Weitzman, 2004).

The sexual health and well-being of young people in Britain remains a concern and in recent years, the UK government have provided strategies for taking a holistic approach to addressing the sexual health of young people. Schools, parents and health professionals have been encouraged to take a comprehensive approach to educating and keeping young people safe from the consequences associated with risky sexual behaviour (Department for Education and Skills, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Sex Education Forum, 2003).

Guidance published by the government (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) has suggested that parents are the most important group who are able to teach children about sexual matters whilst providing the emotional and physical support in preparation for adult life. Novilla et al. (2006) have suggested that parents are able to influence their children's attitudes by forming beliefs and values concerning identity, relationships and intimacy. Previous research in developmental psychology, in particular Bowlby (1973, 1979) suggests that attachments with parents influence children's cognitions, which not only shape their behaviour, but also their friendships and romantic relationships in the future. Although these types of parent-child relationship that are characterised by parental warmth, support and parent-child closeness can have a protective effect over young people's behaviour (Hartup, 1996), parents have a valuable role to play in educating their children about sexual matters. It has been suggested that parents are the primary sex educators of their children (Turnbull, van Wersch & van Schaik, 2008). Technology and media sources are used to initiate and support communications about sexual matters between parents and their children (Goldman & Bradley, 2004; Krafchick & Biringen, 2002). This study aims to assess the facilitators and barriers that may affect communication regarding sexual matters within a sample of families living in the North East of England.

## Method

### Design

This study used the modified grounded-theory method of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the facilitators and barriers that allow for communication about sexual matters within

families.

### Participants

Parents and their children were recruited through purposive sampling from the boroughs of Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland in the UK. Families were recruited by word-of-mouth and by placing an advertisement in local libraries, sporting venues and locations where families were most likely to spend time together. In total, 20 families took part in the study. These were 20 mothers (mean age = 39, SD = 6), 6 fathers (mean age = 42, SD = 7), 16 adolescent males (mean age = 12, SD = 4) and 10 female adolescents (mean age = 14, SD = 7). No participants reported having any learning disabilities (such as dyslexia) and all spoke English as their native language.

### Materials and procedure

In order to identify and explore the facilitators and barriers for effective communication about sexual matters within families, a standard set of interview questions were used to gather data from the families who participated in the research. These questions were based on previous research findings concerning communication. As a result of the findings from earlier interviews, the set of questions were expanded upon and then used as a guide for data collection in later interviews, which provided the qualitative data for this research study.

## Results

### Facilitators

Various facilitators of communication were identified. Family relationships start with the foundation of love, trust, respect, commitment, support and stability. Parents show these qualities from early in their child's life, allowing for expansion and forming good relationships between family members. This was evident in this study in families who discussed sexual matters openly. It was found that trust was paramount. Numerous statements from children revealed that if they trusted their parents, then they were more likely to talk to them about sexual matters and their personal experiences. For example, a 14-year old boy reported:

*"When I tell my mum things I know my mum will keep it a secret. If I need to know something*

*that is private I know I can trust her as well not to say anything ... I can trust my mum and I know she will talk to me about things ... I am closer to my mum and I trust her a lot more."*

A further quote came from a brother (aged 15) and sister (aged 13):

*"For me it is because I can trust them and you talk to them on more of a personal level because they are your parents' (Son) ... 'You can trust your parents, but you can't trust your friends because they will talk about you behind your back; mum wouldn't do that to me."*  
(Daughter)

Trust inadvertently demonstrated honesty within families. This was illustrated by a 14-year old boy when referring to talking to his parents.

*"She (his Mother) probably knows more about it and I can trust her as well' (Son) ... 'I think you also know that when you do ask questions I am always going to tell you the truth' (Mother) ... 'Yes, that was also what I was trying to say, but it is also not just to do with being honest it is also that I trust you not to tell anybody else' (Son)... 'Aw, you trust me do you son?' (joking) (Mother) ... 'Well I have to really, you are my mum ... Pretty much the same reasons for talking to my mum; I can also trust my dad.'" (Son)*

It was found that children who regarded their parents as role models were likely to mimic their parents' behaviour by reciprocating the openness of discussing sexual matters within families. In addition, parents' knowledge also facilitated communications concerning sexual matters. It was revealed that if children perceived their parents to have the knowledge to teach them, communication regarding sexual topics were enhanced. This was emphasised by the occupation of parents as illustrated by a 12-year old son, who stated:

*"She (the Mother) is a nurse, so she knows about it and she has been there eighteen years, which is quite encouraging ... (talk to) mum, because dad's a butcher ... He is just thick! ... Being a nurse she would know stuff that the school wouldn't."*

A further quote to illustrate children's perception of their parents' knowledge came from the dialogue between a father and their 15-year old son:

*"He (the Father) just seems to be more knowledgeable about what I am going through' (Son) ... 'I think we can give him the knowledge that he needs know and then he will learn things for himself, so I think I do to equip him with the information that he needs to know or I would find out if I didn't know something that he asked or wanted to know more about." (Father)*

Parents also reported that if they did not know about particular sexual issues then they would find the required information so that they could educate their children. This was demonstrated by a mother who reported talking to other parents who were perhaps more knowledgeable than her. The mother reported:

*"... if I don't know the answer I will find it out and then explain it to you properly, don't I? I know other mums with kids in their early teens so I will drop it into the conversation when talking to them as though I don't know and then I will tell her so nobody knows that I am asking for her (the daughter). This way she doesn't get embarrassed and she still finds out the answer to what she asked me about." (Mother)*

Another parent reported:

*"I don't know if I would be able to answer all of their questions, but I would be honest with them if I did not know, but I would then either go to the library or on the Internet to find out the information they needed to know more about ... I think she comes in and asks questions, but then I will ask her questions to make sure she has the correct knowledge on something, but with him he is that bit older and has the knowledge so I concentrate more on the emotional side with him. I just know that as parents we have a responsibility to give our children the knowledge they need for becoming adults."*

These statements reinforce the role of parents in that they want the best for their children and are committed and supportive towards their needs. When parents spent time with their children, conversations about sexual matters

were increased. Dialogue from one family revealed:

*"We have this thing on a night time when we all eat together and we go around the table so everybody gets their chance to say what they have done in that day and what has made them laugh? You have to laugh every day because it is the... mother and son say at the same time: 'The Law'. This is a little thing that we do as a family and I suppose this is where I would say we talk openly about sexual matters in that it opens up the conversation to talk about anything and everything."*

Further quotes to illustrate how spending time together increased communication about sexual matters came from two fathers and their sons (both aged 15). One particular father and son reported:

*"I just talk in general to my dad about almost anything and everything ... when we are out biking' (Son) ... 'I think we tend to have quite a lot of conversations when it is just me and him when we are out bike riding ... we spend a lot of time together alone, and these conversations are mixed in with something else like riding a bike so it takes the emphasis of the fact that we are talking about sex ... masturbation ... that is one of the things we have had a good conversation about when we went biking at Whitby, so he does know things." (Father)*

Dialogue from a further family revealed that fathers and sons discuss sexual matters. They reported:

*"We were coming back from football that night' (Son) ... 'What was that about?' (Mother) ... 'Him asking about body piercing and why do people get them on their genitals and nipples' (Father) ... 'It can help increase the sensation when having sex, just for some people you know' (Son) Father and son laughed 'And how would you know?' (Mother) ... 'Dad told me' (Son) ... 'I told you I would answer any questions' (Father) ... 'You could have told me' (Mother) ... 'I did, it was months ago.'" (Father) ( The family laugh together.)*

Families in general were also found to discuss sexual matters when spending time together at

meal times and on an evening when watching television. One mother stated that conversations about sexual matters occurred '*...when watching TV together or whilst making meals.*' These conversations were expanded upon mainly between mothers and daughters when having quiet times together when they could be alone. A statement to illustrate this came from a mother that demonstrated the close relationship she had with her daughter. The mother reported:

*"I talk to her about things and she wants to talk to me. I know she had been out with her boyfriend last week and when she came home I was in bed reading and she came up and sat on the edge of the bed. I asked if she was alright and whether she had had a good time. She then just came and got into the bed for a cuddle and she cried for the next twenty minutes because they had finished. Now why she didn't just go to her room and cry by herself I don't know; I think she just prefers to share things with me. I feel it is quite an honour, but at the same time that is the way I have always been with her in the fact that I do openly discuss things with her, so that might be why she did it but I think we are quite close anyway."*

Formal sex education at school was also found to generate conversations about sexual matters in several families. Children reported talking to their mothers about sexual matters when coming home from school. This happened mostly as a result of mothers initiating these conversations by asking children to identify what sex education their children had learnt. This provided children with the opportunity to elaborate on things they had been told, and allowed parents to explain in more detail than teachers.

### Barriers

The research also identified barriers that prevented sexual matters being discussed within families.

Discussions on sexual matters between parents and their children were restricted if children perceived their parents to not have the up-to-date knowledge to teach them. A good example of this lack of education was expressed by two brothers (aged 13 and 15) who reported:

*"I don't want to talk to them about sex. They can't even get the terminology right" (Son 2) ... 'Don't get us wrong we love our parents but they do come across as rather out-dated' (Son 1) ... 'Yes, like something from the ice-age' (Son 2) ... Laughter ... 'Sorry that is a family joke. We labelled dad as the mammoth off ice-age because he is starting to put on weight and he has too much hair on his head.'" (Son 1) (More laughter)*

A 'lack of sexual knowledge in parents indirectly led to embarrassment, which-in turn-affected children as they too were embarrassed when discussing sexual topics in the company of their parents. This was demonstrated by dialogue of one of the families:

*"Mum gets embarrassed talking to us about sex" (Son) ... 'I do not' (Mother) ... 'I think sometimes it is embarrassing; we are just unsure of the terminology you use, because it was different for us and you lot are a lot more open about things than we were.'" (Father)*

Regardless of knowledge, other parents were also found to experience embarrassment. As in the family with the two brothers as discussed above who stated:

*"Aw that would be so bad. Mother talking about sex!" (Son 2) ... "Dad talking about sex!" (Son 1) ... "I think they are embarrassed" (Son 2) ... "No, you mean they are an embarrassment when talking about sex" (Son 1) ... "Dad does and I think that is to do with our embarrassing scenario when I was 11. Poor man, but mum just puts her head down and shuffles away." (Son 1)*

The mother from this family suggested this embarrassment was based on how she was taught when she was younger. However, the mother said she would talk to her children if they '*... wanted to talk*' to her, but agrees with her sons that communications about sexual matters ceased after the following embarrassing event:

*"I can only really remember one thing which generated conversation and that was when they went up into secondary school. My eldest came*

*home and was quite quiet, but we knew that he had had his first sex education lesson. I told my husband with him being of the same sex that it was his job. So anyway he went and asked our son about school and he mentioned this video on sex. My husband had sort of asked what things were shown on the video and our son had said 'a penis, oh and boobs'. My husband replied well you know what these are; you have seen me and your mum naked. The son replied 'yes well this woman on the video had proper boobs, not like mum's'. Well I was mortified, my husband laughed hysterically and our son's last words were 'giving birth is also disgusting and I do not want to have this conversation again'. Since then we have respected his opinion and never questioned him in such a way."*

The embarrassment felt by children was also heightened when parents asked probing questions about their personal relationships. This was illustrated in the two families who did not discuss sexual matters openly. One particular family revealed:

*"Yes, possibly, but I think you get embarrassed because of the questions I ask when you tell me things' (Mother) ... 'Yes, I know but you keep nosing into my private life and I don't know what to say." (Son)*

It appeared that when parents asked their children questions about sexual matters that this was seen as an invasion of their privacy, which consequently acted as a barrier for discussing sexual matters openly within families.

Parents who were perceived to be controlling and domineering towards their children also prevented these matters being discussed. In an interview with a mother and daughter, the daughter firstly claimed she did not discuss sexual matters with her mother. However, when being challenged by her mother in a sharp tone and condemning manner, the daughter changed her view that reflected those of her mother. The daughter appeared embarrassed throughout much of the interview and looked towards her mother for approval before answering questions. A similar case of dominant behaviour was seen in an interview between a mother and their son whereby the son claimed to not discussing sexual matters

with his mother and felt embarrassed when the topic came up in his mother's presence. Although the mother disagreed and claimed to discuss sexual matters openly with her son she passed comments, such as:

*"I know I might sound like I control what he learns but it isn't like that ... I think the thing is I am a bit of a dictator."*

The mother demonstrated her dominance over her son throughout the interview by answering most of the questions or by speaking on behalf of her son. This could be seen as a supportive and protective act on behalf of the mother; however, it appeared to make the son uncomfortable because he did not know how to answer the questions, which is why he only gave short replies to the questions.

A final barrier for not discussing sexual matters openly within the family was the pressure of younger siblings being present. One of the girls who participated in the study reported that her younger brother 'interrupts the conversations' (daughter, aged 15). Parents, on the other hand, felt that communications about sexual matters were restricted because the content of conversations they had with their older children would be inappropriate in front of younger siblings. One mother reported:

*"We are sometimes restricted on what we discuss with me also having only an eight-year old daughter. There is no way we could talk about some things with her being around so I think sometimes the moment has passed if they mention something and I can't elaborate on it because of my 8-year old daughter and her friends being in the house."*

To overcome these barriers parents would resume conversations with their older children at a time when they could be alone. For example, one mother revealed:

*"This house is very busy in that there is always lots going on, so people are coming in all the time, not just children it can be adults picking up one of the kids for football or something like that, but if I was talking to her about something I would stop talking if someone came into the room because what we are talking about is personal, but we will talk about it later. I also go*

*to bed early and when I tuck her in I will ask if there is anything she wants to talk about, so we would come back to what we were talking about and discuss it in more detail then."*

A further quote illustrates that parents talk to their older children about sexual matters when younger siblings are not present came from a mother who revealed:

*"I get chance to talk about things on a night time. We have half-an-hour when your brothers have gone to bed, so we generally talk about things like this then."*

## Discussion

One of the most important findings from this research was that children want to talk to their parents about sex and sexual matters just as parents want to talk and educate their children about sexual topics. Although the latter finding contradicts previous research findings (Burgess et al 2005; Dilorio et al 1996; Feldman et al 2000; Kahlbaugh et al 1997; King & Lorusso, 1997; Lefkowitz et al 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Jordan et al 2000; Kakavoulis, 2001; Walker, 2001) it has been suggested that parents are the primary sex educators of their children (Turnbull et al 2008) based on the emotional and physical support they provide to prepare their children for adult life (Novilla et al 2006).

### Facilitators that influence communication

Firstly, parents' openness and honesty about sexual matters with their children together with an apparent close and trusting relationship between parents and their children. The openness and honesty was reciprocated by children who were then more likely to talk to their parents seeing them as a role model and trusted companion. These findings support previous research, which emphasised the valuable role parents can have helping their children develop, grow and remain healthy through the close and trusted relationship they have developed. Furthermore, Bowlby (1973, 1979) suggested that the attachment parents have with their children could influence their cognitions and shape their behaviour towards relationships in the future.

Secondly, parents' knowledge was revealed as an important facilitator. Some parents admitted to not having the up-to-date

knowledge to teach their children, but they still wanted to ensure their children had the sexual knowledge they needed. As a means of achieving this, parents would seek the information for themselves first. It is understandable that when parents play this supporting role a closer relationship will be formed between parents and their children.

Thirdly, this research revealed that sexual matters were discussed more openly when parents and their children spent time together. Results showed that when spending time together at mealtimes, sharing a sporting activity or having private conversations together reinforced the close relationship that they shared. Although it was also found that television and the formal sex education provided at school generated conversions about sexual matters, parents were reported to provide their children with a secure environment where they could openly discuss sexual matters.

### Barriers that influence communication

Four barriers that inhibited conversations on sex and relationships were identified. Although a lack of parental knowledge restricted communication of sexual matters, this was amplified because it caused embarrassment within families. This not only applied to parents, but also to the children. Although parents suggested this embarrassment stemmed from the way they were taught by their own parents, children reported becoming embarrassed when parents asked personal questions about their private relationships. In one sense it is difficult for children to talk about their personal relationships if they do not have a close relationship with their parent(s) or if they get embarrassed when talking about personal relationships with their parents. However, in another sense parents may ask questions to identify if their children need support or help in understanding what they are experiencing. In either case, it is important to realise that the embarrassment felt is moving from one generation to the next, which could have implications when the children become parents themselves.

Dominant and controlling behaviour of parents also inhibits discussions of sexual matters within families. In the present study it was shown that if parents had these

mannerisms, their children were shy and reserved, only giving socially desirable answers because they were uncomfortable to express themselves. Relating this to discussing sexual matters, it would come as no surprise that children may refrain from discussing sensitive issues associated with sex in case they were condemned or ridiculed by their parents for doing so. This may also have implications for the relationship children have with their parents in the future, as children are not being provided with the knowledge that allows them to make responsible choices and decisions over their sexual health and personal relationships.

Younger siblings were also found to affect conversations concerning sexual matters, acting as a barrier for open communication within families. However, avoiding subjects of a sexual nature in front of younger siblings could perhaps not only prevent them learning from older siblings, but prevents an open culture for discussing sexual matters within families.

## Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that parents do discuss sexual matters with their children. Close and connected family relationships allow for a trusting relationship to develop and for sexual matters to be discussed openly. Although this research has identified and explored the facilitators and barriers that influence this communication, future research could focus on the age at which children want to talk to their parents. By doing this it would be possible to concentrate on the factors that allow for sexual matters to be discussed at an earlier age when children and young people are developing and at a time they are most likely to benefit from communication with their parents.

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