Why Is It So Hard? Promoting Open Conversations Between Parents and Adolescents

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Purpose: Though rates of adolescent pregnancy are decreasing, sexually transmitted diseases, human trafficking, and dating violence during adolescence are on the rise. Helping adolescents make healthy sexual choices has never been more important, but conversations between adolescents and parents or guardians on this topic are often difficult. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss findings from two qualitative studies. The purpose of the first study was to determine the perspectives of adults who parent, teach and/or provide healthcare or community support for underserved adolescents to determine the most effective ways to help parents hold open interactive conversations with adolescents about health-promoting sexual decision-making. Information from this study was used to guide the next study with young adults. The purpose of this study was to determine the most effective ways to facilitate meaningful conversations, including conversation barriers and facilitators, between parents and adolescents about healthy adolescent sexual decision making.

Methods: In the first study with adults who parent, teach and/or provide healthcare or community support for underserved adolescents, ten women and five men were interviewed separately. The interviews were professionally transcribed, then coded, line by line using the MaxQDA software. Findings from this research were shared with participants in the second study to initiate discussions. In this study, focus groups were conducted with young adults (recent adolescents). These focus groups also were audiotaped, transcribed and coded line by line using the MaxQDA software. Data from both studies were analyzed independently by the principle investigator and two research assistants to determine relevant themes.

Results: Facilitators and strategies that promote adolescent/parent communication about healthy sexual decision-making were identified. Some of these include starting meaningful conversations about sexuality early in children’s lives, recognizing the most opportune times and places for these conversations, responding to cues, being available for conversations about all topics and showing respect for each other even when opinions vary. Barriers which inhibit meaningful conversations were identified as well. These include adolescent and parental dilemmas, such as lack of knowledge, being role-models for children, and reticence to reveal personal information.

Conclusion: Some parents do not recognize the need for open conversations about healthy sexual decision making, but many do, and yet struggle. For both parents and adolescents, having open conversations about healthy sexual decision making involves risk-taking. The costs of these conversations, including the risks of loss of acceptance, power and respect, of being rejected, or criticized are often weighed with the benefits that might be gained. When the costs are too great open conversations are inhibited. Strategies that help parents see the benefits and counteract the risks will be discussed.

Title:
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Abstract Summary:
Communication about healthy sexual decision-making between parents and adolescents can be challenging. Findings from two studies will provide insight and encouragement for “Healthy Sex Chats”.

Content Outline:
A. Introduction

1. Open communication about healthy sexual decision making between parents and adolescents can decrease risky behaviors
2. Conversations between parents and adolescents about healthy sexual decision making can be challenging and, as a result, often do not occur

B. Research: qualitative

1. Methods: interviews with individuals who work with underserved adolescents and focus groups with young adults
2. Results:
   1. Barriers to open conversations, or “Healthy Sex Chats” identified
   2. Facilitators to promote open conversations or “Healthy Sex Chats” identified

C. Conclusions:

1. “Healthy Sex Chats” require risk-taking for both parents and adolescents
2. Evaluations of costs and benefits related to the risks of personal exposure and the loss of relationship (respect and acceptance) often play a major role.
3. Promoting benefits of “Healthy Sex Chats” at every opportunity is essential

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Professional Experience: Dr. Weiss is an associate professor, at the College of Nursing at the University of Central Florida. Her research interest is in adolescent sexual decision making, particularly teen pregnancy prevention in underserved populations. She became a Chiron Mentee through Sigma Theta Tau in 2006 to assist in this work. Previously she has studied decision making in other vulnerable populations including adults with chronic diseases, hurricane survivors in Honduras and incarcerated women. Dr. Weiss has conducted research examining the views of high risk adolescent females regarding sexual decision making and with funding from the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners studied the views of rural ninth grade females. In addition to teaching she is the Director of the Doctor of Nursing Practice Primary Care Program at the UCF College of Nursing. She has practiced as a nurse practitioner with under-served populations for over 20 years.

Author Summary: Dr. Weiss is an associate professor at the College of Nursing at the University of Central Florida, where she is also the Director of the Doctor of Nursing Practice Primary Care Program. Her current research is focused on promoting open communication about healthy sexual decision making between parents and adolescents.