

Sexual Communication with Parents and Friends: Influences on Adolescent Sexual Behaviour in Urban Poor Communities in Ghana.

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Abstract: Communication about sex and sexual issues has been identified as important in promoting responsible sexual behaviors among adolescents, including delaying sexual debut and promoting contraceptive use. Communication about sex and adolescent sexual behavior in urban poor communities were examined using data from 326 adolescents in a survey by RIPS, University of Ghana. Adolescents' self reported discussions about sex with their parents (mothers and fathers) and friends were linked to their sexual behaviors (ever kissed; ever fondled or been fondled; ever watched a pornographic movie, and ever had sexual intercourse). Univariate analyses showed higher frequencies of sexual communication between adolescents and their mothers and friends compared to fathers. Bivariate and binary logistic regression analyses showed sexual communication with parents to be significantly associated with less risky sexual behavior compared to communication with friends. Therefore, parent-adolescent sex communication need to be integrated into programmes aimed at promoting responsible adolescent sexual behavior.

Introduction

Adolescence marks a period of considerable experimentation and is characterized by increases in risky behaviors including alcohol, drug use, petty crime and risky sexual behaviors (Donovan & Jessor 1985). A quarter of the world's population is made up of adolescents and young adults, meaning they make up a sizable proportion of the global population (UNFPA, 2012). More than 85% of the global adolescent population is found in developing countries with more than one-third of the total population of sub-Saharan Africa aged 10-24 years (Blum & Nelson-Mmari, 2004; UNFPA, 2012). The consequent dilemma of adolescent risk taking, especially sexual risk taking is disproportionately a problem in sub-Saharan Africa. Available evidence in the sub-region suggests that adolescents in poor urban settings are particularly vulnerable to risky sexual behaviors and poor reproductive health outcomes (Zulu, Dodoo & Chika-Ezeh, 2002; Dodoo et al., 2007). Rapid urbanization coupled with the increasing urban poverty in sub Saharan Africa may therefore expose more adolescents to risky sexual behaviors.

Available evidence suggests that frequent, open and positive sexual communication between adolescents, their parents, teachers as well as peers decreases sexual-risk taking behaviors and promotes positive sexual behavioral outcomes including delaying sexual debut and promoting contraceptive use (Bastien, Kajula & Muhwezi, 2011; Kumi-Kyereme et al., 2007). However research evidence in sub-Saharan shows that communication with adolescents about sex is generally low across countries and fraught with discomfort and characterized by indirect verbal

cues, warnings and threats (Biddlecom, Awusabo-Asare & Bankole, 2009; Kumi-Kyereme et al., 2007; Bastien, Kajula & Muhwezi, 2011). Research efforts on adolescent-parent sexual communication in the sub-region have also focused on adolescent-mother communication while neglecting the influence of sexual communication with both parents on adolescent sexual behavior. A fundamental reason cited for excluding fathers regards their purported absenteeism, even though available evidence shows that fathers control many decisions in the house including decisions about household welfare and reproduction including regulating ‘unpartnered adolescent fertility’ (Richardson, 1995; Engle, 1997; Dodoo, 1998).

This study therefore examines the influence of adolescent sexual communication with parents (both mothers and fathers) and friends on adolescent sexual behavior in poor urban communities in Ghana. The study addresses three key research questions: (1) what is the extent of sexual communication between adolescents and their parents (both mothers and fathers) and friends in poor urban communities in Ghana? (2) Is there an association between communication about sex with parents and friends and adolescent sexual behavior? (3) Does sexual communication with parents and friends have different influences on adolescent sexual behavior?

Data and Methods

The data used for this study are part of a longitudinal study conducted by the Regional Institute for Population Studies, University of Ghana on urban health and poverty in three urban poor communities in Accra (RIPS survey, 2011). Three hundred and twenty six adolescent participants in the second wave of this survey were selected for this study. This survey included questions about who adolescents discussed issues about sex with; and the response options included mothers, fathers, friends, teachers and religious leaders, to name a few. This study focused on the discussions about sexual and sexual concerns between adolescents and their parents (mothers and fathers) and friends which were used as the independent variables. Adolescents were also asked if they had ever had sex, viewed pornographic movies, kissed members of the opposite sex and fondled or been fondled by members of the opposite sex. The responses to these questions were dichotomous; “Yes” and “No” and these were used as the dependent variables of this study. The socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents and their households including the sex, highest education and living arrangements of adolescents are used as control variables in this study.

With regards to the analytic approach of this study, univariate analyses (frequencies and percentages) was conducted to show the proportion of adolescents who had discussions about sex with mothers, fathers and friends. Bivariate analysis was also conducted by cross tabulating the independent variables and control variables against the dependent variables. The chi-square statistic was used to test for associations at the bivariate level and the test for significance was done at $p \leq 0.05$ significance level. At the multivariate level, binary logistic regression modules have been employed given that each of the dependent variables is dichotomous.

Preliminary results and discussions

The results, as indicated in Table 1, show that a higher proportion of the adolescents had discussions about sexual issues with their mothers, followed by friends while those who had discussions with their fathers formed the lowest proportion of adolescents in the study. A study by Amoran, Anadeko & Adeniyi (2005) also found that mothers communicated more frequently about sex and sexuality with adolescents than fathers. This high frequency of sexual discussion between adolescents and their mothers may be influenced by the primary role of mothers in child rearing and caring in sub-Saharan Africa (Oppong, 2001). An increasing number of women in poor urban communities in Ghana are raising children alone due to marital disruption and child bearing outside marriage (Apt 1997; Badasu 2004).

The preliminary results of this study found statistically significant associations between sexual communication with parents and friends and the sexual behavior of adolescents (see Table 2). The results in Table 2, however, indicates that sexual communication with parents was significantly associated with less risky sexual behavior compared to sexual communication with friends. For example, a higher proportion of adolescents who discussed sexual issues with their parents only consistently reported that they had not kissed a member of the opposite sex; had not fondled or been fondled by a member of the opposite sex and had not had sexual intercourse. Sexual communication between adolescents and their friends was negatively associated with all the adolescent sexual behaviors.

The results of this study indicate that sexual communication with parents and friends do not have the same influence on adolescent sexual behavior. In addition, the findings of this study suggest that some sexual communication, especially communication with friends could have undesirable influences on the sexual behavior of adolescents.

Conclusion

This study points to the need to involve parents more in discussions about sex with adolescents and to integrate parent-adolescent communication about sexual issues into programmes that are aimed at promoting responsible sexual behavior among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 1.1. Frequency of Adolescent sexual communication with Parents and friends

Sources of Sexual Communication	Frequency	Percent
Communication with Fathers Only		
Yes	16	4.9
No	310	95.1
Communication with Mothers Only		
Yes	116	35.6
No	210	64.4
Communication with both Parents		
Yes	30	9.2
No	296	90.8
Communication with Friends Only		
Yes	91	27.9
No	235	72.1
Sample Size(N)	326	100

Source: Urban Health and Poverty Survey (RIPS, 2011)

Table 1.2. Sexual Communication and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Sexual Communication	Watched Pornographic Movies		Sample Size (N)	Chi-Square	P-value
Both Parents (Mothers & Fathers)	Yes	No			
Yes	40.0	60.0	326	3.093	0.059*
No	56.8	43.2			
Friends Only					
Yes	62.6	37.4	326	2.813	0.060*
No	52.3	47.7			
Sexual Communication	Ever had Sexual Intercourse				
Both Parents (Mothers & Fathers)	Yes	No			
Yes	36.7	63.3	326	7.582	0.006***
No	62.5	37.5			
Friends Only					
Yes	69.2	30.8	326	4.368	0.024**
No	56.6	43.4			
Sexual Communication	Kissed a member of opposite sex				
Both Parents (Mothers & Fathers)	Yes	No			
Yes	46.7	53.3	326	5.086	0.022**
No	67.2	32.8			
Friends Only					
Yes	73.6	26.4	326	3.830	0.033**
No	62.1	37.9			
Sexual Communication	Fondled/been fondled by opposite sex				
Both Parents (Mothers & Fathers)	Yes	No			
Yes	43.3	56.7	326	3.037	0.062*
No	59.8	40.2			
Friends Only					
Yes	64.8	35.2	326	2.230	0.085*
No	55.7	44.3			

Source: Urban Health and Poverty Survey (RIPS, 2011)

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