

Influence of Parent-child Communication Patterns on Adolescents Sexual Behaviour

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Abstract

This study investigated the different communication patterns adopted by parents in discussion with their children with the view to ascertaining the influence of the communication patterns on adolescents' sexual behaviour. The study adopted the survey research design. The population consisted of all adolescent students in Ekiti State secondary schools and their parents. The sample comprised of 600 adolescent students and 600 literate parents selected using multistage sampling technique from three local government areas in Ekiti State. Data were collected using two instruments developed by the researchers, namely, "Adolescent Sexual Communication and Sexual Behaviour Scale" (ASCSBS) and Parental Sexual Communication Pattern Scale" (PSCPS). The two instruments were content validated and reliability coefficient of 0.78 and 0.82 were obtained for PSCPS and ASCSBS respectively. The data collected were analysed using analysis of variance, chi-square, cluster analysis, simple percentages and weighted average. The result of the study showed that parents adopted four sexual communication patterns namely; permissible, opportunistic, reactive and avoidant patterns of sexual communication. The results also revealed that the permissible pattern of sexual communication was the most prevalent among the four identified patterns and that mothers communicated sexual issues more than fathers with their adolescent children. The study recommended that parents should be trained and sensitised on some intervention strategies to improve on their sexual communication with their children.

Key words: Parental-child communication, Sexuality, Communication patterns, Adolescent, Sexual behaviour.

Introduction

Communication encompasses the entire environment; the way of dressing, walking, greeting, facial expressions among the people and so on. All these communicate or send one message or the other to the people around about the individual's values and intelligence, moral uprightness,

attitudes and behaviours. Perhaps the most difficult, yet an essential aspect of being human is the ability to communicate with other human beings. It is difficult to understand individuals unless the person is willing and able to communicate with words as well as actions. What makes communication difficult as noted by

Oladepo (2008) is that it could be wrongly done or misinterpreted which will make the need for effective communication skills important.

Home is the first contact of every child. The nature of communication and training that a child receives at home, especially during the developmental stages according to psychologists, goes a long way in determining his behaviour at adult life. The social learning and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 1999) explained that human beings learn through observation, personal vicarious experience, and interaction with their environment.

Behavioural consequences and feedback from the surrounding social and physical environment, and the way an individual interprets these consequences and feedback, determine future action. As the nature of human beings develops, children learn more from their parents and imitate their behaviour. They listen to what parents say and have high dependency on their parents. This is also in line with Sigmund Freud's assertion that a person's unique character type develops in childhood majorly from the nature of parent-child interaction and also from the standard of his/her social class (Freud, 1923). When such a person becomes an adolescent, he/she is seen to give more attention to relate with people outside.

Like other aspects of communication, sexual communication is an essential aspect of being human, which people (especially parent to children) find difficult to do. Carrera, Baker and McCombs (2003) argued further that most adolescents seem not to be comfortable talking about sexuality to their parents or teachers probably because of some cultural barriers and the nature of the relationship that has been established between them and their parents or teachers. It could be

true that most adults especially parents may want their adolescents to have sex education, to know about abstinence, contraception, and how to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) but may often have difficulty communicating about sex.

Scale and Everly (2007) however noted that the dynamics of parents-child relations and communications could however be greatly influenced by culture and social environment. They opined that parent-child communication on sexual issues remains a challenging issue in many sub-Saharan African countries as the social milieu in many traditional communities still constrains such communication.

Initiating conversations about the sexual issues may also be difficult for parents in such communities as they may be unsure as to how to approach such issues.

A study on some sexual communication styles revealed that mothers are effective communicators (Rosenthal & Feldman, 2000). They posit that their styles are dependent on some factors, such as who initiated and maintained sexual communication, the comfort level of mother and the teenager, the frequency of sexual communications, the context in which communications took place and the topics to be discussed and avoided (Rosenthal & Feldman, 2000). The styles thus isolated were avoidant, reactive, opportunistic, child-initiated and mutually interactive. It is these same styles that the researchers adopted in this work with some modifications.

The avoidant style of communication is characterized by both parents and adolescents being uncomfortable with discussing sexual topics and these discussions being avoided, cut short or resented in generalised non-personal terms when

they did occur. Feelings and psychological issues are rarely discussed, the emphasis being on biological or factual materials. Parents using this style tend to reassure themselves that adequate sex education had occurred at school.

The reactive communicators are parents who bring up sex-related discussions when a pressing need is perceived on the basis of the child's behaviour, for example when the teenager appeared to be getting serious with a romantic partner (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Generally, parents do not feel particularly confident about these discussions, they fear alienating their teenager, but are concerned to get a message across.

Some parents could also be referred to as opportunistic communicators. These, according to Rosenthal and Feldman (2000), formed the largest category of mothers communicating with their adolescents, but did so frequently. They sought share occasions to initiate discussions, such as television programmes, family events and the stimulus of sex education occurring at school. They wove their communication in with other activities (such as preparing meal), brings up issues almost as incidental as a way of dissipating anxiety and embarrassment. They talk about feeling as opinions and cover a broad range of topics.

At times some children especially the extroverts' or the highly inquisitive ones would be the ones to initiate discussions on sexual-issues, this communications style is referred to as child-initiated. Parents in this category would wait until their adolescents bring up the topic before discussion. They believe that when the child is ready to engage in sex-related discussion, the conversation would be more fruitful than if they are the parent-initiated.

Lastly, there is the mutual interactive group in which sex-related conversation could be initiated by the adolescent or the parent and both parties will be comfortable about pursuing the conversations. This pattern is generally characterised by openness, intimacy and emotionally based discussions.

Purpose of the study

Overtime, most of efforts on sexual communication are targeted at teachers, learners and other educational practitioners leaving out a very important group-the parents. There is therefore the need to investigate the nature of parental involvement in sexual communication with the adolescent and influences of such communication on adolescent sexual behaviour so as identify the necessary interventions needed for the parents. Specifically the objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the patterns of parents-child sexual communication;
2. Examine the relationship between parent-child sexual communication and adolescents sexual behaviour; and
3. Determine which of the parents communicate more on sexual issues with the adolescent.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:

1. How do parents communicate sexual issues with their adolescents?
2. Which of the parents communicate more on sexual issues with their adolescents?

Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between parents' sexual communication patterns and the

perceived adolescents' sexual behaviour.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between the sexual communication by mothers and the actual sexual behaviour reported by the adolescent.

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between the sexual communication by fathers and the actual sexual behaviour reported by the adolescent.

Method

The study adopted the survey research design. The population consisted of all the adolescent students in Ekiti State secondary schools and their parents. The study sample comprised of 600 adolescent students and 600 literate parents selected from three local government areas in Ekiti State using multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using two instruments developed by the researchers. The instruments are

“Adolescent Sexual Communication and Sexual Behaviour Scale” (ASCSBS) and Parental Sexual Communication Pattern Scale” (PSCPS). The two instruments were content validated and reliability coefficient of 0.78 and 0.82 were obtained for PSCPS and ASCSBS respectively. PSCPS elicited information on parents' demographic data, patterns of sexual communication and parents' perception of their children's sexual behaviour while ASCSBS elicited information on nature and scope of parental sexual communication with the adolescents and types of sexual behaviour exhibited by the adolescents. Data were analysed using, chi-square, cluster analysis, simple percentages and weighted average.

Results

Research Question 1: How do parents communicate sexual issues with their adolescents?

Table 1: Cluster analysis of Parents Sexual Communication Patterns

	Cluster	Identification	Frequency	%
	1	Opportunistic	111	20.15
	2	Avoidant	118	21.42
	3	Reactive	124	22.50
	4	Permissible	198	35.94
Total	4		551	100

From table 1 above, cluster analysis classified all the parents under the study into four sexual communication groups and assembled the number of the respondents belonging to each of groups. Out of the 551 valid respondents, 111(20.15%) identified with opportunistic pattern, 118 of them representing 21.42% of the respondents belonged to the avoidant group. Reactive pattern had 124 respondents which was equivalent to 22.50% of the respondents and lastly,

198 parents representing 35.94% of the total sample identified with permissible pattern. From the results presented, the permissible sexual communication pattern was the most prevalent method adopted by parents in communicating sexual matters with their children.

Research Question 2: Who communicate more on sexual issues with the adolescents between fathers and mothers?

Table 2: Distribution of Fathers and Mothers by Self-rated Sexual Communication Pattern

Levels of Sexual Communication with Adolescents	Fathers				Mothers			
	F	%	Mean	Weighted Average	F	%	Mean	Weighted Average
Low Communication	272	47.2	7.03	17.24	229	39.8	12.25	21.28
Moderate Communication	216	37.5	22.24		222	38.7	22.89	
High Communication	86	14.9	36.59		123	21.4	35.18	
No Response	2	0.3			2	0.3		
Total	576	100			576	100		

The results from Table 2 above showed that the children rated their parents as low communicators. 47.2% agreed that their fathers were low sexual communicators while 39.8% believed that their mothers were low sexual communicators. At the moderate levels, adolescents claimed that they received sexual communication from their mothers (38.7%) than from their fathers (37.5%). 21.4% of the mothers were high communicators as against 14.9% from the fathers' group. Equally, the

average mean of communication of the fathers (17.24) is less than the one for the mothers (21.28). It could, therefore, be concluded that mothers communicated sexual matters with their adolescent children more than the fathers.

Research Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between the sexual communication by the parents and their perceived adolescent sexual behaviour

Table 3: Relationship between Parent's Sexual Communication and Perceived Sexual Behaviours of Adolescents.

Perceived Adolescent Sexual Behaviour	Parents' Sexual Communication			Total	df	X ²	p
	Low	Moderate	High				
Low Risk	17 (7.08%)	119 (49.58%)	104 (43.33%)	240 (100.00%)	4	30.14	<0.05
Moderate Risk	16 (8.47%)	153 (80.53%)	21 (11.05%)	190 (100.00%)			
High Risk	26 (21.49)	25 (20.66%)	70 (57.85%)	121 (100.00%)			
Total	59	297	195	551			

A chi+-square value of 30.14 was obtained at $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) from Table 3 above. Since the p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis cannot be upheld. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected and it was therefore concluded that there was a significant relationship between the

sexual communication by the parents and the sexual behaviour of adolescents perceived by the parents.

Research Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between the sexual communication by mothers and the actual sexual behaviour reported by the adolescents.

Table 4: Association between Adolescents' Sexual Behaviour and Mothers' Sexual Communication

Adolescent Sexual Behaviour	Mothers' Sexual Communication			Total	df	X ²	p
	Low	Moderate	High				
Low Risk	16 (43.24%)	13 (35.14%)	8 (21.62%)	37 (100.00%)	4	5.22	0.265
Moderate Risk	25 (29.41%)	38 (44.71%)	22 (25.88%)	85 (100.00%)			
High Risk	188 (41.41%)	173 (38.10%)	93 (20.49%)	454 (100.00%)			
Total	229	224	123	576			

Table 4 above showed that a chi-square value of 5.22 was obtained at $p = 0.265$ ($p > 0.05$). Since the p value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis was accepted. It could therefore be concluded that there was no significant relationship between mothers' sexual communication and

the actual sexual behaviour of adolescents

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between the sexual communication by fathers and the actual sexual behaviour reported by the adolescents.

Table 5: Adolescents' Sexual Behaviour and Fathers' Sexual Communication

Adolescent Sexual Behaviour	Fathers' Sexual Communication			Total	df	X ²	p
	Low	Moderate	High				
Low Risk	14 (38.89%)	12 (33.33%)	10 (27.78%)	36 (100.00%)	4	31.97	0.05
Moderate Risk	21 (24.42%)	39 (45.35%)	26 (30.23%)	86 (100.00%)			
High Risk	237 (52.20%)	165 (36.35%)	52 (11.45%)	454 (100.00%)			
Total	272	216	88	576			

It could be seen from the above that the p value is less than 0.05 and the chi-square value is 31.97. Since the p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was upheld that there was significant relationship between the sexual communication by the fathers and the actual sexual behaviours of adolescents.

Findings from this study revealed that four communication patterns were adopted by parents to communicate sexual issues with their children. The patterns were named permissible, opportunistic, avoidant and reactive patterns of sexual communication. Three of these patterns, opportunistic, avoidant and reactive, are similar to those identified by Rosenthal and Feldman (2000) and they have been described earlier.

Discussion

The permissible group is characterized by open communication in which all members of the family are encouraged to participate and any topic could be discussed. The atmosphere at home gives room for sexual discussions which could be initiated by either the child or the parents. This pattern shares the features of both child-initiated and mutually interactive styles identified by Rosenthal and Feldman (2000). Like the conversation orientation pattern rooted in the work of Scales and Everly (2007), permissible pattern is equally characterized by the frequent, spontaneous interactions with every family member, unconstrained by topics discussed or time spent in discussion.

The finding revealed that permissible sexual communication pattern was the most prevalent among parents. Most parents reported that they allowed and created time for discussions on sexual issues with their adolescents. This result is contrary to what Moore and Peterson (2008) obtained in a similar study. They found out in their own study that most parents fell under the opportunistic communication style. Since things are changing, perhaps it might be that parents especially the younger ones were seeing reasons why they should be involved in the sex education of their children. They might have realized that there was need for every parent to create enough room to discuss sexual issues with the adolescents to prevent the negative consequences of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

It is important to note that before communication could be categorized as high, moderate or low, its occurrence, frequency and nature should have been considered. Parent sexual communication was measured with questions on ten topics bordering on sexual partners, sexual decision-

making, save sex, abortion, pregnancy, abstinence, contraceptive use, masturbation and issue of prevention of HIV/AIDS. The Findings of the study revealed that mothers were better sexual communicators than fathers. This is consisted with the study conducted by Kahn, Kelvin & Roberts (2000) in which adolescents' evaluations of their parents as sex educators varied as a function of the gender of the parent, with mothers being evaluated more positively than fathers. The children in this study rated their mothers as better sexual communicators both at moderate and high levels. This could be because mothers seem to be naturally closer to the children being the first nurse. Some theorists suggest that gender differences occur because mothers are better at communicating in general. They equally opined that mothers are the agents of intimacy, and /or because mothers can discuss sexual matters more safely than father. Fox and Inazu (2010); and Rosenthal and Feldman (2000) equally found that mothers are more likely than fathers to talk about sex and birth control with their children.

Furthermore the result revealed that there was significant relationship between parent-child sexual communication and adolescent sexual behaviour as perceived and reported by the parents. Most parents rated themselves as moderate or high sexual communicators and invariably perceived sexual behaviour of their adolescents as low or moderate in terms of risk. Consequently, parents by implication agreed that their sexual communication had a positive influence on sexual behaviour of their adolescents. The parents' assertion was in agreement with some studies that found more parent-adolescent sexual communication to be related to fewer sexual behaviors (Fox & Inazu, 2010; Peterson, Rollins, & Thomas,

1995) though some other studies found that more parent-adolescent sexual communication was related to risky sexual behaviors

From the adolescent's point of view, it was found out that there was no significant relationship between mother-child sexual communication and adolescents' sexual behaviour. It was observed from the results that despite the fact that mothers were rated as higher communicators than fathers, risky sexual behaviour still occurs among adolescents of whose parents were low, moderate and high communicators. This was an indication that the sexual communication engaged in by some parents was not effective enough to positively influence their children's sexual behaviour or those who communicated sexual issues with their children did not really use effective patterns of communication. The result revealed further that there was significant relationship between father-child sexual communication and adolescents' sexual behaviour. Fathers had earlier been tagged low sexual communicators and the adolescents' sexual behaviour tended towards high risky. In a similar research conducted by Miller, McCoy, Olson and Wallace (1996) parents acknowledged that sexuality was a difficult topic, but fathers felt these difficulties more keenly and tended to leave it to the mothers. This would not likely produce a positive outcome as it was obvious in the sexual behaviour reported by the adolescents.

Conclusion

The study concluded that parents adopted four types of communication patterns to communicate sexual issues with their adolescents. These were permissible, opportunistic, avoidant and reactive patterns. The study also identified that mothers are better sexual

communicators than fathers. It could be concluded from this study that parent-child sexual communication patterns had no significant influence on adolescents' sexual behaviour.

Recommendations

In view of the implications of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are considered necessary.

- Parents should establish good relationship which allows for free flow of communication with their children right from childhood. This will help children to acquire good sexual values right from childhood and invariably enhance the involvement of parents in vital decision making by the adolescents.
- Parents should de-emphasize abstinence only message and develop a positive attitude towards comprehensive sex education.
- Government with the aid of international organizations should organize seminars and workshops for parents to be actively involved in sex education of their children being the first contact in the children's lives.
- The school counsellor should also liaise with voluntary organizations and health professionals to organize health talk on sex education.
- Government could run adult literacy centers which would run programs on sex education. Incentives could be introduced to attract parents to partake in such programs.
- To improve the effectiveness of parents as sex educators, counselors should help them to improve their general communication skills

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