

Sex Education as Women's Work: The Gendered Dimensions of Relational Labour

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Background:

Parents play a critical role in supporting their children's learning about sex and relationships. However, mothers are more likely to take responsibility for initiating and sustaining these conversations with fathers often playing little role in talking to their children about sex and relationships. This study investigates explores gendered patterns in household regarding speaking to children about sex and relationships.

Methods:

The study draws on a mixed method study involving: 1) interviews and focus groups with 35 parents/carers of school-aged young people (15-18 years) and 2) a national survey of 1918 parents/carers collected via a professional survey panel. Participants were asked about responsibilities for discussing sex and relationships within their households, including how often these conversations occur and who initiates them, as well as division of labour relating to housework and relationship maintenance.

Results:

Survey findings show that, among cisgender participants who cohabited with an opposite sex partner (n=1294), women undertook the majority of housework and childcare while men undertook more paid work. Women were significantly more likely than men to report initiating conversations about sex and relationships with children (29.5% vs 19.8%, <.05). Women who reported their partner initiated conversations about sex and relationships were also more likely to report an equal division of household labour.

In interviews, mothers explained that their commitment to talking with children about sex and relationships is shaped by socially assumed roles (women as more 'naturally' inclined toward nurturing) and women's own experiences of inadequate sex education, recognising the consequences of its absence.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the unequal role of mothers in supporting children to understand sexual health and develop capacity to understand safe and respectful relationships. It also points to the invisibility of men and fathers in teaching young people about sex and relationships.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This research was funded by the Australian Government Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

