

Hard-to-have conversations: Parent-adolescent communication about sex and relationships.

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Introduction:

Encouraging young people to communicate with parents and health professionals about sex and relationships is essential for navigating the complexities of relationships, sex, and sexuality. This study examines the conversations young people have with their parents and explores the key messages they take away from these discussions.

Methods:

Data were obtained from 4,137 young people (ages 14-18) who participated in the 2024 cross-sectional Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health. Measures included sources of information that young people consulted about sexual matters, barriers to seeking help, and discussions with parents. Analyses involved descriptive statistics, logistic regression, and thematic analysis of open-text responses.

Results:

Twenty-four percent of participants reported initiating conversations about sex or relationships with parents, with young people feeling more confident with mothers (21%) than fathers (7.2%). For 34% of respondents, parents were among the top three preferred sources of information about sex and relationships. Topics discussed with parents included intimate relationships (54%), sex (49%), pornography (33%), and sexting (26%), with variations across age, gender, and sexuality. Parental messages often emphasised caution and safety, alongside advice on waiting until marriage, consent, contraception, and condom use. Barriers to accessing sexual healthcare included fear of parental discovery (45%) and concerns about judgment or embarrassment (52%). Adolescents who had spoken with their parents about sex and relationships had better sexual health knowledge and were more likely to have initiated sexual health discussions with a GP.

Conclusion:

Open communication with parents about sex and relationships is associated with better STI knowledge and increased healthcare-seeking behaviors among young people. Despite this, fear of judgment and parental discovery remain significant barriers. Addressing these concerns through inclusive and supportive dialogue can improve sexual health literacy and accessibility for young people.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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