

# THE NATURE OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

by

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(Under the Direction of Ted Futris)

## ABSTRACT

Although much is known about how parents and adolescents communicate about sex, less is known about their conversations regarding relationships and whether the patterns for those communications are similar to those for sex. This study explores the nature of parent-adolescent communications about relationships and the factors that facilitate and inhibit such communications. A convenience sample of 170 females, 18-23 years of age, completed a retrospective survey assessing the nature of their communication experiences with their parents about sex and relationships during their adolescent years. Results of this study suggest that the patterns of communication about relationships and sex are similar: respondents turned mostly to their mothers to discuss these topics, albeit not frequently; the range of topics discussed were limited and general; more positive parent-adolescent relationships facilitated more frequent discussions; and the barriers inhibiting these communications were common. Implications for programs and future research are shared.

INDEX WORDS: Parent-adolescent communication, adolescent relationships, sexuality

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Current attitudes and behaviors of adolescents are bringing the issues of adolescent sexuality, dating, and relationships to the forefront. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), a survey conducted every two years in high schools across the country, 46.8% of 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade students surveyed in 2005 had had sexual intercourse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006). This study further found that 6.2% of students had sexual intercourse for the first time before the age of 13, 14.3% of students had sexual intercourse with four or more persons, and among the 33.9% of currently sexually active students nationwide, only 62.8% reported that either they or their partner had used a condom during last sexual intercourse (CDC). Although the CDC survey observed a decline in trends related to adolescent sexual behavior from 1991 to 2005, these results show that many adolescents still engage in sexual activity (including risky sexual activity) and some begin at a very young age.

Similar to the YRBSS, the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health (Add Health), a comprehensive national study that examines adolescent behaviors and factors that influence their health, surveyed adolescents about their sexual behavior. Among the 12,118 adolescents who were interviewed in 1997, 17% of 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> graders and 49.3% of 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> graders reported having had sexual intercourse; 39.9% of female and 37.3% of male adolescents in grades 7 through 12 reported having had sexual intercourse (SIECUS, 2003). Furthermore,

11.8% of sexually experienced girls in grades 7 and 8 and 19.4% of sexually experienced girls in grades 9 to 12 reported having been pregnant (SIECUS, 2003).

While the prevalence of adolescent sexuality may be distressing, the studies documenting the occurrence of abuse and violence in adolescent dating relationships raise additional concern. Taken together, these studies show that dating abuse is common: approximately 25-30% of adolescents report some form of dating abuse within their relationship (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006; Foshee, et al., 1996; Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O’Learly & Cano, 1997; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Molidor & Tolman, 1998). Moreover, there is a link between sexual behavior and violence, such that adolescent dating violence is more likely to occur in romantic relationships that include sexual intercourse: 37% of the ADD Health respondents reporting being involved in sexual relationships experienced at least one form of verbal or physical violence victimization, compared with 19% of those reporting relationships with no sexual intercourse (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005). Gender differences may play a role here as research shows a link between sexually permissive attitudes and risky sex (numerous sex partners and young age of first sexual intercourse) and sexual coercion by males (Simons, Burt & Simons, 2008). In other words, dating violence may be more common among males who take a nonchalant attitude toward sex; they believe that oral sex and sexual intercourse is acceptable on a first date and for a couple that has only been dating a short amount of time (Simons, Burt & Simons).

These unsettling trends have influenced parents, practitioners, educators, and policy makers to revisit the methods used to teach adolescents about issues like dating, healthy relationships, intimate partner violence, and sexuality. Various responses are beginning to emerge to address the need to facilitate healthy adolescent relationships, including abstinence-

only versus comprehensive sex education programs and, more recently, comprehensive relationship education. Comprehensive relationship education programs help adolescents acquire practical skills for developing healthy relationships. Rather than focusing solely on the negatives of sex and relationships, these programs focus on the positive aspects of relationships, frame appropriate physical behavior in a context or continuum of an emotionally healthy relationship, and help adolescents identify their values and what they hope to achieve through a relationship (Kerpelman, 2007).

Just as schools are making the transition to meet adolescents' needs, so too, must parents. Parents can play a crucial role in the relationship education of their adolescents. They can be actively engaged by talking regularly with their adolescents and teaching them what it means to foster a healthy relationship. However, research in this area is scant. Most of what is known about the influence of parents on relationship education is informed by the research and literature on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality. For example, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation's National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults (2003), the top three sources of information about sexuality are sex education in schools, friends, and parents. All three sources work together to educate adolescents, yet parents still seem to serve as the primary source of education for their adolescents in matters related to sexuality (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001).

Based upon the existing research of sexuality education by parents, it can be assumed that parents have an equally or similar impact on the relationship education of their adolescents. Whereas many conclusions can be drawn from this research, it is also necessary to compare and contrast the differences between sex communication and relationship communication between parents and adolescents. Since parents play such an influential role in the sexuality education of

their adolescents, it is important to understand how they communicate with their adolescents about this topic. Understanding the ways that parents and adolescents communicate about sexuality will help to enlighten the patterns and factors which influence the way that parents and adolescents communicate about relationships.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Although numerous studies exist documenting parent-adolescent communication regarding sexuality and the impact on adolescents' sexual behavior (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; Berenson, Wu, Breitkopf, & Newman, 2006; Guzmán, et al., 2003; Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2000), no studies to date have looked specifically at parent-adolescent communication regarding dating and *relationship* skills development. Furthermore, although many resources are available that help parents talk with their adolescents about sex, few are available that help parents talk with their adolescents about relationships. Yet, before these can be created, it is necessary to better understand the factors that inhibit and facilitate parent-adolescent communication around this topic. Perhaps, encouraging parent-adolescent communication regarding relationships and dating may help adolescents develop healthy romantic relationships and, in turn, avoid risky sexual behavior and dating violence and abuse.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to understand the extent and nature of parent-adolescent communication regarding relationships and the factors influencing those patterns. Specifically, this study will focus on the following: 1) the frequency of sex and relationship communication between parents and adolescents, 2) the topics discussed during these conversations, 3) the

quality of those communications, and 4) the factors that facilitate or hinder these communications.

### *Operational Definitions*

#### *Adolescence*

As society continues to change, so too, does the definition of adolescence. Generally, adolescence is defined as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, characterized by major physical or biological, mental or psychological, emotional, and social development. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers adolescence to begin at 10 years old and last until the age of 19, as this age range generally includes the time from the onset of puberty until the legal age of majority (Moreillon, 1992). Other definitions of adolescence extend up until the early 20s as the age for reaching full maturity. For the purposes of this study, adolescence will be operationally defined as a youth between the ages of 13 and 18. This age period is used because the majority of dating and relationship experiences during adolescence occur between this age range.

#### *Parent-Adolescent Relationship Communication*

For the purposes of this study, parent-adolescent communication will be defined as conversations between parents and adolescents on the following topics: (a) clarifying appropriate dating behavior, expectations, and guidelines; (b) defining healthy dating relationships; (c) understanding how to communicate with a romantic partner and manage conflict; and (d) the role of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship.

### *Adolescent Romantic Relationships*

As research on the topic of adolescent romantic relationships is very new, most of the literature describing these relationships does not actually define what one is. In fact, researchers do not know very much about the patterns of interaction in adolescent romantic relationships and how they are similar or different from patterns of interaction in familial and peer relationships (Furman & Shomaker, 2008).

However, there has been some attempt to elucidate the elements that differentiate adolescent romantic relationships from other relationships. For instance, romantic relationships tend to be egalitarian, where each person has relatively equal status and power (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). Like friendships, romantic relationships are voluntary and can be terminated by either person. As such, these relationships usually require more negotiation and give-and-take (Furman & Shomaker). Other elements include: affiliation, companionship, and recreation; positive and negative affect; and some degree of support and conflict (Furman & Shomaker).

An important aspect which differentiates friendship from romantic relationships is passion; in other words, fascination with the other person, sexual desire, and some degree of exclusiveness in the relationship (Davis & Todd, 1982; Giordano, Manning & Longmore, 2006). Emotionality is also heightened in adolescent romantic relationships (Giordano, et al., 2006). Another characteristic differentiating friendships from romantic relationships is that many romantic relationships eventually develop into mature attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Furman and Wehner (1994) make the point, however, that these differences in attachment and obligation may be more applicable to committed late adolescent romantic relationships rather than romantic relationships in middle adolescence.

Adolescent romantic relationships can also be defined as intimate partner relationships. In this case, intimacy being defined as emotional closeness (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003), interpersonal transactional processes consisting of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998), or self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings (Prager & Roberts, 2004).

Adolescent romantic relationships will be defined for purposes of this study as an intimate partner relationship involving some degree of exclusivity or commitment, affiliation or closeness, and passion. These relationships will be limited to those between a male and a female as much of the research focuses on this type of adolescent relationship. The nature of adolescent relationships – both healthy and unhealthy adolescent relationships – will be defined and explored in more thorough detail in Chapter 2. Throughout this thesis, dating and relationships will be referred to as just relationships, understanding that the term *relationships* encompasses dating as well.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand the immense body of literature that surrounds this issue, several topics need to be considered: parent-adolescent communication in general, parent-adolescent communication specific to sex, and finally, parent-adolescent communication specific to relationships. The bulk of this literature review will focus on parent-adolescent communication including the characteristics that make it more effective and the barriers that make it less likely to occur (in other words, the factors that facilitate and inhibit parent-adolescent communication). Since research on parent-adolescent communication about relationships is scant, the majority of the current review of literature is based on research focused on parent-adolescent communication regarding sexuality. Additionally, to present a frame of reference, the nature of adolescent relationships and healthy adolescent relationships versus unhealthy relationships will first be discussed. This particular literature review will provide a basis to begin exploring parent-adolescent communication about relationships. To begin, a theoretical framework for the study will be presented.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

This study explores parent-adolescent relationship communication using a parental socialization framework (Kuczynski & Grusec, 1997). Socialization theory proposes that the transmission of ideologies, orientations, and behaviors begins with early childhood experiences and rests primarily with the parents (Moen & Erickson, 1996). As children get older and enter adolescence, parental influence begins to wane as other social factors come to the forefront, most notably, peer groups (Harris, 1995). Although parental influence wanes during adolescence, their



influence remains strong during these formative years, particularly in predicting teens' sexual behavior. For example, parental socialization has been found to explain more variance in adolescent deviant behavior (in terms of both behavior and values) than any other factor (Simons, Simons, & Wallace, 2004). Thus, the importance of parental influence upon adolescents cannot be denied nor ignored.

Adolescent socialization encompasses several contexts: school, peer groups, and family. Although all sources work together to socialize a child, the child's primary source of information and socialization comes from his or her parents (Moen & Erickson, 1996; Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001). Parental socialization occurs in many ways and different forms including modeling, family structure, communication, etc. For example, when looking at family structure, adolescents may develop different views about love and the meaning of marriage based upon whether their parents are married or divorced and whether the adolescent's parents were good role models of a healthy relationship and marriage growing up. Alternately, if an adolescent grows up in a single-parent household the socialization of this adolescent may be quite different than that of an adolescent growing up in a dual-parent household. Understanding that there are various ways through which parents socialize their children and that communication is one aspect of this socialization, the current study focuses on parental socialization through the parent-adolescent relationship and communication.

The relationship between parent and adolescent, including communication between the dyad, is expected to considerably impact adolescents' health and behavior (Beveridge & Berg, 2007). As reviewed earlier, parent-adolescent communications about sexuality serve as a central precursor to adolescent sexual behavior positively affecting the choices and decisions that adolescents make. The current study is based on the assumption that a similar connection exists

regarding relationship communications and behavior where parent-adolescent communication regarding relationships will positively affect adolescent intimate relationships.

In addition, parents also serve as the primary influence on the values that adolescents develop. According to Kuczynski & Grusec (1997), “it is the parent who potentially is in the best position for effectively setting the conditions for the acquisition of prosocial values” (p. 400). Society is structured to favor the parent’s primary influence on the child since the principal authority for child rearing falls upon the parent; thus, parents retain the first opportunity to influence the behavior of their children and as a result, remain ultimately responsible for that behavior. Parents love and care for their children and fill their basic needs from the moment of birth; this allows, early on, for a close, emotional bond or relationship with the child. A bond of this nature is not easily duplicated with other relationships in a child’s life. When considering the different relationships in a child’s life, parents have the greatest opportunity to monitor and intimately understand their children’s behavior and this knowledge helps in the socialization process (Kuczynski & Grusec). Thus, for adolescent socialization, the parents’ role and influence is deemed a major factor in the decision making process and subsequently future behavior.

### *Adolescent Relationships*

Dating is a normal and important part of adolescent development. It is an opportunity for adolescents to learn about themselves and what they want in a future long-term committed relationship. Throughout their development, most adolescents will likely be dating, involved in a romantic relationship, or considering a sexual relationship. Approximately 55% of all adolescents have experienced a romantic relationship and by 18 years of age, more than 80% of

adolescents have experienced a relationship.<sup>1</sup> The median duration for an adolescent romantic relationship is almost 14 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). However, it is not uncommon for some adolescents to go through middle and high school without dating at all. When looking at sexual relationships, the numbers are also significant: 85% of sexually active adolescents' first sexual partner was romantic, and the average time between the start of a relationship and the first sexual intercourse is five months (Ryan, Manlove & Franzetta, 2003). Additionally, one-third of 16-18 year-olds reported that sex is "expected" of adolescents their age in a relationship (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006).

Just as adolescents mature at different rates, so too do their romantic relationships. As young people move through adolescence these relationships become increasingly important (Furman, 2002). Younger adolescents spend most of their time in same gender peer groups. As they get older they begin to go out on "group dates" where their peer group becomes mixed-gender (Brown, 1999). Younger adolescents engage in relationships for fun and recreation, status among peers, friendship, and exploring attractiveness or sexuality (Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Furman, 2002).

Older adolescents more frequently are involved in committed, exclusive, and long-term dating relationships (Carver et al., 2003). In these relationships, adolescents seek intimacy, companionship, affection, and social support (Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Furman, 2002). As adolescents grow older, the characteristics of their romantic partners become more heterogeneous. Older adolescents are more likely to find partners outside of their own school or

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<sup>1</sup> Although not explicitly defined, Carver, Joyner, & Udry (2003) refer to dating and relationships as special forms of opposite-sex friendships, romantic, and sexual relationships. These relationships involve intimacy, intimate disclosure, support seeking and giving, and mutuality (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Furman & Shaffer (2003) briefly discuss sexual behavior occurring in fleeting encounters, such as an evening. These encounters are referred to as "hook-ups." Mild sexual behaviors may also commonly occur with friends with whom adolescents are not involved. Whether it is a casual or a committed relationship, romantic relationships serve as a context for adolescents to experiment with sexual behavior and learn about sexuality.

neighborhood than are younger adolescents (Ford, Sohn, & Lepkowski, 2001). Although most romantic relationships among younger adolescents (ages 12- to 14-years) last less than five months, by age 16 adolescent romantic relationships last an average of 2 years (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). For adolescents these relationships, even when short-lived, are not trivial and can have important implications for their developmental and emotional well-being (Furman).

### *Healthy Adolescent Relationships*

Whether or not healthy relationships are better than no relationship at all is not within the focus of this study. Thus, the current review of literature does not compare those in healthy relationships to those in no relationship; rather the focus of this review is on the characteristics of a healthy relationship and the effects on those involved in healthy relationships versus those in unhealthy relationships.

Adolescents in healthy relationships often have partners who are relatively close in age to themselves (Sorenson, 2007). Partners in these relationships have common interests and activities, have fun being together and talking to each other and spend time developing a real friendship (Pearson, 2004). These adolescents also show an equal balance between interdependence and companionship (Berk, 2005; Paul & White, 1990). Additionally, they engage in decreased risky sexual behaviors (Pearson, 2004).

Healthy adolescent relationships are characterized by open and honest communication and high levels of trust and comfort between partners. These adolescents are able to express their own opinions and their partners encourage positive self-esteem. Other characteristics of healthy relationships include: emotional support, empathy, sensitivity, mutual respect, shared values and sharing of personal information, maturity and commitment, love, intimacy, physical contact, and closeness (Berk, 2005; Fogarty, 2006; Kerpelman, 2007; National Campaign to Prevent Teen

Pregnancy, 2007; Paul & White, 1990; Pearson, 2004; Sorenson, 2007).

In terms of conflict management, low levels of verbal and physical aggression, good problem-solving skills, and constructive and positive strategies to deal with conflict when it arises should also be apparent in a healthy relationship. These adolescents are able to take a step back during emotional situations and look at the larger picture and consider all of the factors involved in a situation before reacting (Kerpelman, 2007). Interestingly, adolescents often believe that conflict in a relationship is negative and therefore use maladaptive strategies to deal with it when it arises. These adolescents often hold idealistic, rather than realistic, beliefs about romantic relationships so they do not know how to deal with problems that emerge in their relationships (Kerpelman, 2007). In contrast, adolescents who hold realistic beliefs about relationships can use skills such as cooperation and compromise to handle conflict in their relationship (Berk, 2005; Paul & White, 1990). Additionally, they can recognize the warning signs of troubled communication and know where to seek help (Pearson, 2004).

Healthy adolescent relationships can have many positive effects on adolescents. Being involved in healthy romantic relationships helps adolescents learn important skills such as cooperation, appropriate behaviors, compromise, empathy, and sensitivity (Berk, 2005; Paul & White, 1990). Healthy relationships influence academic involvement, motivation, and achievement. Romantic partners influence career plans and aspirations to the extent that they support or discourage an adolescent's dreams and goals (Kerpelman & Lamke, 1997; Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001). Healthy adolescent relationships also impact psychosocial and developmental aspects. Adolescents in healthy relationships tend to have higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and are less likely to attempt suicide (Brent et al., 1993; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Joyner & Udry, 2000). Adolescents involved in healthy relationships are

more likely to become engaged in social activities and put greater effort into daily tasks (Kerpelman, 2007). Most importantly, healthy adolescent relationships carry lasting effects for future relationships and marriage. Adolescent relationships that are characterized by warmth and care lead to early adult relationships that are satisfying and committed (Berk).

However, some adolescents are not partners in a healthy relationship. Results from a nationally-representative survey of 520 young people (50.2% boys) ages 12-17 showed that although most adolescents do say that their friends are in “healthy” romantic relationships, about one in five adolescents nationwide say most of their friends are in *unhealthy* relationships—those without love, trust, mutual respect, and honesty (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2007). In a poll of over 1000 adolescents ages 13-18 who have been “seriously involved” in a romantic relationship, 24% of 16 to 18 year olds reported that they felt pressure to date, 14% said that they would do almost anything to keep a significant other (i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend), and 61% reported that their partner made them “feel bad or embarrassed” about themselves (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006).

Many adolescents will also experience some form of emotional or physical abuse in their relationship. This same poll also revealed that 25% of those in a “serious” relationship were “hit, slapped, or pushed” by their significant other. Similarly, one in four adolescents reports verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse each year (Foshee, et al., 1996; Avery-Leaf et al., 1997). In a survey of over 4000 9<sup>th</sup> – 12th graders, approximately one in five females reported physical and/or sexual abuse by a dating partner (Silverman et al., 2001). Another study of 635 high school students, found that 36.4% of teenage girls and 37.1% of boys reported receiving some form of physical aggression from dating partners at least once (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

Adolescents report dating abuse more often than any other age group. Females between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rates of intimate partner violence (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Dating abuse among adolescents begins gradually, often starting with teasing and name calling. Adolescents think of these behaviors as “normal” parts of a relationship. While these behaviors may seem innocuous at first, they can escalate, leading to more serious abuse, such as rape and physical assault (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006).

Unhealthy relationships can lead to poor choices and decision making. This can put adolescents in unhealthy relationships at risk for physical or sexual abuse, breakups leading to depression or suicide, early or risky sexual behavior leading to STIs/HIV and teenage pregnancy, and increased likelihood of experimenting with drugs. These detrimental outcomes not only pose immediate problems, but hold long-term consequences for adolescents as well (Simons, Burt & Peterson, in press). Adolescents experience jealousy, anger, longing, and grief because of confusion and problems in their dating relationships (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). Even adolescents involved in healthy relationships sometimes misjudge their emotions leading to negative outcomes. Believing that they are in love, an adolescent may make poor choices, where s/he might otherwise make positive choices (Kerpelman, 2007).

It is likely that most adolescents, at some point in their development, will be involved in a romantic relationship. These relationships can hold both positive and negative, significant short- and long-term outcomes for adolescents. Negative consequences evolve from of a lack of understanding of the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, skills to communicate with a dating partner, and knowledge to avoid becoming involved in an abusive or violent relationship. One resource for adolescents to develop knowledge and skills is through communication with their parents.

### *The Quality of Parent-Adolescent Communication*

Research shows that parent-adolescent communication and interaction plays a major role in adolescent adaptation (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Hartos & Power, 2000; Dailey, 2006).

Healthy and appropriate adolescent autonomy behaviors, such as the ability to express independent opinions and ideas and the ability to maintain a positive relationship with parents, leads to adaptive adolescent outcomes (Beveridge & Berg; Simons & Conger, 2007).

Communication between parents and adolescents continues to be studied in the literature since it greatly affects adolescent outcomes.

Other characteristics of parent-adolescent communication and interactions that have been found to contribute to successful adolescent development and adaptation include: autonomy (within the context of parental guidance), friendliness, appropriate levels of control, monitoring, adolescent disclosure, and warmth (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Hartos & Power, 2000; Simons & Conger, 2007). In order to increase positive outcomes, parents should also encourage their adolescents to take an active role in making decisions and rules for the family (Beveridge & Berg). Appropriate expressions of adolescent autonomy include – discussing reasons behind disagreements, confidence in stating one's own opinions, validation, and agreement with another's position, attending to the other person's statements, idea expression, acceptance, empathy, focusing, problem-solving engagement, curiosity, and explaining (Beveridge & Berg). Parental behaviors that assert and affirm independence and appropriate autonomy are positive for adolescent outcomes, like self-esteem, confidence, and positive decision-making (Beveridge & Berg; Dailey, 2006). These same skills are also important to fostering healthy intimate partner relationships (Kerpelman, 2007).



Open dialogue between parents and adolescents and mutual respect for one another's differing opinions plays a large factor in the degree of parent-adolescent communication (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Heller, Robinson, Henry, & Plunkett, 2006; Dailey, 2006). Equally significant is the recognition of the other person's values and attitudes (both by the adolescent and parent). Adolescents who perceive that their parents are attentive and validating of their experiences and viewpoint are more likely to report greater openness in communication between themselves and their parents (Dailey). Affirming and acknowledging the adolescent's viewpoint, even if the parent disagrees, is one way of showing attentiveness in communication. As adolescents get older they expect to be treated more as equals by their parents with a right to express their own opinions (Eccles et al., 1993). Thus, there is a need for more flexible communication between parent and adolescent, which allows room for the adolescent's self-expression (Noller & Bagi, 1985).

In looking at communication between parents and adolescents it is important to understand that the overall tone or quality of the parent-adolescent relationship strongly influences the quality of parent-adolescent communication.<sup>2</sup> In other words, parent-adolescent communication does not exist independent of other parenting behaviors and the parent-adolescent relationship. In order to produce good communication between parent and adolescent warmth and involvement is necessary (Simons & Conger, 2007). For example, parents who are warm and involved with their adolescents will show more frequent and better communication with their adolescents. Better overall communication between parent and adolescent will, in turn, lead to better communication about relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> This literature review looks primarily at the overall quality of parent-adolescent relationship and communication as opposed to specific parenting styles or typologies (i.e. authoritarian vs. authoritative parenting).

In general, adolescents disclose more to parents who are open, responsive, and accepting; warm, nurturing, and uncritical; attentive and available; validating of their experiences; and who ask for their adolescents' opinions (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006; Dailey, 2006). Adolescents also disclose more to parents who they perceive are credible, trustworthy, and have expertise in the topics being discussed (Guilamo-Ramos et al.). In contrast, adolescents disclose less to parents who are judgmental and rejecting; frequently critical; discounting of their adolescents' communication attempts; and giving fewer personal responses (Dailey). How accepting and warm parents are and how they have reacted to information in the past are likely to influence future adolescent disclosure (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006). Dailey explains that when parents are warm and responsive and confirm their adolescent's thoughts and feelings, this leads to further communication because the adolescent feels comfortable, confident, and safe that they can turn to their parent and be heard.

Numerous characteristics and behaviors, on the parts of both adolescents and parents, have been found to undermine healthy parent-adolescent communication, including: excessively gratifying or submitting to the other person, withholding opinions, withdrawing from the conversation, distracting the other person from the topic, over-personalizing arguments, pressuring for conformity without explanation, making rude/sarcastic remarks (Beveridge & Berg, 2007). These characteristics lead to the adolescent feeling constrained and will manifest in the adolescent exhibiting fewer autonomous behaviors and poorer outcomes (Beveridge & Berg).

In addition, lower quality of the relationship, communication (Hartos & Power, 2000), and psychological control by parents (i.e. coerciveness, hostility, and undermining emotional independence) have also been found to be associated with poor adolescent outcomes (Beveridge & Berg; Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Higher levels of parental control lead to greater depressive

symptoms, poorer self-esteem, more expectations of failure, and overall poorer adjustment of adolescents (Kerr & Stattin). In contrast, adolescents reared by parents who are warm and supportive and enforce rules, show fewer signs of depression and other behavior problems (Simons & Conger, 2007). This is important because, as noted above, there is a strong relationship between the parent-adolescent relationship and parent-adolescent communication (both frequency and quality). In general, a lower quality parent-adolescent relationship leads to destructive communication patterns which are associated with less frequent parent-adolescent discussion (Noller, 1984).

A moderating factor influencing parent and adolescent communication is parents' gender. Mothers seem to be the primary communicator with their adolescents. Research shows a tendency for greater communication, responsiveness, and openness, and more positive interactions and communications between mothers and their adolescents (both sons and daughters) than between fathers and their adolescents. Adolescents tend to report similar interactions with both parents (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Dailey, 2006; Heller, et al., 2006; Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2002; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Simons & Conger, 2007; Swain, Ackerman, & Ackerman, 2006). Perhaps this is because mothers and fathers often display different communication patterns when talking with their sons and daughters (Dailey). Research also shows greater self-disclosure of females to mothers (Noller & Bagi).

#### *Parent-Adolescent Communication about Sex*

Frequent and positive parental communication also protects adolescents from engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Overwhelmingly, research shows that parent-adolescent communication regarding sex positively affects adolescent sexual attitudes and results in greater knowledge

about sexuality, risk, STIs, and HIV/AIDS (Miller & Whitaker, 2001; Martino et al., 2008). Parent-adolescent communication results in positive sexuality behaviors including: increased likelihood of and greater sexual communication with partners (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Hutchinson & Montgomery, 2007; Miller & Whitaker; Whitaker, Miller, May, & Levin, 1999), later onset of first intercourse and increased intentions to delay intercourse (Guzmán, et al., 2003; Meschke et al., 2000), less frequent sexual activity (Hutchinson, J.B. Jemmott, L.S. Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2003; Hutchinson & Montgomery; Meschke, et al.), less risky sexual behavior (i.e. increased likelihood of condom use and greater condom use self-efficacy, increased contraceptive use/decreased unprotected intercourse, decreased number of sexual partners) (Berenson et al., 2006; Holtzman & Robinson, 1995; Hutchinson & Cooney; Hutchinson et al.; Hutchinson & Montgomery; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000; Meschke et al.; Rodgers, 1999; Whitaker et al.), and decreased likelihood of teen pregnancy (Hutchinson & Montgomery; Meschke, et al.).

In spite of the evidence of the positive impact that parents have on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors, few are talking with their adolescents about these important issues (Martino et al., 2008). When parents and adolescents do engage in conversations about sex, parents tend to be more indirect than direct (Martino et al., 2008). Rather than discussing specifics or practicalities of adolescent sex and decision making (i.e. birth control, contraception, and appropriate timing for sex) or personal issues (i.e. masturbation), parents limit their conversations to safe topics: biology and developmental changes (i.e., physical development, maturation, menstruation, pubertal changes), impersonal aspects of or general human sexuality (i.e., conception and reproductive facts), and negative consequences of sex (e.g., STIs and teen pregnancy) (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard et al., 2002; Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000;

Raffaelli et al.; Martino). Most parents fail to discuss the most critical topics related to sexual risk with their adolescents, due to the awkwardness of or not feeling comfortable or competent talking about such topics (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Martino). Additionally, parents may focus on just one topic, rather than a range of topics during these discussions, which leave adolescents unprepared to make healthy and positive sexual decisions when the time comes (Martino).

This is significant because it leads to a perceived gap between the relevant topics that adolescents are concerned with and the topics that their parents cover during discussions (Aquilino & Bragadottir, 2000; National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002). Adolescents are curious about personal and experiential aspects of sex (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). More specifically, adolescents want to know such things as: the appropriate time and context for sexual intercourse in a romantic relationship, how “far” to go with a partner and how to say no, where to obtain birth control and why they should remain abstinent, the real definition of “sex,” the meaning and role of love in a relationship, and how to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2000; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004). Although adolescents may not want to be told not to have sex, they do want to talk about sexual issues with their parents and other adults (Weiss, 2007).

In fact, adolescents often want knowledge on sexual issues long before parents or teachers begin any formal sex education (Weiss, 2007). Yet, research shows that frequency and occurrence of parent-adolescent sexual communication tends to be low to moderate, with particularly low rates of father-adolescent sexual communication (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998). Some studies show that these conversations are happening infrequently, only once during adolescence, or sometimes not at all (Raffaelli et al., 1998; Wilson & Donenberg, 2004). The

lack of repeated conversation means that adolescents have less of a chance for understanding, processing, and accepting their parents' messages related to sex.

In contrast, repeated discussions increase the chances that the adolescent will “hear” the message during the appropriate developmental time (Martino et al., 2008). Martino and colleagues found that parents who discuss new topics with their adolescents and develop them over time through repeated discussions are more effective than parents who take a “checklist approach” during sexual discussions. Additionally, frequent discussions are likely to also increase the comfort of both parent and adolescent regarding these topics, convey sincere parental interest to the adolescent, and foster better parent-adolescent relations. This, in turn, helps to promote healthy adolescent behavior (Martino). Moreover, communication with adolescents about sexual behavior and sex-related topics is more likely to influence behavior when the conversation takes place *before* the onset of sexual activity (Guzmán, et al.; Miller & Whitaker; Swain, et al., 2006).

#### *Factors that Facilitate and Inhibit Parent-Adolescent Communication about Sex*

Although the research shows that adolescents generally desire earlier and greater communication with their parents about sex, these conversations remain infrequent (Noller & Bagi, 1985). There appear to be many barriers that help explain why parent-adolescent communication on these subjects is inhibited. For example, parents express discomfort and embarrassment in discussing these issues, especially those closely related with sexual intercourse; this causes a hesitancy to enter into such conversations (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard et al., 2000; Meschke et al., 2000; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004).

Additionally, parents tend not to be aware of the relevance of these topics to their children. Many think their adolescents are too young to want to discuss sex or their adolescents haven't started

thinking about it yet. Parents also may not perceive AIDS/STIs as real threats to their adolescents (Hutchinson & Cooney; Raffaelli et al., 1998).

A fear of embarrassing their adolescent or a fear that their adolescent will think they are prying, will not take them seriously, and will not be honest with them also hinders these conversations (Jaccard et al., 2000). Parents sometimes feel they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to explain things and are afraid their adolescent might ask them something they do not know (Jaccard et al., 2002; Martino et al., 2008). Often times parents do not know what to say, how to say it, or even when or how to start the conversation with their adolescent (Albert, 2004). Parents also cite a fear that by discussing these topics they will be encouraging sexual activity (Jaccard et al., 2000; Meschke et al., 2000; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2001). Finally, many parents believe that since these topics are covered in school in a sex education course, it is not necessary for them to talk about it at home (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999).

According to adolescents, similar barriers exist for them. They feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in discussing these issues with their parents (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard, et al., 2000; Jaccard et al., 2002; Meschke et al., 2000; Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004). Adolescents do not want to be the ones to bring up the topic; rather they will wait until it is broached by their parents (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson). Adolescents also worry that their parents will ask too many personal questions or become suspicious and won't sufficiently respect their privacy or autonomy (Jaccard et al., 2000; Jaccard et al., 2002). Adolescents also maintain a false belief that they themselves have sufficient knowledge. They question the expertise of their parents to teach them about relevant issues including: technical knowledge about sex and birth control, basic life values, couple dynamics and relationships, peer dynamics and relationships, and other aspects of

adolescent life related to sexual activity (Jaccard et al., 2000; Rosenthal & Feldman; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson).

Adolescents often feel that their parents do not treat them like equals or are not sufficiently open, approachable, supportive, trusting, and empathetic (Jaccard et al., 2000; Whitaker et al, 1999; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Martino et al., 2008). They see their parents as overly dominant, judgmental, and protective in attempts to help them avoid mistakes (Jaccard et al., 2000; Jaccard et al., 2002; Weiss, 2007; Meschke et al., 2000; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson; Martino). Often, during discussions about these sensitive topics, for both parents and adolescents, there tends to be a lack of cooperation toward mutual communication, less turn-taking, lower levels of comfort, decreased efficacy of communication, and situational constraints (Jaccard et al., 2002; Martino). Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) found that adolescents tend to dismiss discussions with their parents that involve “scare tactics” and lectures; yet these are the types of conversations most often reported by parents when asked if they are communicating with their adolescent. Adolescents perceive their parents to be defensive, avoidant, impersonal, or rule-oriented during these discussions (Martino). Rather than being lectured to about sex, adolescents want their parents to remain open, honest, forthright, and listen to what they have to say (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson). These preferences are consistent with findings on general positive and effective monitoring behaviors that reduce at-risk behaviors.

Developmental barriers also exist. As adolescents get older and begin to explore issues of sexuality, they may be more selective in information that they disclose or discuss with their families because they do not want to harm their relationship with their parents. Instead of turning to parents (especially mothers) for advice, they go to friends, older siblings, or other trusted adults to gain information and knowledge (Weiss, 2007; Lloyd, 2004). The various barriers to



communication change with the age and gender of the adolescent as they reassess situations and embark on new experiences (Jaccard et al., 2002; Stanton et al., 2004).

For instance, at the beginning of puberty (age 13 or 14) adolescents may be more interested in hearing about general biology, birth control, and appropriate dating behavior. This is the time when adolescents are beginning to explore issues such as sexuality and group dating. However, during late adolescence, as adolescents approach the ages of 17 and 18 and begin to engage in more serious or long-term, committed relationships, they become curious about appropriate physical behavior, the role of sex in a relationship, and conflict management and communication in a romantic relationship (Jaccard et al., 2000). Parents who are more effective communicators tend to tailor their conversations to meet the appropriate developmental stage of the adolescent, understand the reality of their adolescent, and are more concrete in discussing sex related topics (Jaccard et al., 2002). What this means is that to be most effective, parents should be discussing these topics at multiple points throughout their child's development. It is important that the quality of these conversations remain of good and positive quality, because poor communication reduces the likelihood that parents or adolescents will revisit or follow-up on past conversations related to difficult topics (like risky behaviors and sex) (Martino et al., 2008).

### *Parent-Adolescent Communication about Relationships*

Although the literature on parent-adolescent communication regarding sex-related topics is extensive, limited research exists that focuses on parent-adolescent communication about relationships. Since the literature on parent-adolescent communications about sex is most relevant to parent-adolescent communication regarding relationships, this body of research provides guidance in what parent-adolescent relationship communication may look like. Thus, the influence of parents upon adolescent attitudes and decisions about relationships can be

assumed to be similarly significant to parents' influence on their adolescents' sexuality attitudes and decisions.

Although some parents and adolescents may be talking, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy fact sheet "*Everything you ever wanted to know? What teens want to know about sex, love, and relationships,*" demonstrated that adolescents want to know much more than what is being covered during their present conversations with their parents. They not only want to talk about sex, but more importantly, the role that sex plays within the context of a relationship. Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson (2004) showed similar results and noted that, in addition to contraception and STIs, adolescents desire information about ways to deal with sexual pressures and how to show restraint.

Despite the fact that teens do want to talk about relationships and the importance and significance of adolescent romantic relationships, parents often assume that adolescent relationships are insignificant, fleeting, or trivial (Furman, 2002). In fact, many parents believe their adolescent is not involved in a romantic relationship yet (Swain et al., 2006) and therefore do not warrant a conversation about relationships. Thus, a lack of adequate knowledge about realistic adolescent romantic relationships inhibits parent-adolescent communication about relationships.

### *Parent-Adolescent Communication Summary*

Whether talking about sex or about relationships, parents play an important role in protecting their adolescent from undesirable outcomes (e.g. risky sex, teen pregnancy, dating violence and abuse, etc.). Yet, there seems to be a trend toward lack of communication between parents and adolescents concerning these important topics. Looking at all the patterns together, what clearly emerges is that a close, warm, and caring parent-adolescent relationship combined

with positive parent-adolescent communication (i.e. openness) overall is the most effective means for preventing adolescent risky behavior.

When adolescents feel closely connected to their parents, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as early sexual intercourse (Martino et al., 2008). Parent-child closeness is related to communication in that it is likely to increase the frequency and quality of communication (i.e. talking more about sex or relationships), which leads to a reduced risk of dangerous behavior and negative outcomes. In other words, communication about these topics is much easier when it is built upon an already close parent-adolescent relationship and regular, open parent-adolescent communication (Martino).

### *Research Questions*

Based on the review of the literature, parent-adolescent communication has a positive impact on promoting positive adolescent behaviors and reducing at-risk behaviors. This occurs whereby the parent and adolescent have a warm and supportive relationship, which leads to overall open and positive communication between parent and adolescent. Positive overall communication, in turn, leads to positive communication about sex, which then leads to the adolescent making healthy choices concerning sexual activity. Although much is known about parent-adolescent communication about sex, no research has been done to specifically look at how parents and adolescents communicate about relationships. Furthermore, research is needed to better understand the factors that inhibit and facilitate parent-adolescent communication specific to relationships. To this end, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Do adolescents perceive their parents as a source of information for sex and relationships? If so, which parent do they report talking with about these topics most often?
2. Relative to the conversations parents and adolescents have about sex, how often do parents and adolescents communicate about relationships?
3. If conversations occur between parents and adolescents about sex and relationships, what do they discuss?
4. How do adolescents perceive the quality of those conversations? In other words, who initiates and dominates these conversations, do adolescents feel that their parents are responsive and helpful and how satisfied are they with these conversations?
5. Does parental warmth/support, hostility, monitoring, and openness correlate with communication about sex and relationships?
6. What factors inhibit parent-adolescent discussions about sex and relationships? In other words, what do adolescents say discourage them from talking with their parents about these topics and what do they believe discourage their parents from talking with them about these topics?

Because no prior research on this topic exists, no a priori hypotheses are established. The current study is strictly exploratory and descriptive. Variations by parent gender will be examined.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Design and Procedures*

Data for the current study were collected as part of a larger study to understand the nature of parent-adolescent communication about relationships. Participants were recruited from a large Southeastern university and included students enrolled in a variety of classes who were contacted through class presentations and emails. Course instructors were first contacted to request permission to come to class for a brief 5-10 minute presentation to describe the study and invite students to participate. During the class presentations, students were provided with a postcard that included a description of the study and the link to the website where the online survey could be accessed. After the class presentations, a follow-up email was sent to all course instructors with the study description and survey link to forward on to their students. The survey was available online for four weeks. During the final week that the survey was available, a last reminder email was sent to all course instructors to forward to each student informing them that the survey would only be open for another week and inviting them to participate, if they had not done so already. Participants who agreed to complete the 20-25 minute online survey were asked to focus on their experiences during their middle and high school years in responding to the survey questions. Upon completion of the survey, each participant was directed to a separate website where they could enter into a drawing to receive one of five \$25 gift cards.

### *Participants*

Presentations were given in 18 different courses, reaching approximately 4336 students.<sup>3</sup> Of the 4336 students reached through class presentations and emails, a total of 219 students completed the online survey (approximately 5% of the students reached). Because so few males responded ( $n = 27$ ), the convenience sample was restricted to 195 female respondents, ages 18-23, who spent the majority of their adolescent years living with at least one of their biological parents or a mother- or father-figure. The sample was further reduced to 170 respondents who provided complete data on the variables of interest. Compared to those included in the study, the 25 females who were not included in the current study showed no significant differences, with three exceptions: they were older ( $M = 20.48$  vs.  $20.01$ ;  $F = 50.09$ ,  $p < .000$ ), less likely to be white (70.0% vs. 84.1%,  $\chi^2 = 12.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and more likely to reside in a single parent household (25.0% vs. 13.5%,  $\chi^2 = 11.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

On average, the 170 female students included in the current study were 20 years old ( $SD = 1.25$ ) and 68.0% ( $n = 115$ ) were 18-20 years of age. The majority of the sample was White/Caucasian (84.1%,  $n = 143$ ), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (5.9%,  $n = 10$ ), African American (5.3%,  $n = 9$ ), and Other (4.7%,  $n = 8$ ). During their middle/high school years, 79.4% ( $n = 135$ ) of the students lived with both of their original (biological or adoptive) parents, 13.5% ( $n = 23$ ) lived in a single parent household, and 7.1% ( $n = 12$ ) lived in a stepfamily household. The majority of the sample (74.7%,  $n = 127$ ) indicated that their parents were still married to each other, 24.1% ( $n = 41$ ) reported that their parents were divorced from each other, and only 1.2% ( $n = 2$ ) reported that their parents were never married to each other. Overall, the respondents' parents were well educated: about 82.3% of mothers and 78.3% of fathers had some

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<sup>3</sup> This is an approximate number of students as some of the students were in several of the classes that presentations were made in, and thus, received the information multiple times. Based upon instructor provided class rosters, 38.6% of the students reached were male and 61.4% were female.

college or higher. Of the 147 respondents who knew their parents' income, 40.1% reported that their parents earned between \$60,000 and \$99,999, 43.5% reported that their parents earned \$100,000 or more.

### *Measures*

A combination of commonly-used instruments, as well as measures developed specifically for this study examined the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and communication about sex and relationships. Separate sex and relationship questions were used to assess similarities and differences between the topics and identify the barriers to communication. For each section, items were repeated for students to answer separately for mothers and fathers. Below are descriptions and information about each of the measures included in the survey, according to construct. (See Appendix A for a copy of the related scales taken from the full instrument.)

### *Validity of Measures*

All measures used in this online survey were designed for this research and adapted from pre-existing measures. Where applicable, alpha scores resulting from past use of the measures have been reported to demonstrate the reliability of the measures. The list of sex and relationships topics and adolescent and parental barriers were compiled from the literature describing the various topics and barriers to communication. To further assess the content validity of the measures and to improve the questions, format, and the scales, the online survey was field-tested among colleagues. The comments obtained from these colleagues were then incorporated into the final survey revisions.

### *Sources of Sex and Relationship Education*

To identify whether the adolescents perceived their parents as a resource for sex and relationship information, participants were asked to recall the various sources from which they learned about sex and relationships during their middle and high school years (see Appendix A: Q26-29). The items for the sources of sex and relationship education construct were adapted from the Sex Education Inventory (SEI) (Bennett & Dickinson, 1998). The SEI is a 1983 revision of the Student Sex Education Survey developed by Bennett and Dickinson. The items in the original survey assessed college students' preferred and actual sources of sex education. This instrument was developed for research use in populations of 18- to 23-year old college students. All responses were coded as nominal data. Test-retest reliability for this scale ranges from .80 to .89 in a variety of different samples tested. Construct validity for this scale has been demonstrated by intercorrelations among SEI scores and by correlations between SEI scores and measures of sexual knowledge, attitudes to sex, and patterns of parental responsibility (Bennet & Dickinson).

For the current study, participants were asked to indicate how much influence each of the following sources had on their attitudes about sex: (a) friends, (b) mother/mother-figure, (c) father/father-figure, (d) other family members, (e) physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor (including personnel at family planning clinic), (f) minister, priest, or other religious leader, (g) media, (h) books/internet, (i) school (teacher/sex education course), and (j) other (please specify). Possible responses were: (1) *none*, (2) *very little*, (3) *some*, or (4) *a lot*. In addition, participants were asked which parent they discussed sex-related topics with most often. Possible responses were: (a) *never discussed with either parent*, (b) *mother/mother-figure*, (c) *father/father-figure*, (d) *both parents equally often*, or (e) *other (please specify)*. To compare



adolescents' sources of sex education/information with their sources of relationship education/information the same two questions as described above were repeated. However, in this case, the items were reworded so as to ask respondents to indicate how much influence each source had on their attitudes about relationships and which parent they discussed relationship-related topics with most often. Response categories remained the same as for the sources of sex education/information questions.

### *Frequency of Parent-Adolescent Relationship Communication*

To assess how often parents and adolescents discussed sex in comparison to relationships, items were adapted from the Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI) (Noller & Bagi, 1985). The original PACI rated six process variables (frequency, initiation, recognition, self-disclosure, domination, and satisfaction) across 14 content areas (e.g., social issues, interests, sex roles, relationships, politics, and future plans). For the current study, the only content areas addressed were discussions related to sex and relationships.

To assess the frequency of communication, adolescents were first asked to think about the conversations they had with their mother/mother-figure and then their father/father-figure about sex during their middle and high school years (see Appendix A: Q39 and Q47). Here, sex was defined as: their family's attitudes toward sexuality, the function and importance of sex in a relationship, whether sex should be confined to the marital relationship (i.e. premarital sexual relationships), and practicing safe sex. Next, respondents were asked to think back to the conversations that they had with their mother/mother-figure and father/father-figure about relationships during their middle and high school years (see Appendix A: Q55 and Q63). Here relationships was defined as: the function and importance of marriage and family, attitudes toward the family, marriage and divorce, expectations around dating, and how to behave in a

relationship (e.g., sharing feelings, handling differences). Respondents indicated how often they talked with their parent(s) about each of these topics. Possible responses were: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, (4) *often*, or (5) *I'd prefer not to answer*.

### *Sex and Relationship Topics Discussed*

Given that there are a wide range of topics that could be covered during parent-adolescent conversations regarding sex and relationships; one of the goals of this study was to clarify the content or topics discussed during these conversations. If the participant responded that they either talked *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* with their parent about sex and relationships, then they were asked to indicate the topics that they talked about with their mother/mother-figure and father/father-figure during those conversations (see Appendix A: Q40 and Q48).

Based on various parent-adolescent communication scales regarding sex and relationships (Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997; Fisher, 1987; Hutchinson, 2007; Somers & Canivez, 2003) a comprehensive list of topics that parents and adolescents might cover during sex-related discussions was created. This list included 14 sex-related topics: (a) personal/family values/religious values regarding sex, (b) general human sexuality and puberty (i.e. menstruation, reproduction/how babies are made/biology, maturation and physical/sexual development), (c) good/positive choices and sexual decision making, (d) sexual intercourse, (e) consequences of teen pregnancy, (f) contraception/birth control, (g) how to resist sexual pressure from dating partners, (h) “how far to go” on a date, (i) whether pre-marital sex is right or wrong, (j) role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship, (k) STI/HIV/AIDS information and risk, (l) sexual satisfaction/desire, (m) risks of drinking alcohol and using drugs, and (n) parents’ own past sexual behaviors and experiences. Respondents were asked to check each topic covered during their sex conversations.

As well, if the participant reported that they either talked *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* with their parent about relationships they were then asked to specify the topics that they talked about with each parent during those conversations (see Appendix A: Q56 and Q64). Using various parent-adolescent communication scales regarding sex and relationships (Fox & Inazu, 1980; Raffaelli et al., 1999; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; Somers & Canivez, 2003) a comprehensive list of topics that parents and adolescents might cover during relationship-related discussions was created. The list included 11 relationship or dating-related topics: (a) personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating, (b) dating abuse (including: violence, verbal/physical aggression, controlling behavior, and emotional abuse), (c) how to communicate and manage conflict with your partner, (d) good/positive choices and relationship decision making, (e) developing trust and commitment in a relationship, (f) marital expectations and aspirations, (g) love, (h) appropriate dating behavior and expectations, (i) how to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship, (j) what to look for in a significant other, and (k) parents' own past dating/relationship behavior and experiences. Respondents were asked to check each topic covered during their relationships conversations.

### *Quality of Conversations about Sex and Relationships*

Of interest in the current study was what respondents thought and how they felt about the conversations they had with their parents about sex and relationship during their middle and high school years. (Respondents who reported that they had no conversations with their parents about these topics skipped this section of the survey.) The questions measuring this construct were based on the Noller and Bagi Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory as described above. Several dimensions were measured to create a picture of the adolescents' perceived quality of the

communications: initiation, disclosure, recognition, domination, satisfaction, and perceived helpfulness.

Respondents were first asked to think about their sex conversations with their mother/mother-figure and then father/father-figure (see Appendix A: Q41 and Question49) and indicate how often: (a) they initiated those conversations, (b) their parent initiated those conversations, (c) they disclosed their feelings and views, (d) whether their feelings and views were recognized by their parent, (e) whether they dominated the conversations, and (f) whether their parent dominated the conversation. Similarly, they were asked the same set of questions about their relationships conversations with each parent (see Appendix A: Q57 and Q65). Possible responses were: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, or (4) *often*.

Next, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the discussions they had with their mother/mother-figure and father/father-figure about sex and then relationships (see Appendix A: Q42, Q50, Q58, and Q66). Possible responses ranged from (1) *very dissatisfied* to (6) *very satisfied*. Finally, respondents were asked how helpful the sex and relationships conversations that they had with their mother/mother-figure and father/father-figure were (see Appendix A: Q43, Q51, Q59, and Q67). Possible responses ranged from (1) *very unhelpful* to (4) *very helpful*.

#### *Parent-Adolescent Relationship Quality*

To better understand the correlation between the parent-adolescent relationship and parent-adolescent communication, Simons & Conger's (2007) three instruments were used to measure parental warmth/support, hostility, and monitoring. *Parental warmth/support* reflected various components of supportive parenting and was measured with four items (see Appendix A: Q31-32): (1) Let you know that s/he cared about you (2) Act loving and affectionate toward you

(3) Help you do something that was important to you, and (4) Let you know that s/he appreciated you, your ideas, or the things you did. *Parental hostility* reflected the extent to which the adolescents' mother or father displayed hostility or anger toward them during their middle and high school years and consisted of four items (see Appendix A: Q33-34): (1) Get angry with you (2) Shout or yell at you because s/he was mad at you (3) Criticize you or your ideas, and (4) Argue with you when you disagreed about something. *Parental monitoring* reflected the extent to which the adolescents' mother or father "kept tabs" on them and was measured with four items (see Appendix A: Q35-36): (1) Know where you were during the course of the day (2) Know who you were with when you were away from home (3) Talk with you about what was going on in your life, and (4) Know if you came home or were in bed by the set time. For each scale, adolescents indicated how often each parent displayed each behavior, and possible responses were: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, or (4) *often*.

Each construct was scored by computing an overall mean score such that higher scores reflected greater warmth/support, hostility, and monitoring. Coefficient alphas for warmth/support for the current sample were .88 (mother) and .92 (father) which are consistent with those reported by Simons & Conger (2007): .83 (mother) and .87 (father). Coefficient alphas for hostility for the current sample were .85 (mother) and .90 (father) which are consistent with those reported by Simons & Conger (2007): .74 (mother) and .75 (father). Coefficient alphas for monitoring for the current sample were .80 (mother) and .89 (father) which are also consistent with those reported by Simons & Conger (2007): .82 (mother) and .79 (father).

A fourth indicator of parent-adolescent relationship quality reflects the degree of openness between the parent and the adolescent and was measured using the Revised Parent-Adolescent Communication Form of the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Loeber, Farrington,

Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 1995). This scale gauges how free the respondent felt to communicate with their parents about their emotions, problems, and disagreements. It assesses the mutually responsive parent–adolescent relationship as it contains items asking about both positive and negative aspects of parent-adolescent communication. For example, adolescents were asked to indicate how often certain things happened in their family during their middle and high school years, such as “My mother/mother-figure was a good listener” and “I had trouble believing everything my mother/mother-figure told me.” Possible responses were: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, or (4) *often*. Respondents were then asked to answer the same set of questions about their father (see Appendix A: Q37-38). Total scores were created by averaging all of the items, with negative worded items reverse scored, so that higher scores indicated more positive and open parent-adolescent communication. Coefficient alphas for this sample were .94 (mother) and .92 (father) which are similar to those found in a recent study (Pardini, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2005).

#### *Factors Facilitating or Inhibiting Parent-Adolescent Discussions*

Next, respondents were asked to reflect on what discouraged them from talking with their parents about sex and relationships (adolescent barriers), and what they believe discouraged their parents from talking with them about these topics (parental barriers). Building from the Sex Education Inventory (SEI) (Bennett & Dickinson, 1998) and informed by the literature regarding barriers to parent-adolescent sex communication, a list of various barriers to sex and relationships communication, as perceived by the adolescent, was developed. The list of 18 barriers included: (a) s/he never brought up the subject, (b) s/he got angry when I asked, (c) s/he gave me a lecture, (d) s/he told me things that were not true, (e) s/he asked me why I wanted to know, (f) s/he wasn’t around when I wanted to talk, (g) I was embarrassed, (h) I was afraid of

her/his reaction, (i) these topics were covered in school, (j) s/he was not open/honest with me, (k) I was afraid that s/he would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions, (l) I already knew everything I needed to know, (m) s/he didn't really know the answers to my questions, (n) s/he did not treat me as an equal, (o) s/he was not supportive, trustworthy, or empathetic, (p) s/he was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic, (q), s/he tried to get me to conform to her beliefs, (r) previous discussions about these topics with her/him did not go well, and (s) other.

Respondents were first asked to think back to the sex conversations that they used to have (or not have) with their mother/mother-figure and then father/father-figure (see Appendix A: Q44 and Q52) and check each reason from the list that discouraged them from talking with each parent about sex. Respondents also were asked to think about the conversations that they had (or did not have) with each parent about relationships and indicate the reasons from the list that discouraged them from talking with each parent about relationships (see Appendix A: Q60 and Q68).

After responding to the factors which inhibited them from talking with their parents about sex or relationship related topics, participants were then asked to think about these factors from their *parents' perspective*. Again, based off of the Sex Education Inventory (SEI) (Bennett & Dickinson, 1998) and informed by the literature regarding barriers to parent-adolescent sex communication, a list of various barriers to sex and relationships communication, as perceived by the parent, was developed. The list of 15 barriers included: (a) s/he was embarrassed when I asked, (b) s/he didn't know how to answer my questions, (c) s/he was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life, (d) s/he thought I was too young to want to talk about dating/relationships, (e) s/he did not take my relationships seriously, (f) s/he was afraid I would

think s/he was prying, (g) s/he was afraid I wouldn't take him/her seriously, (h) s/he was afraid I wouldn't be honest, (i) s/he was afraid I would ask something s/he didn't know the answer to, (j) s/he didn't know how to bring it up, (k) s/he was afraid that talking would encourage me to date, (l) s/he thought I was learning about dating/relationships in school, (m) s/he had her/his own bad experiences with dating/relationships and didn't think s/he should talk about it with me, (n) s/he thought my other parent/parent-figure was talking to me about dating/relationships, and (o) I don't know. Like the prior instrument, respondents checked each reason from the list that they think discouraged their parent from talking with them about sex (see Appendix A: Q45 and Q53) and from talking with them about relationships (see Appendix A: Q61 and Q69).

All responses to questions in this section were coded as nominal data. Responses were also summed to indicate the total number of adolescent barriers and parental barriers discouraging the discussion of sexual topics and relationship topics with each parent.

### *Data Analysis*

To answer the first research question of whether or not adolescents perceived their parents to be sources of information for topics like sex and relationships, descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of variability) were examined for each of the various possible sources of information: friends, mother/mother-figure, father/father-figure, other family members, physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor, minister, priest or other religious leader, media, books/internet, school, and other. Next, descriptive analyses (frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of variability) were conducted to determine which parent the adolescent reported talking to about each topic most often. To determine whether conversations between parents and adolescents about sex, were independent of or interdependent



with communications about relationships (research question #2) crosstabs and chi-square tests were computed.

If the adolescents reported talking to their parents about sex and relationships (i.e., rarely, sometimes, or often), the next set of analyses examined what topics they discussed during these conversations (research question #3). Frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of variability were computed separately for sex topics and for relationship topics, and separately for reports of conversations with mothers and with fathers. These analyses allowed for a comparison of topics discussed with each parent and also an indication of the types of topics that parents and adolescents discussed. In other words, are parents and adolescents covering a wide range of topics during their discussions or just touching on a few of the topics surrounding sex and relationships?

The next research question (#4) focused on how adolescents perceived the quality of the conversations they had with their parents about sex and relationships. There were several dimensions used to obtain an overall picture of the adolescents' perception of these conversations: initiation, disclosure, feelings/views recognized, domination, satisfaction, and helpfulness. Frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of variability were examined for sex conversations and for relationships conversations along the described dimensions and separately for conversations with their mother and father.

The last set of analyses examined the factors that facilitated and/or inhibited communications about sex and relationships. First, the associations between communication about sex and relationships with various dimensions of parent-adolescent relationship quality (i.e., parental warmth/support, hostility, monitoring, openness), were examined (research question #5). Parental warmth/support, hostility, monitoring, and openness were correlated with

how often participants reported talking with each parent about sex and relationships (e.g., Did adolescents who reported a more positive relationship with their parent also report more frequent communications with that parent about sex and relationships?).

Finally, to understand possible barriers to parent-adolescent discussions (research question #6) about sex and relationships, descriptive analyses (frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of variability) were computed to first examine the predominate factors that inhibited adolescents, as well as factors they think inhibited their parents from having these discussions. These analyses were conducted separately for sex and relationships conversations with each parent. Correlations were computed to describe the distributions for the sum total of sex barriers by how often the adolescent discussed sex and for the sum total of relationships barriers by how often the adolescent discussed relationships (computed separately for mother and for father). For example, did adolescents who reported a greater number of barriers in talking with their mother about sex, also report less frequent discussions with their mother about sex-related topics?

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

In the following chapter results from the online survey are presented. The results are divided into sections that are ordered by the six research questions posed in this study.

#### *Sources of Sex and Relationships Information*

The first question proposed in the current study was “Do adolescents perceive their parents as a source of information for sex and relationships? If so, which parent do they report talking with about these topics most often?” Table 1 shows the sources that participants reported going to for information about sex and relationships, with parents being listed among the top three sources. On average, participants reported that friends ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .789$ ), mothers ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = .884$ ), and fathers ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) had the most influence on their attitudes about sex. Most (81.8%) reported that their friends had some or a lot of influence on their attitudes about sex, compared to 77.6% and 54.7% who reported that their mother/mother-figure and father/father-figure, respectively, had some or a lot of influence. The least amount of influence was reported to come from a physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = .804$ ) and minister, priest, or other religious leader ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ); only 25.3% and 38.9%, respectively, perceived each of these as having some or a lot of influence.

Results were similar for the sources of influence on attitudes about relationships. Friends (94.7%,  $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .634$ ), mothers (91.1%,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .722$ ), and fathers (72.2%,  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .951$ ) had the most influence on the participants’ attitudes about relationships, while the least amount of influence was from a physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor ( $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = .672$ ) and minister, priest, or other religious leader ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ).

While friends, mothers, and fathers had a strong influence on the sex attitudes of participants, these three sources played a larger role in influencing participants' attitudes about relationships.

Table 1.

*Sources of Influence on Sex and Relationships Information (percents)*

|   | Sources of Sex Information |             |      |       | Sources of Relationships Information |             |      |       |
|---|----------------------------|-------------|------|-------|--------------------------------------|-------------|------|-------|
|   | None                       | Very little | Some | A lot | None                                 | Very little | Some | A lot |
| Friends   | 3.5                        | 14.7        | 47.1 | 34.7  | 1.2                                  | 4.1         | 43.5 | 51.2  |
| Mother/mother-figure                                    | 5.9                        | 16.5        | 38.8 | 38.8  | 2.4                                  | 6.5         | 36.1 | 55.0  |
| Father/father-figure                                    | 18.2                       | 27.1        | 32.9 | 21.8  | 8.3                                  | 19.5        | 34.9 | 37.3  |
| Other family members                                    | 27.2                       | 36.1        | 24.9 | 11.8  | 17.1                                 | 30.6        | 33.5 | 18.8  |
| Physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor | 34.1                       | 40.6        | 23.5 | 1.8   | 57.1                                 | 34.1        | 8.2  | .6    |
| Minister, priest, or other religious leader             | 45.9                       | 15.3        | 21.8 | 17.1  | 47.6                                 | 18.2        | 21.2 | 12.9  |
| Media   | 17.2                       | 27.2        | 45.0 | 10.7  | 19.4                                 | 28.8        | 40.6 | 11.2  |
| Books/internet  | 18.3                       | 36.7        | 33.1 | 11.8  | 25.3                                 | 33.5        | 30.0 | 11.2  |
| School  | 28.2                       | 36.8        | 30.7 | 4.3   | 43.0                                 | 43.6        | 12.1 | 1.2   |

*Note.* N = 170. Percents listed above represent the valid percent. Data missing on the following variables for influence on sex attitudes: other family member (n = 1), media (n = 1), books/internet (n = 1), school (n = 7). Data missing on the following variables for influence on relationship attitudes: mother (n = 1), father (n = 1), and school (n = 5).

Additionally, participants reported that schools had a larger influence on their attitudes about sex than on their attitudes about relationships (35.0% vs. 13.3% for some to a lot of influence). Looking at the responses for the influence of the media, a similar pattern is observed: 55.7% and 51.8%, respectively, reported that the media influenced their attitudes about sex and relationships. Comparing these two sources shows that the media has greater influence than does school on female adolescents' attitudes about both sex and relationships (but still less than that compared to friends and parents).

Table 2 compares the parent with whom participants reported talking to about sex and relationships most often. With regard to which parent the respondent talked about sex and relationships with most often, mothers were most often reported by the participants as the primary parent for whom they talked with about sex (68.2%) and relationships (74.7%).

Although only 5.9% never talked about sex or relationships with either parent, 75.9% talked with at least one parent about sex and relationships, and 56.5% talked with their mother about both topics. Of those who never discussed sex with either parent (n = 36), 63.9% (n = 23) did discuss relationships with their mother and 8.3% (n = 3) reported discussing relationships topics with both parents. The majority of the participants (68.2%, n = 116) reported that they talked with their mother the most about sex related topics and 96.6% of these respondents also talked with their mother about relationships either alone (82.8%, n = 96) or with their fathers (13.8%, n = 16). Only, 1.7% (n = 2) of those who talked with their mother about sex reported not talking to either parent about relationships.

Table 2.

*Parent Discussed Relationships and Sex Topics With Most Often*

| Sex Topics                         | Relationships Topics               |                      |                      |                            | Other   | Total      |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------|------------|
|                                    | Never discussed with either parent | Mother/Mother-figure | Father/Father-figure | Both parents equally often |         |            |
| Never discussed with either parent | 10 (5.9)                           | 23 (13.5)            | 0 (0)                | 3 (1.8)                    | 0 (0)   | 36 (21.2)  |
| Mother/Mother-figure               | 2 (1.2)                            | 96 (56.5)            | 1 (0.6)              | 16 (9.4)                   | 1 (0.6) | 116 (68.2) |
| Father/Father-figure               | 0 (0)                              | 4 (2.4)              | 2 (1.2)              | 3 (1.8)                    | 0 (0)   | 9 (5.3)    |
| Both parents equally often         | 0 (0)                              | 3 (1.8)              | 0 (0)                | 4 (2.4)                    | 0 (0)   | 7 (4.1)    |
| Other                              | 0 (0)                              | 1 (0.6)              | 0 (0)                | 0 (0)                      | 1 (0.6) | 2 (1.2)    |
| Total                              | 12 (7.1)                           | 127 (74.7)           | 3 (1.8)              | 26 (15.3)                  | 2 (1.2) | 170 (100)  |

*Note.* N = 170. Percents in parentheses above represent the percentage of participants within the 170 who responded to the question.

Fewer participants talked with their father about sex either alone (5.3%,  $n = 9$ ) or with their mother (4.1%,  $n = 7$ ). When fathers were perceived as the main or shared source of information about sex, 43.8% ( $n = 7$ ) primarily turned to their mothers about relationships. A very small percentage (2.4%) of the 170 participants talked with both parents equally often about sex and relationships. The data show that, overall, mothers are the ones who talk about sex and relationships most often with their adolescent daughters and that parents, and specifically mothers, are discussing both topics with them.

### *Frequency of Parent-Adolescent Sex and Relationships Communication*

After establishing whether parents were sources of information for sex and relationships, the second question proposed in the current study was “Relative to the conversations parents and adolescents have about sex, how often do parents and adolescents communicate about relationships?” Table 3 gives the mean responses for the frequency of sex and relationships communication between parents and daughters.

Table 3.

#### *How Often Participants Talked About Sex and Relationships with Each Parent*

|                                      | Mother |      | Father |      |
|--------------------------------------|--------|------|--------|------|
|                                      | Mean   | SD   | Mean   | SD   |
| Talk with parent about sex           | 2.39   | .918 | 1.49   | .681 |
| Talk with parent about relationships | 3.27   | .869 | 2.14   | .944 |

*Note.*  $N = 170$ . Values are the mean of reported scores on a 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*).

On average, parent-daughter communication about sex occurred rarely with both mothers ( $M = 2.39$ ) and fathers ( $M = 1.49$ ). Looking at communication with mothers, 18.8% never talked to their mother about sex, 34.7% reported rarely talking to their mothers about sex, and 46.5%

talked to their mother sometimes or often. In contrast, participants who reported the frequency with which they talked to their father about sex, 61.2% reported never talking to their father about sex, 29.4% talked rarely, and only 9.4% talked sometimes or often with their father. Still, mothers, on average, talked with their daughters about sex more often than did fathers, and the difference was statistically significant,  $t(169) = 11.46, p < .000$ .

Parent-daughter communication about relationships was slightly more frequent than that for communication about sex, and occurred, on average, sometimes with mothers ( $M = 3.27$ ) but rarely with fathers ( $M = 2.14$ ). Of the 170 who responded to the frequency of relationships communication with their mothers, 4.1% never talked with their mothers about relationships, 15.3% talked rarely, and 80.6% talked sometimes or often. Results for conversations with fathers about relationships were similar to that of conversations about sex ( $n = 170$ ): 30.0% never talked, 34.1% talked rarely, and 35.8% talked sometimes or often with their father about these topics. Similar to the findings about sex conversations, mothers, on average, talked with their daughters about relationships more often than did fathers, and the difference was statistically significant,  $t(169) = 14.30, p < .000$ .

The next set of analyses focused on how often participants reported talking to each of their parents about sex compared with how often they reported talking to each of their parents about relationships. On average, mothers talked more about relationships than sex (see Table 3,  $t(169) = -13.45, p < .000$ ). As well, conversations with mothers about sex was positively correlated with conversations with them about relationships ( $r = .543, p < .01$ ). This means that the more often participants talked to their mothers about sex, the more often they also talk about relationships, or vice versa. Table 4 further illustrates this pattern of communication about sex and relationships. Of the 170 adolescent female respondents, 2.9% never talked with their mother

about either sex or relationships. For those who never talked about sex with their mothers ( $n = 32$ ), 43.8% ( $n = 14$ ) rarely talked, 28.1% ( $n = 9$ ) sometimes talked, and only 12.5% ( $n = 4$ ) often talked about relationships. Looking at those who rarely talked with their mothers about sex ( $n = 59$ ), 81.4% ( $n = 48$ ) talked about relationships sometimes or often. Of the 79 participants who sometimes or often talked with their mother about sex, 96.2% also sometimes or often talked with their mother about relationships.

Table 4.

*How Often Participants Talk with Mother About Sex and Relationships*

| Discussed Sex | Discussed Relationships |           |           |           | Total     |
|---------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|               | Never                   | Rarely    | Sometimes | Often     |           |
| Never         | 5 (2.9)                 | 14 (8.2)  | 9 (5.3)   | 4 (2.4)   | 32 (18.8) |
| Rarely        | 1 (0.6)                 | 10 (5.9)  | 25 (14.7) | 23 (13.5) | 59 (34.7) |
| Sometimes     | 1 (0.6)                 | 1 (0.6)   | 16 (9.4)  | 42 (24.7) | 60 (35.3) |
| Often         | 0 (0)                   | 1 (0.6)   | 1 (0.6)   | 17 (10.0) | 19 (11.2) |
| Total         | 7 (4.1)                 | 26 (15.3) | 51 (30.0) | 86 (50.6) | 170 (100) |

*Note.*  $N = 170$ . Number (and percentage) of participants within the 170 who responded to both questions.

Similar to findings for mothers, fathers talked more about relationships than sex with their daughters (see Table 3,  $t(169) = -11.04$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Also, conversations with fathers about sex was positively correlated with conversations with them about relationships ( $r = .591$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that the more often female adolescents talked with their fathers about sex, the more often they also talked about relationships. Table 5 further illustrates this pattern. Of the 170 participants who responded to both questions, 28.9% ( $n = 49$ ) reported that they never talked with their father about either sex or relationships. Of the 104 respondents (61.2%) who reported that they never talked with their father about sex, nearly half (47.1%,  $n = 49$ ) also never discussed relationships, but 33.7% ( $n = 35$ ) rarely and 19.2% ( $n = 20$ ) sometimes or often did



discuss relationships with their father. However, of the 50 who reported that they rarely talked with their father about sex, 44.0% (n = 22) also rarely talked about relationships and 52.0% (n = 26) sometimes or often talked about relationships. Of the remaining few (n = 16) who sometimes or often talked about sex, 93.8% (n = 15) also sometimes or often talked about relationships. This shows that approximately half of the respondents are not talking about either sex or relationships with their father; but for those participants who are talking with their father about sex, the majority of them are also talking about relationships.

Table 5.

*How Often Participants Talk with Father About Sex and Relationships*

| Discussed Sex | Discussed Relationships |           |           |          | Total      |
|---------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|
|               | Never                   | Rarely    | Sometimes | Often    |            |
| Never         | 49 (28.9)               | 35 (20.6) | 19 (11.2) | 1 (0.6)  | 104 (61.2) |
| Rarely        | 2 (1.2)                 | 22 (12.9) | 20 (11.8) | 6 (3.5)  | 50 (29.4)  |
| Sometimes     | 0 (0)                   | 1 (0.6)   | 8 (4.7)   | 6 (3.5)  | 15 (8.8)   |
| Often         | 0 (0)                   | 0 (0)     | 0 (0)     | 1 (0.6)  | 1 (0.6)    |
| Total         | 51 (30.0)               | 58 (34.1) | 47 (27.6) | 14 (8.2) | 170 (100)  |

*Note.* N = 170. Number (and percentage) of participants within the 170 who responded to both questions.

Although these results suggest that participants talked less frequently with their fathers than with their mothers about both sex and relationships, there appears to be an association between how often they talked with their mother and their father. For example, conversations with mother about sex was positively correlated with conversations with father about both sex ( $r = .206, p < .01$ ) and relationships ( $r = .285, p < .01$ ). Positive correlations were also found between talk to father about sex and talk to mother about relationships ( $r = .165, p < .05$ ) and between talk to father about relationships and talk to mother about relationships ( $r = .357, p < .01$ ). Although these between parent correlations were not as strong as the within parent

correlations previously presented, they show that if female adolescents are talking with their mothers about sex, they may also be talking with their fathers about sex and relationships.

### *Topics Covered During Sex and Relationships Conversations*

The third research question addressed the specific topics that were discussed during conversations about sex (14 possible topics) and relationships (11 possible topics). These analyses only included those participants who reported that they rarely, sometimes, or often talked with either parent about each topic.

Regarding conversations about sex (see Table 6) more topics were covered during sex conversations with mother ( $n = 138$ ;  $M = 6.71$ ) as opposed to conversations with father ( $n = 66$ ;  $M = 3.91$ ). Paired sample  $t$ -tests were examined to compare the mean number of sex topics covered by mothers with the mean number of sex topics covered by fathers ( $n = 57$  who provided complete data for both questions) and these were found to be statistically significantly different:  $M = 7.67$  vs.  $M = 3.79$ , respectively,  $t(56) = 8.88$ ,  $p < .000$ . The topics most frequently covered during discussions with mothers were: general human sexuality and puberty (92.0%), personal/family values/religious values regarding sex (83.3%), and good/positive choices and sexual decision making (69.6%).

Likewise, the topics most frequently covered during discussions with fathers were: personal/family values/religious values regarding sex (60.6%), good/positive choices and sexual decision making (53.0%), and risks of drinking alcohol and using drugs (48.5%). For conversations about sex with both mothers and fathers, the topics least likely to be covered were: “how far to go” on a date (15.2% and 9.1%), sexual satisfaction/desire (16.7% and 1.5%), and role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship (25.4% and 9.1%).

Table 6.

*Topics Covered During Sex Conversations with Mother and Father*

|  | Mother (n = 138) | Father (n = 66) |
|--|------------------|-----------------|
| General human sexuality and puberty                              | 127 (92.0)       | 18 (27.3)       |
| Personal/family values/religious values regarding sex            | 115 (83.3)       | 40 (60.6)       |
| Good/positive choices and sexual decision making                 | 96 (69.6)        | 35 (53.0)       |
| Whether pre-marital sex is right or wrong                        | 92 (66.7)        | 28 (42.4)       |
| Contraception/birth control                                      | 88 (63.8)        | 15 (22.7)       |
| Risks of drinking alcohol and using drugs                        | 79 (57.2)        | 32 (48.5)       |
| Consequences of teen pregnancy                                   | 61 (44.2)        | 25 (37.9)       |
| Sexual intercourse   | 57 (41.3)        | 8 (12.1)        |
| Parents' own past sexual behaviors and experiences               | 48 (34.8)        | 8 (12.1)        |
| How to resist sexual pressure from dating partners               | 47 (34.1)        | 23 (34.8)       |
| STI/HIV/AIDS information and risk                                | 37 (26.8)        | 13 (19.7)       |
| Role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse | 35 (25.4)        | 6 (9.1)         |
| Sexual satisfaction/desire                                       | 23 (16.7)        | 1 (1.5)         |
| "How far to go" on a date  | 21 (15.2)        | 6 (9.1)         |

*Note.* Number (and valid percentage) of participants who checked off each topic. N-sizes are based on the number of those who responded that they had conversations with their mother or father about sex.

Similar to conversations about sex, mothers are talking about a greater number of topics regarding relationships with their daughters than are fathers ( $M = 6.70$  vs.  $4.62$ ). Paired sample  $t$ -tests were examined to compare the mean number of relationship topics covered by mothers with the mean number of relationship topics covered by fathers ( $n = 57$  who provided complete data for both questions) and these were found to be statistically significantly different:  $M = 7.72$  vs.  $M = 5.46$ , respectively,  $t(56) = 5.84$ ,  $p < .000$ . As shown in Table 7, mothers talked with their daughters most frequently about: personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating (79.8%), love (73.0%), and good/positive choices and relationship decision making (71.8%). Respondents reported that their fathers covered the following topics most often: personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating (62.2%), good/positive choices and relationship decision making (54.6%), and appropriate dating behavior and expectations (51.3%). The topics least likely to be discussed with either mothers or fathers were:

dating abuse (41.1% and 32.8%), how to communicate and manage conflict with your partner (46.0% and 31.1%), and how to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship (51.5% and 30.3%).

Table 7.

*Topics Covered During Relationships Conversations with Mother and Father*

|   | Mother (n =163) | Father (n = 119) |
|---|-----------------|------------------|
| Personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating | 130 (79.8)      | 74 (62.2)        |
| Love  | 119 (73.0)      | 44 (37.0)        |
| Good/positive choices and relationship decision making              | 117 (71.8)      | 65 (54.6)        |
| What to look for in a significant other                             | 113 (69.3)      | 60 (50.4)        |
| Parents' own past dating/relationship behavior and experiences      | 111 (68.1)      | 48 (40.3)        |
| Developing trust and commitment in a relationship                   | 98 (60.1)       | 42 (35.3)        |
| Marital expectations and aspirations                                | 89 (54.6)       | 44 (37.0)        |
| Appropriate dating behavior and expectations                        | 89 (54.6)       | 61 (51.3)        |
| How to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship            | 84 (51.5)       | 36 (30.3)        |
| How to communicate and manage conflict with your partner            | 75 (46.0)       | 37 (31.1)        |
| Dating abuse  | 67 (41.1)       | 39 (32.8)        |

*Note.* Number (and valid percentage) of participants who checked off each topic. N-sizes are based on the number of those who responded that they had conversations with their mother or father about relationships.

*Quality of Parent-Adolescent Sex and Relationships Communication*

The fourth research question proposed in this study was “How do adolescents perceive the quality of those conversations? In other words, who initiates and dominates these conversations, do adolescents feel that their parents are responsive and helpful, and how satisfied are they with these conversations?” With regards to the conversations they had with their mother and father about sex, Table 8 shows that although participants were more likely to initiate sex conversations with their mothers than with their fathers ( $t(58) = 6.87, p < .000$ ),<sup>4</sup> on average,

<sup>4</sup> All t-tests reported here are based on comparisons among the number of respondents who reported having conversations with both mothers and fathers about sex either *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* (n = 59). Mean scores presented in Table 8 and reported in the text above are similar to the mean scores for the 59 respondents t-tests were computed for.

they reported rarely initiating sex conversations with their mother ( $M = 2.50$ ) and their father ( $M = 1.97$ ). In contrast, respondents reported that, on average, their mothers ( $M = 2.91$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.27$ ) initiated conversations more often than they did, although these differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level (mothers:  $t(58) = -1.78, p = .08$ ; fathers:  $t(58) = -1.96, p = .06$ ). Additionally, participants reported that their mothers were more likely to initiate sex conversations than were their fathers ( $t(58) = 6.80, p < .000$ ).

On average, participants were more likely to disclose their feelings and views about sex to their mothers than their fathers ( $t(56) = 4.89, p < .000$ ), sometimes disclosing their feelings and views to their mothers ( $M = 2.83$ ) but rarely to their fathers ( $M = 2.46$ ). As well, they felt that their feelings and views were, on average, sometimes recognized by their mothers ( $M = 3.27$ ) and their fathers ( $M = 2.95$ ), although mothers were more likely than fathers to recognize their feelings and views about sex ( $t(56) = 3.10, p < .01$ ).

Table 8.

*Perception of Sex Communication with Mother and Father*

|   | Mother |      |      | Father |      |      |
|---|--------|------|------|--------|------|------|
|   | N      | Mean | SD   | N      | Mean | SD   |
| Adolescent initiated conversations          | 138    | 2.50 | .938 | 66     | 1.97 | .841 |
| Parent initiated conversations              | 138    | 2.91 | .749 | 66     | 2.27 | .646 |
| Adolescent disclosed feelings/views         | 136    | 2.83 | .812 | 65     | 2.46 | .920 |
| Adolescent's feelings/views were recognized | 137    | 3.27 | .818 | 65     | 2.95 | 1.08 |
| Adolescent dominated the conversations      | 138    | 2.28 | .781 | 66     | 2.14 | .802 |
| Parent dominated the conversations          | 138    | 2.86 | .750 | 66     | 2.59 | .859 |

*Note.* Values are the mean of reported scores on a 4-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*. N-sizes are based on the number of those who responded that they had conversations with their mother or father about sex.

Regarding who dominated these conversations, participants reported doing so rarely with their mothers ( $M = 2.28$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.14$ ), whereas mothers ( $M = 2.86$ ) and fathers ( $M =$

2.59) were more likely to dominate these discussions (mothers:  $t(58) = -4.62, p < .000$ ; fathers:  $t(58) = -2.67, p < .01$ ). Comparing mothers and fathers, mothers were more likely than fathers to dominate the conversations about sex ( $t(58) = 3.58, p < .01$ ). Likewise, participants were more likely to dominate conversations about sex with their mothers than with their fathers ( $t(58) = 2.38, p < .05$ ).

With regards to participants' perceptions of the quality of their conversations with their parents about relationships, similar patterns emerged. Participants were more likely to initiate relationships conversations with their mothers than with their fathers ( $t(114) = 7.81, p < .000$ ).<sup>5</sup> As shown in Table 9, participants reported that they initiated conversations sometimes with their mothers ( $M = 3.04$ ) and that their mothers also sometimes initiated these conversations ( $M = 3.02$ ). Contrastingly, participants ( $M = 2.58$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.47$ ) rarely to sometimes initiated relationships conversations. Additionally, participants reported that their mothers were more likely to initiate relationships conversations than were their fathers ( $t(114) = 7.99, p < .000$ ).

Although participants were more likely to disclose their feelings and views about relationships to their mothers than their fathers ( $t(113) = 5.61, p < .000$ ), they sometimes felt comfortable disclosing their feelings and views to their mothers ( $M = 3.18$ ) and rarely to sometimes felt comfortable disclosing their feelings and views to their fathers ( $M = 2.83$ ). With regards to their feelings and views being recognized during conversations about relationships, participants reported that their mothers ( $M = 3.38$ ) and fathers ( $M = 3.20$ ) sometimes recognized their feelings and views, although mothers were more likely than fathers to recognize their feelings and views about relationships ( $t(112) = 3.97, p < .000$ ). Last, as presented in Table 9,

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<sup>5</sup> All t-tests reported here are based on comparisons among the number of respondents who reported having conversations with both mothers and fathers about relationships either *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* ( $n = 115$ ). Mean scores presented in Table 9 and reported in the text above are similar to the mean scores for the 115 respondents t-tests were computed for.

participants reported that they and their parents, on average, rarely to sometimes dominated conversations about relationships. Unlike conversations about sex, conversations about relationships were not dominated more by mothers ( $t(114) = -.584, p = .561$ ) or fathers ( $t(114) = -.598, p = .551$ ). However, mothers were more likely to dominate these conversations than fathers ( $t(114) = 3.38, p < .01$ ), and participants were more likely to dominate these conversations with their mothers than with their fathers ( $t(114) = 4.10, p < .000$ ).

Table 9.

*Perception of Relationships Communication with Mother and Father*

|   | Mother |      |      | Father |      |      |
|---|--------|------|------|--------|------|------|
|   | N      | Mean | SD   | N      | Mean | SD   |
| Adolescent initiated conversations          | 162    | 3.04 | .681 | 117    | 2.58 | .790 |
| Parent initiated conversations              | 162    | 3.02 | .595 | 118    | 2.47 | .701 |
| Adolescent disclosed feelings/views         | 161    | 3.18 | .805 | 117    | 2.83 | .813 |
| Adolescent's feelings/views were recognized | 161    | 3.38 | .766 | 117    | 3.20 | .801 |
| Adolescent dominated the conversations      | 162    | 2.78 | .788 | 117    | 2.56 | .771 |
| Parent dominated the conversations          | 162    | 2.88 | .657 | 117    | 2.63 | .714 |

*Note.* Values are the mean of reported scores on a 4-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*. N-sizes are based on the number of those who responded that they had conversations with their mother or father about relationships.

Comparing the quality of conversations with parents about sex and relationships, paired sample t-tests were conducted with the 55 participants who reported having conversations about both sex and relationships with each parent.<sup>6</sup> Participants were more likely to initiate conversations about relationships than sex with both mothers ( $t(54) = -4.91, p < .000$ ) and fathers ( $t(54) = -7.42, p < .000$ ). Likewise, fathers were more likely to initiate conversations about relationships than sex ( $t(54) = -2.53, p < .05$ ). No significant differences were found in mothers

<sup>6</sup> T-tests are based on comparisons among the number of respondents who reported having conversations with both mothers and fathers about sex and relationships either *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* (n=55). Mean scores for these analyses were similar to those presented in Tables 8 and 9.

initiating sex or relationships conversations. Comparing participants' disclosure about sex and relationships, they were more likely to disclose their feelings and views about relationships than sex to both parents (mothers:  $t(51) = -3.10, p < .01$ ; fathers:  $t(51) = -4.58, p < .000$ ). Although, fathers were more likely to recognize their daughters' feelings and views about relationships than sex ( $t(52) = -2.37, p < .05$ ), no significant differences were found for mothers ( $t(52) = -1.00, p = .322$ ). As well, participants were more likely to dominate the conversations about relationships than sex with both parents (mothers:  $t(54) = -5.74, p < .000$ ; fathers:  $t(54) = -4.91, p < .000$ ). Additionally, fathers were more likely to dominate the conversations about relationships than sex ( $t(54) = -2.36, p < .05$ ).

Next, analyses examined how satisfied participants were with these conversations and how helpful they found them. As shown in Table 10, participants felt that the sex conversations they had with their mothers ( $M = 4.60$ ) and fathers ( $M = 4.42$ ) were, on average, somewhat to very satisfying. With regards to helpfulness, participants found conversations about sex to be, on average, somewhat helpful with both mothers ( $M = 3.07$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.94$ ). Paired samples t-test did not reveal significant differences in satisfaction or helpfulness of the conversations about sex by parents' gender. In contrast, respondents were very satisfied with conversations they had with their mothers ( $M = 4.83$ ) and somewhat to very satisfied with conversations they had with their fathers ( $M = 4.47$ ) about relationships. As well, participants reported that the relationships conversations with their mothers ( $M = 3.25$ ) and fathers ( $M = 3.02$ ) were somewhat helpful. Comparisons by parent's gender revealed that the conversations participants had with their mothers about relationships were more satisfying ( $t(113) = 3.78, p < .000$ ) and helpful ( $t(113) = 4.25, p < .000$ ) than those they had with their fathers about relationships.



Last, t-tests were conducted to compare how satisfied participants were and how helpful they found both sex and relationships conversations (n=55).<sup>7</sup> On average, participants were slightly more satisfied with the conversations they had with their parents about relationships than the conversations they had with their parents about sex (mothers:  $t(54) = -4.18, p < .000$ ; fathers:  $t(54) = -2.30, p < .025$ ). T-tests also showed that, on average, participants found the conversations they had with their parents about relationships to be more helpful than the conversations they had with their parents about sex (mothers:  $t(53) = -3.62, p > .01$ ; fathers:  $t(53) = -2.36, p > .05$ ).

Table 10.

*Perceived Satisfaction and Helpfulness of Sex and Relationships Communication with Mother and Father*

|                             | Mother |      |      | Father |      |      |
|-----------------------------|--------|------|------|--------|------|------|
|                             | N      | Mean | SD   | N      | Mean | SD   |
| Satisfaction <sup>a</sup>   |        |      |      |        |      |      |
| Sex conversations           | 138    | 4.60 | 1.30 | 65     | 4.42 | 1.29 |
| Relationships conversations | 163    | 4.83 | 1.28 | 117    | 4.47 | 1.20 |
| Helpfulness <sup>b</sup>    |        |      |      |        |      |      |
| Sex conversations           | 138    | 3.07 | .75  | 65     | 2.94 | .81  |
| Relationships conversations | 162    | 3.25 | .77  | 117    | 3.02 | .78  |

*Note.* N-sizes are based on the number of those who responded that they had conversations with their mother or father about sex and relationships.

<sup>a</sup> Values are the mean of reported scores on a 6-point scale: 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 2 = *somewhat dissatisfied*, 3 = *slightly dissatisfied*, 4 = *slightly satisfied*, 5 = *somewhat satisfied*, 6 = *very satisfied*.

<sup>b</sup> Values are the mean of reported scores on a 4-point scale: 1 = *very unhelpful*, 2 = *somewhat unhelpful*, 3 = *somewhat helpful*, 4 = *very helpful*.

<sup>7</sup> T-tests are based on comparisons among the number of respondents who reported having conversations with both mothers and fathers about sex and relationships either *rarely*, *sometimes*, or *often* (n=55). Mean scores presented in Table 10 and reported in the text above are similar to the mean scores for the 55 respondents t-tests were computed for.

### *Correlation Between Relationship Quality and Communication*

Because parent-adolescent relationship quality is associated with parent-adolescent communications, this study also examined whether parental warmth/support, hostility, monitoring, and openness correlated with communication about sex and relationships. The results of these correlations are shown in Table 11. Overall, participants reported a very warm and supportive relationship with each parent and rarely viewed their relationship with their parents as hostile. As well, respondents indicated that, on average, mothers often ( $M = 3.65$ ) and fathers sometimes ( $M = 3.01$ ) monitored their activities. Participants also reported a relationship with their mothers ( $M = 3.03$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.86$ ) that was sometimes open.

Table 11.

*Correlation between Quality of Parent-Adolescent Relationship and Frequency of Sex and Relationships Communication*

|                | Mother                 |                  |                            | Father                 |                  |                            |
|----------------|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
|                | Mean (SD) <sup>a</sup> | Sex <sup>b</sup> | Relationships <sup>b</sup> | Mean (SD) <sup>a</sup> | Sex <sup>b</sup> | Relationships <sup>b</sup> |
| Warmth/Support | 3.73 (.485)            | .313**           | .430**                     | 3.48 (.746)            | .259**           | .443**                     |
| Hostility      | 2.51 (.745)            | -.230**          | -.371**                    | 2.24 (.794)            | .010             | .036                       |
| Monitoring     | 3.65 (.533)            | .344**           | .502**                     | 3.01 (.851)            | .299**           | .497**                     |
| Openness       | 3.03 (.603)            | .557**           | .604**                     | 2.86 (.651)            | .332**           | .419**                     |

<sup>a</sup> Values are the mean of reported scores on a 4-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*.

<sup>b</sup> Correlation values for quality of parent-adolescent relationship quality indicator by frequency of sex and relationships communication.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Looking at the correlations between the parent-adolescent relationship quality and communication about sex and relationships, the results (see Table 11) show positive and statistically significant correlations between parental warmth, monitoring, and openness with conversations about sex and relationships with both parents. Negative and statistically significant correlations were found between hostility and communication with mothers about sex ( $r = -.230$ )

and relationships ( $r = -.371$ ) but *not* with fathers. Thus, participants who felt they had a more positive relationship with their parent (i.e. greater warmth/support, openness, monitoring) also reported that they communicated with them about sex and relationships more often.

### *Barriers to Parent-Adolescent Sex and Relationships Communication*

The final research question proposed in this study had to do with the barriers that discouraged female adolescents from talking with their parents about sex and relationships (adolescent barriers) and the barriers they believe discouraged their parents from talking with them about these topics (parental barriers). As shown in Table 12, the most common barrier to talking about sex with mothers was embarrassment (61.8%). Similarly, over half of the respondents (56.5%) felt embarrassed to talk with their fathers about this topic, but many (64.7%) also indicated that the most common barrier was that he never brought the subject up.

Although participants reported far fewer barriers to talking with their mothers about relationships, the most frequently reported barriers to relationships conversations with mothers was embarrassment (17.6%) and fear of mothers becoming suspicious and asking too many personal questions (17.6%). The most common reasons participants reported for not talking with their fathers were that he never brought the subject up (47.6%) and the respondent was embarrassed to talk with their fathers about relationships (28.2%). Barriers least often reported for both sex and relationships communication with either parent were ones associated with openness and honesty (e.g., previous discussions not going well, anger, untrue statements, and not knowing the answers). As might be expected, participants were more embarrassed to discuss sex than relationships with both their mothers (61.8% vs. 17.6%) and their fathers (56.5% vs. 28.2%). Similarly, looking at the barriers related to fears, participants were less afraid to discuss relationships than they were to discuss sex with both of their parents.

Table 12.

*Adolescent Barriers to Sex and Relationships Communication*

|  | Conversations with Mother |               | Conversations with Father |               |
|--|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------|
|  | Sex                       | Relationships | Sex                       | Relationships |
| I was embarrassed.   | 105 (61.8)                | 30 (17.6)     | 96 (56.5)                 | 48 (28.2)     |
| I was afraid that s/he would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions. | 63 (37.1)                 | 30 (17.6)     | 29 (17.1)                 | 10 (5.9)      |
| I was afraid of her/his reaction.  | 62 (36.5)                 | 22 (12.9)     | 50 (29.4)                 | 32 (18.8)     |
| These topics were covered in school.   | 59 (34.7)                 | 4 (2.4)       | 40 (23.5)                 | 7 (4.1)       |
| S/he never brought up the subject.   | 55 (32.4)                 | 21 (12.4)     | 110 (64.7)                | 81 (47.6)     |
| I already knew everything I needed to know.  | 43 (25.3)                 | 13 (7.6)      | 27 (15.9)                 | 8 (4.7)       |
| S/he asked me why I wanted to know.  | 28 (16.5)                 | 13 (7.6)      | 6 (3.5)                   | 11 (6.5)      |
| S/he gave me a lecture.  | 24 (14.1)                 | 28 (16.5)     | 21 (12.4)                 | 26 (15.3)     |
| S/he tried to get me to conform to his/her beliefs.                                    | 22 (12.9)                 | 17 (10.0)     | 10 (5.9)                  | 10 (5.9)      |
| S/he was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic.   | 17 (10.0)                 | 20 (11.8)     | 12 (7.1)                  | 18 (10.6)     |
| S/he did not treat me as an equal.   | 13 (7.6)                  | 10 (5.9)      | 13 (7.6)                  | 12 (7.1)      |
| S/he was not supportive, trustworthy or empathetic.                                    | 12 (7.1)                  | 12 (7.1)      | 10 (5.9)                  | 10 (5.9)      |
| S/he wasn't around when I wanted to talk.  | 10 (5.9)                  | 9 (5.3)       | 14 (8.2)                  | 15 (8.8)      |
| Previous discussions about these topics with her/him did not go well.                  | 10 (5.9)                  | 11 (6.5)      | 4 (2.4)                   | 6 (3.5)       |
| S/he was not open/honest with me.  | 9 (5.3)                   | 8 (4.7)       | 6 (3.5)                   | 7 (4.1)       |
| S/he didn't really know the answers to my questions.                                   | 4 (2.4)                   | 7 (4.1)       | 6 (3.5)                   | 12 (7.1)      |
| S/he got angry when I asked.   | 3 (1.8)                   | 2 (1.2)       | 2 (1.2)                   | 4 (2.4)       |
| S/he told me things that were not true.  | 3 (1.8)                   | 5 (2.9)       | 3 (1.8)                   | 5 (2.9)       |

*Note.* N = 170. Number (and valid percentage) of participants who checked off each barrier.

When looking at the parental barriers to communication about sex and relationships (as shown in Table 13), 22.9% and 24.7% of respondents reported that they did not know what barriers inhibited their mothers and fathers, respectively, from talking to them about sex and 27.1% and 26.5% did not know what barriers inhibited each parent from talking to them about

relationships.<sup>8</sup> Still, respondents thought that the most common parental barriers to sex communication with their mother were her not knowing how to bring it up (35.9%), not knowing this was a relevant topic in the respondent's life (34.7%), and feeling embarrassed (27.1%). For fathers, respondents felt the most common barriers to not talking about sex were embarrassment (48.8%), thinking mothers were talking with them instead (47.1%), and not knowing how to bring up the topic of sex (32.9%).

Looking at relationships communication, there was not a single factor that predominately stood out as barrier for most participants. Still, the most common parental barriers reported by respondents included being afraid of prying (17.1% for mothers and 14.7% for fathers), their parents not taking their relationships seriously (15.9% for mothers and 19.4% for fathers), and not knowing how to bring it up (13.5% for mothers and 20.0% for fathers). They perceived that their fathers were embarrassed (21.8%) and not aware that the topics were relevant (16.5%) to their lives. Interestingly, the largest parental barrier for fathers was thinking that their mothers were having these conversations with their daughters (34.1%), the opposite was not true for mothers (1.2%). Overall, embarrassment and lack of knowledge appeared to be the greatest barriers parents were perceived as having in talking about sex and relationships with the participants.

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the respondents who check "I don't know" to this question still checked other responses suggesting that in addition to those that they checked off, there may have been other barriers they were not aware of.

Table 13.

*Parental Barriers to Sex and Relationships Communication*

|   | Conversations with Mother |               | Conversations with Father |               |
|---|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------|
|   | Sex                       | Relationships | Sex                       | Relationships |
| S/he didn't know how to bring it up.  | 61 (35.9)                 | 23 (13.5)     | 56 (32.9)                 | 34 (20.0)     |
| S/he was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life.  | 59 (34.7)                 | 19 (11.2)     | 49 (28.8)                 | 28 (16.5)     |
| S/he was embarrassed.   | 46 (27.1)                 | 9 (5.3)       | 83 (48.8)                 | 37 (21.8)     |
| S/he thought I was too young to want to talk about sex/relationships.   | 42 (24.7)                 | 20 (11.8)     | 41 (24.1)                 | 25 (14.7)     |
| I don't know.   | 39 (22.9)                 | 46 (27.1)     | 42 (24.7)                 | 45 (26.5)     |
| S/he was afraid I wouldn't be honest.   | 29 (17.1)                 | 16 (9.4)      | 12 (7.1)                  | 4 (2.4)       |
| S/he was afraid I would think s/he was prying.  | 28 (16.5)                 | 29 (17.1)     | 16 (9.4)                  | 25 (14.7)     |
| S/he thought I was learning about sex and relationships in school.  | 26 (15.3)                 | 5 (2.9)       | 27 (15.9)                 | 5 (2.9)       |
| S/he was afraid that talking would encourage me to have sex/date.   | 25 (14.7)                 | 5 (2.9)       | 18 (10.6)                 | 8 (4.7)       |
| S/he did not take my relationships seriously.   | 25 (14.7)                 | 27 (15.9)     | 27 (15.9)                 | 33 (19.4)     |
| S/he didn't know how to answer my questions.  | 21 (12.4)                 | 10 (5.9)      | 37 (21.8)                 | 23 (13.5)     |
| S/he was afraid I wouldn't take her/him seriously.  | 11 (6.5)                  | 10 (5.9)      | 10 (5.9)                  | 9 (5.3)       |
| S/he was afraid I would ask something s/he didn't know the answer to.   | 10 (5.9)                  | 5 (2.9)       | 8 (4.7)                   | 11 (6.5)      |
| S/he had her/his own bad experiences with sex and relationships and didn't think s/he should talk about it with me. | 9 (5.3)                   | 11 (6.5)      | 5 (2.9)                   | 8 (4.7)       |
| S/he thought my other parent was talking to me about sex and relationships.   | 3 (1.8)                   | 2 (1.2)       | 80 (47.1)                 | 58 (34.1)     |

*Note.* N = 170. Number (and valid percentage) of participants who checked off each barrier.

Lastly, a sum score of adolescent and parental barriers was computed for sex and relationships conversations (see Table 14). Participants reported an average of 3.18 barriers in talking about sex and 1.54 in talking about relationships with their mother. In regards to talking with their fathers, they reported an average of 2.70 barriers to sex conversations and 1.89 barriers to relationships conversations. Regarding parental barriers, participants perceived their mothers

having an average of 2.55 barriers to sex conversations and 1.39 barriers to relationships conversations, while they perceived fathers as having 3.01 barriers to sex conversations and 2.08 barriers to relationships conversations. Additionally, only 11.2% and 11.8% of the 170 participants reported no barriers to sex communication with their mothers and fathers, respectively. Regarding parental barriers, 14.7% and 11.2% of participants perceived their mother and father, respectively, as having no barriers to sex communication. In contrast, a larger percentage of participants reported no barriers to relationships communication with their mothers (38.2%) and fathers (24.7%); and 28.2% and 17.1% viewed their mothers and fathers, respectively, as having no barriers to talking with them about relationships.

Table 14.

*Mean Number of Barriers to Sex and Relationships Communication for Adolescents and Parents*

|                                 | Sex Conversations |      |                | Relationships Conversations |      |                |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------|----------------|-----------------------------|------|----------------|
|                                 | Mean              | SD   | r <sup>a</sup> | Mean                        | SD   | r <sup>b</sup> |
| Adolescent barriers with mother | 3.18              | 2.44 | -.408**        | 1.54                        | 2.02 | -.300**        |
| Mothers barriers                | 2.55              | 1.99 | -.310**        | 1.39                        | 1.48 | -.296**        |
| Adolescent barriers with father | 2.70              | 2.28 | -.019          | 1.89                        | 2.26 | -.242**        |
| Fathers barriers                | 3.01              | 2.56 | -.036          | 2.08                        | 2.19 | -.228**        |

*Note.* N = 170. Values are the mean of reported barriers on an 18-point scale for adolescents and 14-point scale for parents.

<sup>a</sup>Correlation values for the sum total of communication barriers by frequency of sex communications by parent gender.

<sup>b</sup>Correlation values for the sum total of communication barriers by frequency of relationships communications by parent gender.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

To assess the association between the number of adolescent and parental barriers with how often participants communicated with their parents about sex and relationships, correlations were computed. As illustrated in Table 14, all of the correlations between barriers and frequency of communication were in the expected, negative, direction: the fewer number of barriers to

communication for either parent or daughter, the more frequent the communications were with each parent (for communications about sex and relationships). All correlations were statistically significant with the exception of those between conversations with fathers about sex and barriers to these conversations for daughters and fathers. Thus, participants who felt that there were fewer barriers to conversations about sex for them and their mothers also communicated more frequently with their mother about sex. As well, participants who felt that there were fewer adolescent and parental barriers to conversations about relationships with both their mothers and fathers communicated more frequently about relationships with each parent.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### *Discussion*

The purpose of this study was to better understand the extent and nature of parent-adolescent communication regarding relationships and to compare the conversations these dyads have about relationships to those about sex. Overall, the current study examined the frequency of sex and relationship communication between parents and adolescent females, the specific topics discussed, how the adolescents perceive the quality of these communications, and the barriers inhibiting these discussions. The results of this study provide evidence that parents and adolescent females are talking about both sex *and* relationships, albeit not frequently and the topics of conversations are limited.

As the literature suggests, results of this study confirm that friends and parents are among the top sources through which adolescent females learn about sex (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Although the literature does not address sources of information for learning about relationships, similar patterns emerged in this study when comparing the sources through which adolescents learn about sex and relationships. As might be expected, adolescents felt that their mothers rather than their fathers were a greater source of information about both sex and relationships (e.g., Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2002; Simons & Conger, 2007). Thus, although parental influence may decline in the adolescent years, adolescent females still perceive their parents as resources for information and education about these topics.

It is important to note here, that although parents were listed among the top sources, friends were the primary source of information for both sex and relationships. In other words,

friends were more of a driving force than either mothers or fathers when it came to participants' developing attitudes about sex and relationships. Longitudinal data is needed to determine whether parents' influence comes first or friends influence does. It may be that parents are influencing their adolescents more through monitoring their choice of friends or peer group rather than through direct interaction. In turn, peer groups may then be influencing the adolescents' attitudes about sex and relationships. Or, perhaps parents' influence is strongest when adolescents are younger and developing their attitudes about sex and relationships. Although they get older and their peers become more influential, the attitudes they developed when they were younger still remain strong.

In contrast to the Kaiser Family Foundation survey, the current study found that schools were less often reported as a source of information about sex and particularly about relationships. This is interesting because by the time adolescents enter high school many of them have encountered some form of sex education focused on biological development and abstinence or other methods for preventing sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Borawski, Trapl, Lovegreen, Colabianchi, & Block, 2005; Kirby, 2006). While some of these programs may teach about sex, very few (if any) include relationship education. This is consistent with the results of this study which show that schools had a greater, albeit modest, influence on participants' attitudes about sex than upon their attitudes about relationships.

Perhaps adolescents in this study did not list school as one of their primary sources of relationship information because many of them were exposed solely to either developmental curriculum or abstinence-only education. Empirical studies on abstinence-only programs show them to be one-sided and ineffective and unproductive, leaving adolescents unprepared for future relationships. In the short term, abstinence-only programs might persuade some adolescents to

wait until marriage before engaging in a dating or sexual relationship. However, those adolescents that later become involved in a romantic relationship or decide to become sexually active are left with no information or skills on how to make mature decisions and to protect themselves (Bleakley, Hennessy, & Fishbein, 2006; Borawski et. al, 2005; Kirby, 2006). These types of curriculum may be developmentally appropriate for younger grade levels where fewer students are engaging in romantic relationships or sexual intercourse (Kirby), but for older students beginning to embark on these types of relationships, more realistic and skill-based sex and relationship education programs are needed, which teach adolescents the *practical* skills they need to know. It might be that adolescents are looking to their parents, rather than school, to teach them these skills and prepare them for future relationships.

The results of this study do confirm that female adolescents are turning to their parents to learn about sex and relationships, albeit not frequently. In fact, only a small percentage of the total sample reported that they never talked to their parents about either sex or relationships. Parent-adolescent communication about sex occurred rarely with both mothers and fathers while parent-adolescent communication about relationships occurred sometimes with mothers but rarely with fathers. Mothers were most often reported by the participants as the primary parent for whom they talked with about sex and relationships. Although adolescents are talking with their parents about these topics, it seems that only rarely or sometimes are they engaging in these conversations, and that they are talking more often with their mothers than their fathers. This is in line with the literature which shows low rates of parent-adolescent sexual communication, with particularly low rates for father-adolescent sexual communication (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998). The results of this study suggest that the same patterns are true for parent-daughter communication about relationships.

Comparing parent-adolescent sex communication to relationships communication, it appears that adolescent females are more often talking with their parents about relationships than sex. For example, of those participants who never discussed sex with either parent, 61.9% did discuss relationships with their mother and 9.5% discussed relationships with both parents; in contrast, only 3.3% of those who talked with their mother about sex reported not talking to either parent about relationships. Thus, a much smaller percentage of respondents said that they never talked about relationships, but did talk about sex. This is important as it shows that parents and adolescent females are, most likely, talking about sex within the context of relationships, as opposed to a stand-only topic. Perhaps, relationships are a less sensitive topic, and therefore, easier for parents and adolescents to discuss and use as an entrance to conversations about sex.

Literature on parent-adolescent communication about sex suggests that when parents and adolescents do talk about sex, parents tend to be more indirect than direct and focus on just one topic, rather than a range of topics. During these conversations, parents stick to “safe topics”, such as biology and developmental changes and general human sexuality (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard et al., 2002; Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000; Raffaelli et al.; Martino), rather than practical skills or more sensitive issues surrounding sex and relationships. Consistent with this research, the current study also shows that parents talked with their daughters mostly about “safe” topics. Those topics most frequently covered were: personal/family values/religious values regarding sex, general human sexuality and puberty. Although parents talked about more than just one topic during sex conversations with their female adolescents, it seems that during the middle and high school years parents are talking with their daughters about very few topics related to sex (mothers covered an average of 6.7 topics and fathers covered 3.9 topics). One difference found was that parents in this study also talked about good/positive choices, sexual

decision making, and pre-marital sex. Still, parents generally did not talk about more practical or skills-based topics such as, “how far to go” on a date, sexual intercourse, sexual satisfaction/desire, sexual pressure, STI/HIV, and the role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship. Thus, results of this study confirm that parents may be missing the topics that adolescents are most curious about and feel are most relevant to their lives.

Although the existing literature has not looked specifically at topics covered during relationships conversations between parents and adolescents, a similar pattern to that of sex conversations was found in this study in regard to topics covered during relationships conversations. During the middle and high school years, participants reported that mothers covered an average of 6.7 topics and fathers covered an average of 4.6 topics. The topics most frequently covered during conversations between parents and their daughters about relationships included: personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating, good/positive choices and relationship decision making, love, and appropriate dating behavior and expectations. These more general topics are in contrast to the more specific topics that rarely came up in discussions about relationships between parents and adolescents: dating abuse, how to communicate and manage conflict with your partner, trust and commitment in a relationship, and how to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship. Given the high incidence of dating abuse among teens (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006; Foshee, et al., 1996; Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O’Learly & Cano, 1997; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Molitor & Tolman, 1998), it is imperative that parents begin to realize the importance of covering these topics during conversations with their adolescents. Comparing mothers and fathers, more topics

were covered during sex and relationships conversations with mothers as opposed to conversations with fathers.

Despite the fact that parents and daughters do not discuss more specific topics, they report positive experiences and do seem to feel satisfied with the conversations that they had with their parents regarding sex and relationships. As might be expected, participants rarely initiated sex conversations with either parent whereas they sometimes initiated relationships conversations with their mothers, but rarely did so with their fathers. On the other hand, mothers initiated conversations about both sex and relationships sometimes, but fathers rarely initiated either conversation. During these conversations participants disclosed their feelings sometimes to their mothers but rarely did so to their fathers, which is consistent with the literature showing greater self-disclosure of females, especially, to mothers (Noller & Bagi, 1985). More importantly is that participants felt like their feelings and views were sometimes recognized during sex conversations and sometimes or often during relationships conversations. In other words, the current sample tended to feel comfortable being open and honest with their parents about what they were thinking and feeling about these topics, and when they did disclose, their parents were receptive to what they had to say and acknowledged their feelings and thoughts. This is important because if adolescents feel that their feelings and views are not recognized they are more likely to stop talking to their parents about these topics; whereas adolescents who perceive that their parents are recognizing and validating their thoughts and feelings are more likely to communicate openly with their parents (Dailey, 2006). Looking at who dominated the conversations, parents dominated sex and relationships conversations sometimes while participants dominated sex conversations rarely and relationships conversations rarely to sometimes.

Additionally, participants in this sample felt that the sex and relationships conversations that they had with their parents were somewhat satisfying and helpful. The sex and relationships conversations they had with their mothers were somewhat more satisfying than those they had with their fathers, and the relationships conversations they had with both parents were more satisfying than the conversations they had about sex with either parent. Yet, participants felt that conversations with both parents about sex and relationships were somewhat helpful. Although this study did not include measures of adolescent sexual and relationship behavior, future studies might look at the association between adolescents' perceptions of sex and relationships conversations with their parents and their subsequent behavior. In line with the literature (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Dailey, 2006; Heller, et al., 2006; Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998; Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2002; Noller & Bagi, 1985; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Simons & Conger, 2007; Swain, Ackerman, & Ackerman, 2006) and the other results found in this study, female adolescents felt that the conversations they had with their mothers about these topics were, on average, more positive, satisfying, and helpful than the conversations they had with their fathers. Overall, it seems that the conversations that parents and their female adolescents had about relationships were more positive than those they had about sex. For instance, participants were more likely to initiate those conversations and they disclosed more of their feelings and views about relationships and felt that those were recognized by both parents.

This study also examined the overall relationship quality between parent and adolescent since this is likely to influence the extent and quality of communications between parents and adolescents (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Heller, Robinson, Henry, & Plunkett, 2006; Dailey, 2006; Simons & Conger, 2007). Participants in this study, on average, reported positive relationships

with each parent: high levels of warmth/support, monitoring, and openness, and low levels of hostility between parent and adolescent. Adolescents showed, on average, a more positive relationship with mothers than with fathers which is consistent with past research (e.g., Barnes & Olson, 1985; Dailey; Heller, et al.). In other words, mothers more often monitored their daughters' activities and maintained a more open relationship with them than did fathers. This may explain the earlier findings indicating that respondents turned to their mothers more often than to their fathers to discuss sex and relationships.

Results of this study confirm that the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship is associated with the frequency of communication. All of the correlations between relationship quality and communication were statistically significant and in the expected direction, with the exception of daughter-father hostility. Positive and statistically significant correlations were found between parental warmth/support, monitoring, openness, and conversations about sex and relationships with both parents. In other words, parents and female adolescents with a relationship characterized by warmth/support, openness, and monitoring were also more likely to have more frequent discussions about sex (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Hartos & Power, 2000; Simons & Conger, 2007) and relationships. Negative and statistically significant correlations were found between hostility and communication with mothers about sex, where participants who perceived lower degrees of hostility in their relationship with their mother were more likely to talk about sex and relationships with her. This study did not find a statistically significant association between adolescent-father hostility and communication about either sex or relationships. The results related to parent-adolescent relationship quality and communication are important to understand since a positive relationship between parents and daughters (i.e. high levels of warmth/support, monitoring, openness and low levels of hostility) may be a prerequisite



for positive and effective conversations between them (Noller, 1984). In other words, parents and female adolescents who have a negative relationship and try to discuss sensitive topics like sex and relationships may find these conversations less satisfying and useful.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, there are many barriers cited in the literature that inhibit parent-adolescent communication about sex (e.g., Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; Meschke et al., 2000; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Raffaelli et al., 1998), but one of the goals of this study was to see if similar barriers existed to conversations about relationships. Indeed, when comparing factors that inhibited relationships conversation between parents and daughters, similar barriers were reported by participants. The most common parental barriers to conversations about relationships as perceived by adolescents were not knowing how to bring up the topics, embarrassment, fear of prying, not taking the adolescents' relationships seriously, and a lack of awareness of how relevant the topics (regarding sex) were to the adolescent. This is in line with the existing research which shows that parents often assume that adolescent relationships are insignificant, fleeting, or trivial (Furman, 2002), and are likely to believe that their adolescent is not involved in a romantic relationship yet (Swain et al., 2006). Therefore, they may thus feel that there is no need to discuss relationships with their adolescent. Interestingly, the largest barrier to relationships and sex conversations for father was thinking that the mother was talking to their daughter; however, the opposite barrier was not observed for mothers. Just as the literature shows that adolescents and mothers are more likely to talk about these topics (Hutchinson & Cooney, 1998), perhaps fathers are picking up on the fact that mothers may be talking with their adolescents and assuming they do not need to have these conversations.

The most frequently cited barriers inhibiting participants from talking to their parents about relationships were embarrassment, the parent never bringing the subject up, and the fear that the parent would become suspicious and ask too many personal questions. This goes back to the results found regarding adolescent initiation of sex and relationships which occurred rarely with parents. Adolescents do not want to be the ones to bring up sensitive topics like sex and relationships; rather they will wait until the subject is brought up by their parents (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson). Thus, if parents want to discuss these topics with their daughters, it seems, based on the data presented here, that parents will need to be the ones to bring up the subject.

When looking at the sum scores of barriers inhibiting sex and relationships conversations, on average, the participants said that there were a greater number of barriers inhibiting conversations between them and their fathers about sex and relationships than between them and their mothers. This makes sense when considering the literature which documents greater communication between mothers and adolescents than between fathers and adolescents (e.g., Barnes & Olson, 1985; Dailey, 2006; Simons & Conger, 2007). Dailey (2006) explained that the differences in communication between parents may perhaps be due to the different communication patterns mothers and fathers display when talking with their adolescents.

Additionally, participants felt, on average, there were a greater number of barriers inhibiting conversations between parents and adolescents about sex than about relationships. As mentioned earlier, perhaps conversations about relationships are seen as less sensitive and easier to approach than are conversations about sex. The literature shows that parents are more hesitant to discuss sexual issues with their adolescents, especially those topics closely related to sexual intercourse or those that parents perceive will encourage their adolescents to engage in sexual activities (Hutchinson & Cooney; Jaccard et al., 2000; Meschke et al., 2000; Fitzharris &

Werner-Wilson, 2001; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004). Perhaps, the consequences or risks of discussing relationships are fewer, as perceived by parents, thus those topics are easier to discuss or bring up with their daughters (although findings from this study show they do not occur frequently). Many parents also believe that since the topic of sex is covered in school it is not necessary for them to talk about it at home (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999); however, since most sex education courses do not address relationships-related topics specifically, parents may feel they do need to discuss those topics with their adolescents.

### *Limitations of the Study*

There were several threats to the internal validity of this study that need to be addressed. First was volunteer bias – the college students from the Southeastern University who participated in this study may have been more open with and had a better relationship with their parents than students who chose not to participate in this type of study. It was expected and confirmed that parents and female adolescents who have a more positive and open relationship would have greater and more effective communication about sex and relationships. Although there was some variability on parent-adolescent relationship quality, this study may not have explained the frequency and quality of parent-daughter sex and relationships communication between dyads with an overall more negative or troubled relationship.

Social desirability represented another threat to internal validity. Throughout their participation in the study, the participants may have picked up on the goals of the study. Thus, they might have changed their survey responses in order to “meet” the desired goals of the study, what they thought was being asked of them, or what they perceived to be the most desirable responses. In other words, when responding, participants may have answered as though they had a better relationship and greater communication with their parents than they actually did.

External validity of the study must also be addressed when considering the conclusions that can be drawn from these findings. This refers to the ability to generalize the findings from this study to a larger group of parents and female adolescents. One threat to external validity in this study was reactivity. The participants who completed the survey may have responded differently since they knew they were participating in a study. In other words, on a daily basis students do not necessarily think about their conversations with their parents about sex and relationships. When specifically asked to think about these topics, their answers may have changed. Thus, this survey may not be generalizable to a larger group of female adolescents.

This survey was of a retrospective nature asking college students to think back to the conversations they had with their parents when they were adolescents. Because of this, it was possible that students may not have accurately remembered their conversations about these topics. To help address this threat, a question was added to the survey to help establish the reliability of the college students' responses to the previous sections asking about the conversations they had with their parents growing up. The question for this construct was adapted from the Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III) (Hutchinson, 1999). For both the sex and relationships conversations with their parents, respondents were asked to indicate how easy or difficult it was to remember the amount of sexual and relationships communication they had with their mother/mother-figure. Possible responses were: (1) *very difficult*, (2) *somewhat difficult*, (3) *somewhat easy*, or, (4) *very easy*. Respondents were then asked the same questions regarding sex and relationships communication with their father/father-figure. Overall, students felt it was somewhat easy to remember the conversations they used to have with their parents. The majority of the respondents felt it was somewhat or very easy to

remember the communications they had with their mothers (68.2%) and fathers (60.8%) about sex and with their mothers (84.3%) and fathers (69.1%) about relationships.

Finally, because this study did not include male participants, the results of this study can only be generalized to female adolescents rather than adolescents as a whole. This affects the conclusions which can be drawn from these results since the relationship between daughters and mothers and fathers is different than that of sons with their parents. For example, research shows greater self-disclosure of females to mothers (Noller & Bagi, 1985). Thus, the results in this survey may reflect greater degrees of openness and self-disclosure by respondents than is accurate. Daughters may be more likely to approach their mothers to discuss sex and relationships since it may be more comfortable to discuss sensitive topics like these with the same gender parent, a pattern observed in the findings presented. Looking at some of the open-ended comments to the survey helped to further elucidate the barriers between communication between daughters and their fathers. Some of the statements included:

- I did not discuss sex as often with my father because I am his *little girl*.
- He wasn't the same-sex parent. I also am his baby girl. He didn't exactly want to think about that in context with his daughter. It was a protective barrier, I'm sure.
- I didn't want him to think I wasn't innocent anymore.
- I felt uncomfortable because he's a man and I'm a girl.
- He thought it was my mom's prerogative to discuss this with me because she was the same-sex parent.
- I'd say he was afraid I would be honest. I think he expected me to take care of myself, and didn't want to know because then he'd have to do something about it.
- He didn't want me dating because I was his *little girl*.

These comments show that many participants and parents felt it was more comfortable to discuss these topics with the same-sex parent. Thus, this survey only analyzed the conversations between daughters and their mothers and fathers than between sons and their parents. Future studies should look at the differences in sex and relationships communication between male adolescents and their parents.

In addition, future studies could also further examine how communication patterns are influenced by sexual orientation. In another open-ended comment, one male respondent disclosed that he was gay and thus he felt that there were many other barriers to sex and relationships conversations with his parents which were not covered in this study. Future research seems warranted to better understand the different sets of barriers for gay and lesbian adolescents as well as other diverse groups (e.g., White/Caucasian vs. Black or Hispanic, low socioeconomic status vs. high socioeconomic status).

### *Implications for Practice and Future Research*

As the research regarding parent-adolescent communication about relationships is limited, this study provides a first glance at communication patterns between parents and adolescents on this topic. There are several next steps that can be taken to delve further into this topic. As mentioned above, future studies would benefit from more diverse samples in order to examine whether differences exist for males and adolescents from various racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. To improve reliability, future studies could also survey younger adolescents – those still living with their parents and embarking on dating and relationships. Another step that needs to be explored is the nature of parent-adolescent communication from the parents' perspective. Future studies should survey adolescents *and* their parents to compare answers between the dyads. Based upon the extensive literature highlighting the important role that parents play in protecting their adolescents' from engaging in risky sexual behavior, future studies should explore whether parents play a similar role in protecting their adolescents from risky dating behavior and unhealthy relationships (i.e. dating abuse, maladaptive coping strategies, etc.). Just as parent-adolescent communication about sex decreases negative

outcomes, such as HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy, perhaps parent-adolescent communication about relationships can reduce the instances of dating abuse and harmful relationships.

Still, the findings from the present study related to the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and barriers to communication can offer some help to policy makers and educators designing resources and programs to guide parents in these discussions with their adolescents. These resources would benefit from including tips and strategies for improving the overall quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and communication, lists of topics that adolescents are interested in discussing, recent statistics and information on adolescent relationships in order to better understand the relevance of these topics to adolescents, and strategies and suggestions for helping parents overcome the barriers in talking with their adolescents. Most importantly, these resources should convey to parents the importance of initiating these conversations with their adolescents early and maintaining them regularly, since these conversations are more effective when continued throughout adolescence with varying age and developmentally appropriate topics.

As well, schools could play a more prominent and influential role in educating youth about not only sex, but relationships as well. Although comprehensive sex education programs go further in teaching adolescents practical information, these programs rarely provide a relationship context or framework for sex (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verman, 2002). Comprehensive sex education programs teach adolescents about contraception and how to avoid HIV or STI's, but they are not teaching adolescents what it means to have a healthy relationship and the skills necessary to build such a relationship. In addition to sex education, adolescents need more educational programs and curricula that address feelings, examine choices, cultivate positive skills, reinforce a sense of self-worth, and promote healthy

relationships (Larson et al.). According to Sieving and colleagues (2006), “while sex education is vitally important to preparation for adulthood, it seems all the more critical that youth have opportunities to be involved in prosocial relationships and learn skills for managing the social relationships in which sexual behavior occurs” (p.18). Thus, youth need a context for which *all* relationships (including sexual relationships) should occur.

Recently, schools and out-of-school programs have begun to address this need by offering relationship education. Relationship education focuses on communication and conflict management; teaches values such as commitment, trust, respect, and honesty; and enhances understanding of the choices and behaviors that put adolescents’ physical and emotional health at risk (Kerpelman, 2007). These programs have been shown to be more effective in helping adolescents develop useful approaches to managing conflict, problem-solving, and communicating their needs and views (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004; Kerpelman, 2007; Gardner & Boellaard, 2007). Relationship education teaches adolescents to understand the factors related to healthy and stable relationships, as well as to recognize patterns of unhealthy and abusive relationships. Most importantly, relationship education increases adolescents’ levels of self-efficacy to help them feel empowered to make good choices and stand up for themselves when needed (Kerpelman).

Recent literature shows promising and effective outcomes of relationship programs. For example, students participating in relationship education programs have reported increased abilities to identify unhealthy relationship patterns and resist sexual pressure, more realistic beliefs about relationships and marriage, lower levels of violence and verbal aggression, improvements in family cohesion, and higher quality of parent-adolescent communication (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2007; Gardner, et al., 2004; Pearson, 2004; Gardner & Boellaard, 2007).



These students learn skills that may help prevent violence in their growing serious relationships, such as how to set and openly discuss dating expectations (Gardner & Boellaard). However, research on the efficacy of relationship education for adolescents is new and thus, it is premature to conclude if these programs have lasting effects (Gardner & Boellaard). Still, preliminary results show relationship education to have a positive impact on adolescents' relationship attitudes and knowledge.

As the results of this study show, although parents and adolescents are talking about relationships they are not covering some of the more specific topics, such as communication and conflict management and break-ups. These may be important topics for adolescents to learn about in order to increase the number of adolescents involved in healthy relationships, instead of unhealthy ones. Thus, relationship education can be used to help fill in these gaps. If parents do not feel comfortable or sufficiently knowledgeable about these more specific topics, perhaps relationship education can step in to teach adolescents these much needed skills.

### *Conclusion*

The existent literature on the nature of parent-adolescent communication about sensitive topics is limited to communication about sex. Thus, this study adds to the existent literature in that it helps to explain the nature of parent-adolescent communication about relationships and elucidates the patterns that are similar to those for parent-adolescent communication about sex. This study suggests that, overall, parents and adolescents are communicating with one another about relationships; yet this communication is happening infrequently. Additionally, parents are talking about more general relationship topics during these conversations and may not be covering the more relevant and necessary topics to their adolescents. When looking at the barriers inhibiting relationship communication between parents and adolescents similar patterns

emerge to the barriers inhibiting sex communication, mainly embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and not knowing how to bring the subject up. The results from the current study can help parents in overcoming these barriers and support them in having relationships discussions with their adolescents. If parent-adolescent communication about sex can reduce risky adolescent sexual behavior, perhaps parent-adolescent communication on issues related to relationships may also be the key to protecting adolescents from risky dating behavior and unhealthy relationships.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Parent-Teen Communication Online Survey*<sup>9</sup>

#### **Section 2: Tell us a little about you...**

2. What is your current age?

3. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

4. What race do you consider yourself to be?

- ☐ White (non-Hispanic)
- ☐ Black (non-Hispanic)
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ American Indian
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

5. During your middle/high school years, who did you live with all the time (or most of the time if you lived in multiple households)?

- ☐ Both of your original (biological or adoptive) parents
- ☐ An original (biological or adoptive parent) and a stepparent
- ☐ A single parent
- ☐ A relative but not a parent (Grandparent, Aunt, Uncle, Sister, etc.)
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

6. Which statement best describes the CURRENT relationship between your original biological/adoptive parents?

- ☐ Married to each other ➡ Skip to #14
- ☐ Never married to each other ➡ Skip to #7
- ☐ Divorced from each other ➡ Skip to #10

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<sup>9</sup> Limited to questions used in the current study.

### **Section 5: Tell us a little about your parents...**

For each of the parents whom you lived with the most, check the responses below that are most appropriate.

14. What is the highest level of education your mother/mother-figure has obtained?

- ☐ I do not have a mother/mother-figure
- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Trade/Vocational school
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Community college graduate
- ☐ College graduate
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctor/Lawyer/Other doctorate

15. What is the highest level of education your father/father-figure has obtained?

- ☐ I do not have a father/father-figure
- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Trade/Vocational school
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Community college graduate
- ☐ College graduate
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctor/Lawyer/Other doctorate

16. What is the approximate annual income of your parents whom you lived with the most during your middle and high school years?

- ☐ Less than \$20,000
- ☐ \$20,000-\$29,000
- ☐ \$30,000-\$39,000
- ☐ \$40,000-\$49,000
- ☐ \$50,000-\$59,000
- ☐ \$60,000-\$69,000
- ☐ \$70,000-\$79,000
- ☐ \$80,000-\$89,000
- ☐ \$90,000-\$99,000
- ☐ \$100,000 or More
- ☐ I don't know

### **Section 9: Where did you learn about sex?**

Teens learn about sexuality from many different sources in their lives. Think back to your middle and high school years...

26. How much influence did each of the following sources have on your attitudes about sex.

*Response categories: (1) None, (2) Very little, (3) Some, (4) A lot*

- a) Friends
- b) Mother/mother-figure
- c) Father/father-figure
- d) Other family members
- e) Physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor (including personnel at family planning clinic)
- f) Minister, priest, or other religious leader
- g) Media
- h) Books/internet
- i) School (teacher/sex education course)
- j) Other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

*Source:* Bennett, S.M., & Dickinson, W.B. (1998) Sex Education Inventory: Preferred and Actual Sources (SEI).

27. Which parent did you discuss sex-related topics with most often?

- ☐ Never discussed with either parent
- ☐ Mother/mother-figure
- ☐ Father/father-figure
- ☐ Both parents equally often
- ☐ Other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

*Source:* Bennett, S.M., & Dickinson, W.B. (1998) Sex Education Inventory: Preferred and Actual Sources (SEI).

## **Section 10: Where did you learn about relationships?**

Teens learn about relationships from many different sources in their lives. Think back to your middle and high school years...

28. How much influence each of the following sources have on your attitudes about relationships.

*Response categories: (1) None, (2) Very little, (3) Some, (4) A lot*

- a) Friends
- b) Mother/mother-figure
- c) Father/father-figure
- d) Other family members
- e) Physician/nurse, professional sex educator or counselor (including personnel at family planning clinic)
- f) Minister, priest, or other religious leader
- g) Media
- h) Books/internet
- i) School (teacher/sex education course)
- j) Other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

*Source:* Bennett, S.M., & Dickinson, W.B. (1998) Sex Education Inventory: Preferred and Actual Sources (SEI).

29. Which parent did you discuss relationship-related topics with most often?

- ☐ Never discussed with either parent
- ☐ Mother/mother-figure
- ☐ Father/father-figure
- ☐ Both parents equally often
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*Source:* Bennett, S.M., & Dickinson, W.B. (1998) Sex Education Inventory: Preferred and Actual Sources (SEI).

### **Section 11: Were your parents good role models?**

Parents often model healthy relationships for their adolescents. Think about your own parents' relationship...

30. How much would you agree or disagree that your parents were models of a healthy relationship?

- ☐ Completely disagree
- ☐ Mostly disagree
- ☐ Slightly disagree
- ☐ Slightly agree
- ☐ Mostly agree
- ☐ Completely agree

### **Section 12: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?**

Parents and teens show varying degrees of care and affection for each other. Thinking about your interactions with your parents during your middle and high school years, how often did these things happen in your family?

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

31. How often did your mother or mother-figure...

- a) Let you know that she cared about you?
- b) Act loving and affectionate toward you?
- c) Help you do something that was important to you?
- d) Let you know that she appreciated you, your ideas, or the things you did?

32. How often did your father or father-figure....

- a) Let you know that he cared about you?
- b) Act loving and affectionate toward you?
- c) Help you do something that was important to you?
- d) Let you know that he appreciated you, your ideas, or the things you did?

*Source:* Simons, L.G. & Conger, R. D. (2007). Linking mother–father differences in parenting to a typology of family parenting styles and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28 (2), 212-241. (Warmth/support scale)

### **Section 13: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?**

Parents and teens sometimes find it difficult to get along with one another. Still, thinking about your interactions with your parents during your middle and high school years, how often did these things happen in your family?

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

33. How often did your mother or mother-figure...

- a) Get angry with you?
- b) Shout or yell at you because she was mad at you?
- c) Criticize you or your ideas?
- d) Argue with you when you disagreed about something?

34. How often did your father or father-figure...

- a) Get angry with you?
- b) Shout or yell at you because he was mad at you?
- c) Criticize you or your ideas?
- d) Argue with you when you disagreed about something?

*Source:* Simons, L.G. & Conger, R. D. (2007). Linking mother–father differences in parenting to a typology of family parenting styles and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28 (2), 212-241. (Hostility scale)

### **Section 14: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?**

Parents like to “keep tabs” on their teens. Thinking about your interactions with your parents during your middle and high school years, how often did these things happen in your family?

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

35. How often did your mother or mother-figure...

- a) Know where you were in the course of the day?
- b) Know who you were with when you were away from home?
- c) Talk with you about what was going on in your life?
- d) Know if you came home or were in bed by the set time?

36. How often did your father or father-figure...

- a) Know where you were in the course of the day?
- b) Know who you were with when you were away from home?
- c) Talk with you about what was going on in your life?
- d) Know if you came home or were in bed by the set time?



Source: Simons, L.G. & Conger, R. D. (2007). Linking mother–father differences in parenting to a typology of family parenting styles and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28 (2), 212-241. (Monitoring scale)

### **Section 15: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?**

Parents and teens show varying degrees of openness when talking with each other. Thinking back to conversations you used to have with your parents, how often did these things happen in your family during your middle and high school years?

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

37. How often did these things happen with your mother/mother-figure?

- a) I could discuss my beliefs with her without feeling afraid or embarrassed.
- b) I was careful about what I said to her.
- c) There were things that I did not discuss with her.
- d) I thought that I could not tell her how I really felt about some things.
- e) She made me feel free to say what I thought.
- f) I had trouble believing everything she told me.
- g) I was afraid to ask her for something I wanted.
- h) When I asked her questions, I got honest answers from her.
- i) She was a good listener.
- j) She tried to understand what I thought.
- k) I found it easy to discuss problems with her.
- l) It was very easy for me to express all of my true feelings to her.
- m) She encouraged me to think about things myself and talk about them so that I could establish my own opinion.
- n) If I did something wrong, she felt a need to listen to my explanation.
- o) I could have my say, even if she disagreed with me.

*Adapted from:* Pittsburgh Youth Study Revised Parent-Adolescent Communication Form. Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., & Van Kammen, W.B. (1998). *Antisocial Behavior and Mental Health Problems: Explanatory Factors in Childhood and Adolescence*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### **Section 16: What was your relationship with your parents like growing up?**

38. Still thinking about your conversations with your parents during your middle and high school years, how often did these things happen with your father/father-figure?

- a) I could discuss my beliefs with him without feeling afraid or embarrassed.
- b) I was careful about what I said to him.
- c) There were things that I did not discuss with him.
- d) I thought that I could not tell him how I really felt about some things.
- e) He made me feel free to say what I thought.

- f) I had trouble believing everything he told me.
- g) I was afraid to ask him for something I wanted.
- h) When I asked him questions, I got honest answers from him.
- i) He was a good listener.
- j) He tried to understand what I thought.
- k) I found it easy to discuss problems with him.
- l) It was very easy for me to express all of my true feelings to him.
- m) He encouraged me to think about things myself and talk about them so that I could establish my own opinion.
- n) If I did something wrong, he felt a need to listen to my explanation.
- o) I could have my say, even if he disagreed with me.

*Adapted from:* Pittsburgh Youth Study Revised Parent-Adolescent Communication Form.  
 Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., & Van Kammen, W.B. (1998). *Antisocial Behavior and Mental Health Problems: Explanatory Factors in Childhood and Adolescence*.  
 Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

#### **Section 17: Did you talk with your mother/mother-figure about sex?**

Think about the conversations you had with your parents about sexuality. By sexuality, we mean your family's attitudes toward sexuality, the function and importance of sex in a relationship, whether sex should be confined to the marital relationship (i.e. premarital sexual relationships), and practicing safe sex.

39. How often did you talk with your mother/mother-figure about sexuality?

- ☐ Never ➡ Skip to #44
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ I'd prefer not to answer ➡ Skip to #44

### **Section 18: What topics did you and your mother talk about?**

40. Many different topics related to sexuality may have been covered during these discussions with your mother/mother-figure. Please check the topics that you discussed during these discussions. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Personal/family values/religious values regarding sex
- ☐ General human sexuality and puberty (i.e. menstruation, reproduction/how babies are made/biology, maturation and physical/sexual development)
- ☐ Good/positive choices and sexual decision making
- ☐ Sexual intercourse
- ☐ Consequences of teen pregnancy
- ☐ Contraception/birth control
- ☐ How to resist sexual pressure from dating partners
- ☐ “How far to go” on a date
- ☐ Whether pre-marital sex is right or wrong
- ☐ Role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship
- ☐ STI/HIV/AIDS information and risk
- ☐ Sexual satisfaction/desire
- ☐ Risks of drinking alcohol and using drugs
- ☐ Mother’s own past sexual behaviors and experiences

*Sources:* Bogenschneider, K. & Stone, M. (1997). Parent/Teen Discussion of Risk Behaviors; Sales et al. (2008). Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS); Fisher, T. (1987). Weighted Topics Measure of Family Sex Communication Scale; Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III); Somers, C. L., & Canivez, G. (2003). The Sexual Communication Scale (SCS).

### **Section 19: What were your conversations with your mother/mother-figure like?**

41. When you discussed sexuality with your mother/mother-figure, how often...

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

- a) Did you initiate those conversations?
- b) Did she initiate those conversations?
- c) Did you disclose your feelings and views?
- d) Were your feelings and views recognized by her?
- e) Did you dominate the conversation?
- f) Did she dominate the conversation?

42. When you discussed sexuality with your mother/mother-figure, how satisfied were you with those discussions?

- ☐ Very dissatisfied
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied

*Source:* Noller, P. & Bagi, S. (1985). Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI).

43. How helpful were the sexuality conversations you had with your mother/mother-figure?

- ☐ Very unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat helpful
- ☐ Very helpful

*Source:* Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III)

**Section 20: What made it difficult to talk with your mother/mother-figure about sex?**

44. There are many things that may discourage teens from talking with their parents about sex. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your mother/mother-figure about sex-related topics, check each reason below that applied to YOU. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ She never brought up the subject.
- ☐ She got angry when I asked.
- ☐ She gave me a lecture.
- ☐ She told me things that were not true.
- ☐ She asked me why I wanted to know.
- ☐ She wasn't around when I wanted to talk.
- ☐ I was embarrassed.
- ☐ I was afraid of her reaction.
- ☐ These topics were covered in school.
- ☐ She was not open/honest with me.
- ☐ I was afraid that she would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions.
- ☐ I already knew everything I needed to know.
- ☐ She didn't really know the answers to my questions.
- ☐ She did not treat me as an equal.
- ☐ She was not supportive, trustworthy, or empathetic.
- ☐ She was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic.
- ☐ She tried to get me to conform to her beliefs.
- ☐ Previous discussions about these topics with her did not go well.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

45. There are many things that may discourage parents from talking about sex with their teens. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your mother/mother-figure about sex-related topics, check each reason below that you think applied to HER. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ She was embarrassed.
- ☐ She didn't know how to answer my questions.
- ☐ She was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life.
- ☐ She thought I was too young to want to talk about sex.
- ☐ She did not take my relationships seriously.
- ☐ She was afraid I would think she was prying.
- ☐ She was afraid I wouldn't take her seriously.
- ☐ She was afraid I wouldn't be honest.
- ☐ She was afraid I would ask something she didn't know the answer to.
- ☐ She didn't know how to bring it up.
- ☐ She was afraid that talking would encourage me to have sex.
- ☐ She thought I was learning about sex in school.
- ☐ She had her own bad experiences with sex and didn't think she should talk about it with me.
- ☐ She thought my father/father-figure was talking to me about sex.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

46. How easy or difficult was it to remember the amount of sexual communication you had with your mother/mother-figure?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Somewhat easy
- ☐ Very easy

### **Section 21: Did you talk with your father/father-figure about sex?**

Now, think back to the conversations you had with father/father-figure about sexuality during your middle and high school years. By sexuality, we mean your family's attitudes toward sexuality, the function and importance of sex in a relationship, whether sex should be confined to the marital relationship (i.e. premarital sexual relationships), and practicing safe sex.

47. How often did you talk with your father/father-figure about sexuality?

- ☐ Never ➡ Skip to #52
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ I'd prefer not to answer ➡ Skip to #52

## **Section 22: What topics did you and your father/father-figure talk about?**

48. Many different topics related to sexuality may have been covered during these discussions with your father/father-figure. Please check the topics that you discussed. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Personal/family values/religious values regarding sex
- ☐ General human sexuality and puberty (i.e. menstruation, reproduction/how babies are made/biology, maturation and physical/sexual development)
- ☐ Good/positive choices and sexual decision making
- ☐ Sexual intercourse
- ☐ Consequences of teen pregnancy
- ☐ Contraception/birth control
- ☐ How to resist sexual pressure from dating partners
- ☐ “How far to go” on a date
- ☐ Whether pre-marital sex is right or wrong
- ☐ Role/timing/context of physical closeness and sexual intercourse in a relationship
- ☐ STI/HIV/AIDS information and risk
- ☐ Sexual satisfaction/desire
- ☐ Risks of drinking alcohol and using drugs
- ☐ Father’s own past sexual behaviors and experiences

*Sources:* Bogenschneider, K. & Stone, M. (1997). Parent/Teen Discussion of Risk Behaviors; Sales et al. (2008). Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS); Fisher, T. (1987). Weighted Topics Measure of Family Sex Communication Scale; Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III); Somers, C. L., & Canivez, G. (2003). The Sexual Communication Scale (SCS).

## **Section 23: What were your conversations with your father/father-figure like?**

49. When you discussed sexuality with your father/father-figure, how often...

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

- a) Did you initiate those conversations?
- b) Did he initiate those conversations?
- c) Did you disclose your feelings and views?
- d) Were your feelings and views recognized by him?
- e) Did you dominate the conversation?
- f) Did he dominate the conversation?

50. When you discussed sexuality with your father/father-figure, how satisfied were you with those discussions?

- ☐ Very dissatisfied
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied

*Source:* Noller, P. & Bagi, S. (1985). Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI).

51. How helpful were the sexuality conversations you had with your father/father-figure?

- ☐ Very unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat helpful
- ☐ Very helpful

*Source:* Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III)

**Section 24: What made it difficult to talk with your father/father-figure about sex?**

52. There are many things that may discourage teens from talking with their parents about sex. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your father/father-figure about sex-related topics, check each reason below that applied to YOU. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ He never brought up the subject.
- ☐ He got angry when I asked.
- ☐ He gave me a lecture.
- ☐ He told me things that were not true.
- ☐ He asked me why I wanted to know.
- ☐ He wasn't around when I wanted to talk.
- ☐ I was embarrassed.
- ☐ I was afraid of his reaction.
- ☐ These topics were covered in school.
- ☐ He was not open/honest with me.
- ☐ I was afraid that he would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions.
- ☐ I already knew everything I needed to know.
- ☐ He didn't really know the answers to my questions.
- ☐ He did not treat me as an equal.
- ☐ He was not supportive, trustworthy, or empathetic.
- ☐ He was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic.
- ☐ He tried to get me to conform to his beliefs.
- ☐ Previous discussions about these topics with him did not go well.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

53. There are many things that may discourage parents from talking about sex with their teens. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your father/father-figure about sex-related topics, check each reason below that you think applied to HIM. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ He was embarrassed.
- ☐ He didn't know how to answer my questions.
- ☐ He was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life.
- ☐ He thought I was too young to want to talk about sex.
- ☐ He did not take my relationships seriously.
- ☐ He was afraid I would think he was prying.
- ☐ He was afraid I wouldn't take him seriously.
- ☐ He was afraid I wouldn't be honest.
- ☐ He was afraid I would ask something he didn't know the answer to.
- ☐ He didn't know how to bring it up.
- ☐ He was afraid that talking would encourage me to have sex.
- ☐ He thought I was learning about sex in school.
- ☐ He had his own bad experiences with sex and didn't think he should talk about it with me.
- ☐ He thought my mother/mother-figure was talking to me about sex.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

54. How easy or difficult was it to remember the amount of sexual communication you had with your father/father-figure?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Somewhat easy
- ☐ Very easy

### **Section 25: Did you talk with your mother/mother-figure about relationships?**

Think back to the conversations you had with your parents about relationships during your middle and high school years. By relationships, we mean the function and importance of marriage and family, attitudes toward the family, marriage and divorce, expectations around dating, and how to behave in a relationship (e.g., sharing feelings, handling differences).

55. How often did you talk with your mother/mother-figure about relationships?

- ☐ Never ➡ Skip to #60
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ I'd prefer not to answer ➡ Skip to #60



### **Section 26: What topics did you and your mother/mother-figure talk about?**

56. Many different topics related to dating and relationships may have been covered during these discussions with your mother/mother-figure. Please check the topics that you discussed.  
(Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating
- ☐ Dating abuse (including: violence, verbal/physical aggression, controlling behavior, and emotional abuse)
- ☐ How to communicate and manage conflict with your partner
- ☐ Good/positive choices and relationship decision making
- ☐ Developing trust and commitment in a relationship
- ☐ Marital expectations and aspirations
- ☐ Love
- ☐ Appropriate dating behavior and expectations
- ☐ How to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship
- ☐ What to look for in a significant other
- ☐ Mother's own past dating/relationship behaviors and experiences

*Sources:* Somers, C. L., & Canivez, G. (2003). The Sexual Communication Scale (SCS); Fox & Ignazu (1980). Mother-Daughter Communication About Sex; Raffaelli, M., Smart, L.A., Van Horn, S.C., Hohbein, A.D., Kline, J.E., & Chan, W. (1999). Measures of communication about 18 different sexual topics; Rosenthal & Feldman (1999). Adolescents' Perceptions of Parental Communication about Sexuality.

### **Section 27: What were your conversations with your mother/mother-figure like?**

57. When you discussed relationships with your mother/mother-figure, how often...

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

- a) Did you initiate those conversations?
- b) Did she initiate those conversations?
- c) Did you disclose your feelings and views?
- d) Were your feelings and views recognized by her?
- e) Did you dominate the conversation?
- f) Did she dominate the conversation?

58. When you discussed relationships with your mother/mother-figure, how satisfied were you with those discussions?

- ☐ Very dissatisfied
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied

*Source:* Noller, P. & Bagi, S. (1985). Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI).

59. How helpful were the relationships/dating conversations you had with your mother/mother-figure?

- ☐ Very unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat helpful
- ☐ Very helpful

*Source:* Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III)

**Section 28: What made it difficult to talk with your mother/mother-figure about relationships?**

60. There are many things that may discourage teens from talking with their parents about relationships/dating. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your mother/mother-figure about relationship-related topics, check each reason below that applied to YOU. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ She never brought up the subject.
- ☐ She got angry when I asked.
- ☐ She gave me a lecture.
- ☐ She told me things that were not true.
- ☐ She asked me why I wanted to know.
- ☐ She wasn't around when I wanted to talk.
- ☐ I was embarrassed.
- ☐ I was afraid of her reaction.
- ☐ These topics were covered in school.
- ☐ She was not open/honest with me.
- ☐ I was afraid that she would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions.
- ☐ I already knew everything I needed to know.
- ☐ She didn't really know the answers to my questions.
- ☐ She did not treat me as an equal.
- ☐ She was not supportive, trustworthy, or empathetic.
- ☐ She was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic.
- ☐ She tried to get me to conform to her beliefs.
- ☐ Previous discussions about these topics with her did not go well.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

61. There are many things that may discourage parents from talking about dating/relationships with their teens. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your mother/mother-figure about dating/relationship-related topics, check each reason below that you think applied to HER. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ She was embarrassed.
- ☐ She didn't know how to answer my questions.
- ☐ She was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life.
- ☐ She thought I was too young to want to talk about dating/relationships.
- ☐ She did not take my relationships seriously.
- ☐ She was afraid I would think she was prying.
- ☐ She was afraid I wouldn't take her seriously.
- ☐ She was afraid I wouldn't be honest.
- ☐ She was afraid I would ask something she didn't know the answer to.
- ☐ She didn't know how to bring it up.
- ☐ She was afraid that talking would encourage me to date.
- ☐ She thought I was learning about dating/relationships in school.
- ☐ She had her own bad experiences with relationships and didn't think she should talk about it with me.
- ☐ She thought my father/father-figure was talking to me about dating/relationships.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

62. How easy or difficult was it to remember the amount of dating/relationships communication you had with your mother/mother-figure?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Somewhat easy
- ☐ Very easy

### **Section 29: Did you talk with your father/father-figure about relationships?**

Now, think back to the conversations you had with father/father-figure about relationships during your middle and high school years. By relationships, we mean the function and importance of marriage and family, attitudes toward the family, marriage and divorce, expectations around dating, and how to behave in a relationship (e.g., sharing feelings, handling differences).

63. How often did you talk with your father/father-figure about relationships?

- ☐ Never ➡ Skip to #68
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often I'd prefer not to answer ➡ Skip to #68

### **Section 30: What topics did you and your father/father-figure talk about?**

64. Many different topics related to dating and relationships may have been covered during these discussions with your father/father-figure. Please check the topics that you discussed. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Personal/family/religious values regarding relationships and dating
- ☐ Dating abuse (including: violence, verbal/physical aggression, controlling behavior, and emotional abuse)
- ☐ How to communicate and manage conflict with your partner
- ☐ Good/positive choices and relationship decision making
- ☐ Developing trust and commitment in a relationship
- ☐ Marital expectations and aspirations
- ☐ Love
- ☐ Appropriate dating behavior and expectations
- ☐ How to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship
- ☐ What to look for in a significant other
- ☐ Father's own past dating/relationship behaviors and experiences

*Sources:* Somers, C. L., & Canivez, G. (2003). The Sexual Communication Scale (SCS); Fox & Ignazu (1980). Mother-Daughter Communication About Sex; Raffaelli, M., Smart, L.A., Van Horn, S.C., Hohbein, A.D., Kline, J.E., & Chan, W. (1999). Measures of communication about 18 different sexual topics; Rosenthal & Feldman (1999). Adolescents' Perceptions of Parental Communication about Sexuality.

### **Section 31: What were your conversations with your father/father-figure like?**

65. When you discussed relationships with your father/father-figure, how often...

*Response categories: (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often*

- a) Did you initiate those conversations?
- b) Did he initiate those conversations?
- c) Did you disclose your feelings and views?
- d) Were your feelings and views recognized by him?
- e) Did you dominate the conversation?
- f) Did he dominate the conversation?

66. When you discussed relationships with your father/father-figure, how satisfied were you with those discussions?

- ☐ Very dissatisfied
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied

*Source:* Noller, P. & Bagi, S. (1985). Parent-Adolescent Communication Inventory (PACI).

67. How helpful were the relationships/dating conversations you had with your father/father-figure?

- ☐ Very unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat unhelpful
- ☐ Somewhat helpful
- ☐ Very helpful

*Source:* Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III)

**Section 32: What made it difficult to talk with your father/father-figure about relationships?**

68. There are many things that may discourage teens from talking with their parents about relationships/dating. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your father/father-figure about relationship-related topics, check each reason below that influenced YOU in these discussions. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ He never brought up the subject.
- ☐ He got angry when I asked.
- ☐ He gave me a lecture.
- ☐ He told me things that were not true.
- ☐ He asked me why I wanted to know.
- ☐ He wasn't around when I wanted to talk.
- ☐ I was embarrassed.
- ☐ I was afraid of his reaction.
- ☐ These topics were covered in school.
- ☐ He was not open/honest with me.
- ☐ I was afraid that he would become suspicious and ask me too many personal questions.
- ☐ I already knew everything I needed to know.
- ☐ He didn't really know the answers to my questions.
- ☐ He did not treat me as an equal.
- ☐ He was not supportive, trustworthy, or empathetic.
- ☐ He was too judgmental, rude, or sarcastic.
- ☐ He tried to get me to conform to his beliefs.
- ☐ Previous discussions about these topics with him did not go well.
- ☐ Other (Please specify:\_\_\_\_\_)

69. There are many things that may discourage parents from talking about dating/relationships with their teens. Thinking back to the conversations that you used to have (or not have) with your father/father-figure about dating/relationship-related topics, check each reason below that you think applied to HIM. (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ He was embarrassed.
- ☐ He didn't know how to answer my questions.
- ☐ He was not aware that these topics were relevant to my life.
- ☐ He thought I was too young to want to talk about dating/relationships.
- ☐ He did not take my relationships seriously.
- ☐ He was afraid I would think he was prying.
- ☐ He was afraid I wouldn't take him seriously.
- ☐ He was afraid I wouldn't be honest.
- ☐ He was afraid I would ask something he didn't know the answer to.
- ☐ He didn't know how to bring it up.
- ☐ He was afraid that talking would encourage me to date.
- ☐ He thought I was learning about dating/relationships in school.
- ☐ He had his own bad experiences with dating/relationships and didn't think he should talk about it with me.
- ☐ He thought my mother/mother-figure was talking to me about dating/relationships.
- ☐ I don't know.
- ☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

*Source:* Bennett, S.M., & Dickinson, W.B. (1998) Sex Education Inventory: Preferred and Actual Sources (SEI).

70. How easy or difficult was it to remember the amount of dating/relationships communication you had with your father/father-figure?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Somewhat easy
- ☐ Very easy

*Source:* Hutchinson, M. K. (1999). Parent-Teen Sexual Risk Communication Scale (PTSRC-III)