

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parent-teenager sexuality education communication: Teenagers' perceptions of barriers to parental access

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Abstract

Sexuality education communication between parents and teenagers plays a significant role in delaying sexual debut for teenagers, helping in the prevention of teenage pregnancy and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections. Studies report that sexuality education communication between teenagers and parents is minimal, uncoordinated, and ineffective. This exposes teenagers to negative sexual behaviours, which could lead to HIV and unplanned teenage pregnancy. The purpose of the study was to explore the views and perceptions of teenagers in the rural KwaZulu-Natal on barriers to sexuality education communication with their parents. The study was conducted in three purposefully chosen rural locations of the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, using qualitative descriptive phenomenology. Data were collected from 22 purposively chosen teenagers using semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was done using Colaizzi's framework for data analysis. Themes that emerged from the data were fear and culture. Overall findings revealed that sexuality education communication between teenagers and their parents was perceived by teenagers in the rural areas as a fearful and culturally prohibited activity. We recommend that parent-teenager sexuality education communication strategies should be developed to enhance such communication. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [11]:119-126*).

Keywords : Communication, education, parents, rural, sexuality, teenager

Résumé

La communication sur l'éducation sexuelle entre parents et adolescents joue un rôle important dans le report du premier rapport sexuel chez les jeunes, contribuant ainsi à la prévention des grossesses précoces et des infections par le VIH. Des études montrent que cette communication est minimale, désorganisée et inefficace. Ceci expose les adolescents à des comportements sexuels à risque, susceptibles d'entraîner une infection par le VIH et des grossesses précoces non désirées. Cette étude visait à explorer les points de vue et les perceptions des adolescents vivant en zone rurale dans la province du KwaZulu-Natal concernant les obstacles à la communication sur l'éducation sexuelle avec leurs parents. Menée dans trois zones rurales de la province du KwaZulu-Natal, en Afrique du Sud, l'étude a utilisé une approche phénoménologique descriptive qualitative. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de 22 adolescents sélectionnés de manière ciblée, au moyen d'entretiens semi-directifs. L'analyse des données a été réalisée selon le cadre d'analyse de Colaizzi. Les thèmes principaux qui se sont dégagés des données sont la peur et la culture. Les résultats globaux ont révélé que, dans les zones rurales, les adolescents percevaient la communication sur l'éducation sexuelle entre leurs parents comme une activité source d'appréhension et culturellement taboue. Nous recommandons le développement de stratégies de communication parent-adolescent sur l'éducation sexuelle afin d'améliorer ce dialogue. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [11]: 119-126*).

Keywords: Communication, éducation, parents, milieu rural, sexualité, adolescence.

Introduction

The teenage stage is a critical time for the consolidation of parent-teenager sexuality education communication in order to ensure that the teenager has a smoother transition into a sexually responsible adult. Sexuality education communication between parents and teenagers is essential for the teenager's physical, social, and

mental development.¹ A Lack of purposeful sexuality education communication at home deprives the parent and teenager of meaningful discussions and the opportunity to prevent unwanted consequences of poor sexuality decisions by the uninformed teenager.² Unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, backstreet abortions, and new HIV infections among teenagers are some of the effects of poor sexual decisions that teenagers

make.³ Open communication and meaningful interaction between parents and teenagers on sexuality education are important for many reasons. Studies on the importance of sexuality education highlight, among other things, that teenagers need to be made to understand the enormous number of changes they will face as they enter puberty.⁴ Researchers highlight that during the adolescent stage, teenagers experience many physical, emotional, and social changes that challenge their knowledge and understanding of the sexual behavioural decisions they make.³ During this time, sexual feelings, attraction, and attention from the opposite/same sex depending on sexual orientation become more common than in earlier stages, and hormonal changes put enough pressure on an uninformed teenager to give in to the attraction. This pressure often leads to unplanned sexual intercourse, resulting in teenage pregnancy and HIV infection.³

Sexuality education is vital in influencing the timing of sexual debut among teenagers.⁵ Teenagers who had received sexuality education from their parents were found to be more likely to delay sexual debut until they felt ready and confident to engage in sexual activities. A study also reported that sexuality education had the positive impact of increasing communication and trust between parents and teenagers, thus reducing incidences of sexually deviant behaviour among teenagers.⁶

Literature on sexuality education between parents and teenagers in sub-Saharan Africa brought to the fore sexuality communication problems between parents and teenagers, sociocultural barriers, triggers of sexuality education discussions, and poor knowledge of sexuality-related topics as reasons for ineffective sexuality education communication between parents and teenagers.² A meeting held by the United Nations (UN) in April 2023 also alluded to the fact that a lack of sexuality education by all relevant parties may lead to gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies, impediment of sustainable development goals and perpetuation of poverty.⁷ In South Africa, a study was conducted on the perceptions of teenagers on communication with parents on sexuality, teenagers admitted that, among other problems, they experienced difficulties with sexuality education communication with their parents, and the generation gap made it difficult to establish a common ground with parents.⁸ Findings

such as these prompted the researchers to conduct a qualitative enquiry with the teenagers in the rural areas to find out what their experiences and views were about sexuality education communication with their parents.

Methods

The study was conducted at KwaZulu-Natal Province using a qualitative descriptive phenomenology design in the three purposively selected districts. This design was chosen because it allowed teenagers free expression of opinions without the researcher's interference. Twenty-two (22) teenagers with ages ranging from 15 to 19 years of age who met the inclusion criteria were recruited to the study. The inclusion criteria were that the teenager should be living in the area with at least one parent and be willing to participate in the study. Table 1 denotes the demographic aspects of participants. Each participant was interviewed either in his/her home or in the nearby community hall. All interviews started with a core question which was:

“What is your experience regarding sexuality education communication between you and your parents?”

Table 1: Demographic data of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade
Male 1	15	M	9
Male 2	16	M	10
Female 1	16	F	10
Female 2	18	F	12
Female 3	18	F	12
Female 4	16	F	10
Female 5	17	F	11
Male 3	18	M	12
Male 4	17	M	11
Female 6	16	F	9
Female 7	17	F	10
Female 8	17	F	11
Male 5	19	M	12
Male 6	18	M	10
Female 9	17	F	11
Female 10	15	F	9
Female 11	15	F	9
Female 12	16	F	10
Male 7	16	M	10
Male 8	17	M	11
Male 9	16	M	10
Male 10	15	M	9

The core question was asked to stimulate the conversation and to allow teenagers to express themselves unhindered. The core question was followed by several probing questions that were asked in no particular order, based on the participant's responses. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu, the home language of the participants and the researcher. Interviews were recorded using an electronic voice recorder and transcribed verbatim into isiZulu, which was translated later into English. Data were analysed manually using a descriptive phenomenological analysis framework. Five of the seven steps of Colaizzi's framework for descriptive phenomenology data analysis were followed, as detailed by Kr.¹⁰ The steps were: Reading and re-reading each transcript, extracting statements that were deemed significant, formulating meanings from the expressions throughout the text, clustering the themes and integrating findings into exhaustive descriptions. Reading and rereading each transcript was when the researcher read each transcript of the participants at least three times, using a "read aloud" feature of the computer to enhance understanding of the content. Extracting the statements that were deemed significant was effected by choosing within the transcripts those statements that were deemed relevant and significant to the study. The researcher wrote the verbatim statements on the left side and wrote the descriptive expression of those statements on the left hand of each transcript analysed. Formulating meanings from the expressions throughout the text was achieved through a personal reflexive activity of trying to assign meanings to the verbatim statements and the descriptive statements formulated in the preceding stage, in preparation for writing up the analysis. Clustering the themes was a stage where the researcher grouped similar statements and expressions and created themes that embodied the expressions in the codes. These were called "sub themes". Similar statements were further grouped together under much broader themes called "themes. Integration of findings into exhaustive descriptions was done by describing the findings and supporting them with participants' verbatim narratives according to the themes.

Trustworthiness of data

Trustworthiness of data in qualitative studies is an important factor in ensuring rigour. The researcher

ensured credibility, confirmability and transferability of the study by employing the following measures.

Credibility was ensured by spending enough time with each participant, allowing him/her to express himself/herself freely. The researcher spent an average of forty-five minutes with each teenager, ensuring that they shared all they wished to share on the topic. At the end of each interview, the researcher ensured that the teenagers had shared everything they wished to share by asking if they had anything more to say. To ensure *confirmability*, the researcher ensured that the data collected reflected the experiences and perceptions of participants by providing thick descriptions of the research context and by consulting with peers to identify potential biases.

Transferability was ensured by describing sampling procedures and research methodology in details in the report to help the reader in deciding whether the findings could be applied to another setting within a similar context. The full report of the study is available on the UNISA website.

Dependability was ensured by the researcher providing details of how the study was conducted, including all the changes made during the study, to ensure there was an audit trail for replicability. All audio-recorded and transcribed data were kept safe for possible further review by any interested party, for transparency. The researchers and an independent coder did coding to minimise bias.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee. Ethics Clearance number: 30743982_CRECHS_2024. Further permission was obtained from the local political community leaders due to a mutual agreement between them and the traditional leadership. Parents of teenagers who were younger than 18 years granted permission for the children to participate, while teenagers themselves signed an assent form as an indication that they were willing to participate in the study. Those who were 18 years and older signed their own consent. All participants were given information on the study, and were allowed to choose whether they wanted to participate or not. They were informed about confidentiality and anonymity of their contributions. They were also informed that if at

any time during the interviews they felt they no longer wanted to participate, they could inform the researcher and they would be excused without any form of penalty.

Results

The findings on the barriers in sexuality education communication between teenagers and their parents emerged as a strong theme and are discussed hereunder: Table 2 summarises the findings of the study. Teenagers expressed that communication between them and their parents was blocked by serious barriers. Barriers that were mentioned were fear and culture.

Fear

Teenagers expressed three topical reasons for fear of talking about sexuality issues with their parents. Among the fears they had were the fears related to the teenager feeling that parents would think he/ she is still too young to have sexuality education, that the teenager has more information and universal fear of possible punishment.

Fear that parents may think that the teenager is still too young for sexuality education

Teenagers expressed that they felt fearful of delving into the sexuality topic with their parents, because they felt the parents thought they were still too young to engage in sexual relationships, causing them to fear initiating enquiries on sexuality issues with their parents. One teenager explained:

“Mah won't even understand that I do want to talk to her about sexuality issues, like, but I feel so embarrassed and shy, uh, where do I start, I want to know that she is okay with me talking with her, because my mom is not an easy person to just talk to about relationships. In her eyes I am still that young girl from grade six, meanwhile I think I am ready to try a romantic relationship.” (Female 7)

Another teenager related her story:

“I thought of speaking to mom about the guy that I like, but I am so scared, I think she will say I am still young, where do I get this kind of information. Sexuality education is for people who are getting ready for marriage, not teenagers.” (Female 9)

Fear that parents may think that the teenager has more information: Teenagers seemed convinced that parents did not have enough

information to conduct sexuality education. One teenager said:

“I find it difficult to speak about sex topics with my parents, because my dad does not have information, sometimes he will tell me the same old things. When I ask about contemporary things, he will just give me an angry look and ask me where I got this information from. So, you see, it is better to keep quiet and get information from schools and elsewhere.” (Male 7).

A female teenager also mentioned the concern that parents had shallow information. She confessed:

“Parents either know nothing about sexuality or they do not want to share what they know with us. My mother always asks questions from me, and she will ask what we learn at school. I never know whether she wants me to teach her or she wants to see how much I know. So, me and my friends think she has no information, and I am so scared of putting her advices to use” (Female 11).

Teenagers felt parents did not have as much knowledge, because they obtained more information from other sources such as their phones, school health nurses and Life Orientation teachers. The parents' information in such cases ends up being boring.

Perception of possible punishment

Teenagers expressed fear of punishment based on parents' threatening words as a barrier to initiating sexuality education topics. Teenagers verbalised that they did not want to initiate sexuality education talks with their parents because they would be seen as despising the authority of the parents and inviting corporal punishment. Respect for the homestead is a very important aspect of being a rural community member. The man of the house gains respect from the community based on the way his children behave. Therefore, teenagers have to abide by the rules, or else they will face the anger and corporal punishment from the man of the house. These rules seemed to be non-negotiable. This implied that even if a teenager wanted to ask questions regarding how to get to marriage, parents would probably not entertain such. Teenagers desired to be seen as “law-abiding citizens” in their homes, and, as such, they found it challenging to initiate sexuality talks with parents, lest their parents thought they had

Table 2: Findings of the study

Superordinate theme	Themes	Sub- themes
Barriers in sexuality education communication	Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear that parents may think that the teenager is still too young for sexuality education • Fear that parents may think that the teenager has more information • Perception of possible punishment
	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taboo nature of sexuality education • Difference in sexuality education exposure between generations

become corrupt. The fear was shared by both male and female teenagers, and the excerpts were as follows: A 16-year-old girl shared her experience:

“I cannot start sexuality talks with mom. I am scared to ask because I know she will fight with me and ask why I am asking her these things.” (Female 4)

Female 4’s statement was supported by another teenager, who also felt that initiating sexuality talks with parents would invoke punishment.

“That’s why we hide the fact that we have boyfriends because we know it will call for a hiding. But, honestly, we are grown up, we have boyfriends”. (Female 6)).

The statement shared by Female 6 was also echoed by Male 8:

“Because I know that if you are a child, as a rule in our home, you should not have a girlfriend; otherwise, there will be crying and pain, right?” (Male 8).

When teenagers were probed, however, they did explain that the fear of being punished was that they were perceiving, but they had never been punished for starting the conversation; they just believed their parents’ threats that they might be punished. Teenagers were facing such threatening statements from parents regularly, which fuelled their fears.

Teenagers who find themselves fearful of being punished for requesting sexual information from parents have few choices: to defy the rules and face the consequences or to pretend to be abiding, thus living a double life. Such a practice was found

to be a reality in a study¹¹ which discovered that young women resorted to finding sexuality information on their own from such sources as health care facilities and hiding their sexuality behaviour from parents, so that they are seen to be abiding by the rules of the home. Culture was another theme that participants alluded to as a barrier to sexuality education.

Culture

Culture was cited by teenagers as another barrier against sexuality education communication. The sub-themes were cultural taboos and differences in sexuality education experiences between generations.

Cultural taboos

Teenagers felt that sexuality education communication was a no-go area for them and their parents. One teenager expressed it as follows:

“I don’t talk to mom about those things because it’s not that easy. So, I find it hard to talk to her; it is an embarrassing topic. How can I even look at her after talking about sexuality with her? She is a senior to me.” (Female 4).

The researcher noted a non-verbal reaction from the teenager, such as putting hands on her face, signaling embarrassment. Indeed, sexuality education topics were culturally not conducted by parents, which created a barrier as far as the topic was concerned. In terms of culture, the topic was left for other people such as peer educators to tackle, not biological parents. Differences in sexuality education experiences between generations.

Teenagers felt that parents did not delve deep enough into sexuality education, mentioning new developments that parents either did not know or found difficult to address. Sexuality education provided by parents was perceived as shallow and uncoordinated, as if it was just trial and error. Some teenagers even mentioned that their parents had said nothing about issues of alternative sexuality and same-sex attraction as an example. A teenager said;

“My parents never talk about other forms of sexuality. They just know male and female falling in love and then a girl falling pregnant. So, they never speak about being a boyfriend of a girlfriend. They shy away from such topics. My mom cut me short when I tried to raise it, and eh, I never tried again. Even when talking about normal relationships, you can see that they just want it to be over.” (Male 6).

Teenagers shared that parents mainly spoke from within their own experiences, not about issues that affect the current cohort of teenagers.

“Dad uses cultural words that they used as boys to speak to me about approaching girls, words such as ukweshela and ukuqomisa (asking the girl out). I don’t even know if one can speak to and beg a girl for love for that long. I ask, she refuses, and I move on. According to him, though, such begging demonstrates deep love for her” (Male 8).

Parents and teenagers seemed to lose one other at the level of the kind and amount of information expected to be shared. According to teenagers, parents shared information and conducted sexuality education based on their values and knowledge, while teenagers wanted deeper and meaningful discussions that addressed what they faced on a daily basis.

Teenagers lamented the lack of open minded discussions about contemporary topics such as same sex attraction and transgender. Studies in South Africa, such as the one conducted in KwaZulu-Natal¹² found that parents reacted in different ways when confronted with a teenager confessing that he is gay. Teenagers in this study also confessed their fears in talking about such aspects of sexuality with their parents, possibly because this fell out of the parents’ experience.

Discussion

The study discovered among other findings, that there were serious barriers that existed between parents and teenagers in the rural areas regarding sexuality education communication. Teenagers expressed the embarrassment-driven fear, indicating that they felt it was not appropriate to initiate conversations about sexuality related matters with parents. The fearful attitude might be driven also by the fact that parents are not used to discussing other topics with teenagers, just to get used to talking with them. Teenagers wanted assurance from parents that it was fine to initiate sexuality discussions with them. A study conducted in China¹³ concurred with the findings of this study on the fact that teenagers felt uncomfortable initiating discussions on sexuality topics with parents. Teenagers expressed the perceived young age as a barrier to sexuality education communication. This notion of delaying sexuality education communication because of age from the parents’ side may lead to teenagers engaging in sexual activities without getting crucial sexuality education information from parents. The parents would also miss out on the opportunity to discuss sexuality education with their teenagers at the onset of adolescence, thus preparing them for what would come in the future.

Believing that a teenager was still too young for sexuality education communication presents challenges when a teenager participates in sexually irresponsible behaviours such as unprotected sex, which may lead to unplanned pregnancy and HIV infection.

Literature also revealed findings concurring with this study that teenagers asking questions on sexuality would attract scolding and corporal punishment from parents who felt that teenagers were acting outside the norms of the home. A study conducted in Switzerland¹⁴ attested to the fact that teenagers felt that parents’ attitudes towards sexuality conversations were hostile, especially if the teenager initiated the conversation; because it was seen as undermining authority. The teenagers were, as a result, deciding not to engage in sexuality talks with their parents, which is sad because they would learn a lot from their parents.

Several studies concurred with the findings of this study concerning teenagers fearing being punished when they talked about sexuality with parents. In a study conducted in Kenya¹⁵ on barriers to communication between teenagers and parents where mothers and teenagers were asked about the barriers, the perception of being physically punished came up quite frequently. Teenagers in another study mentioned that they were reluctant to even share with their parents that they were involved in a romantic relationship for fear of punishment¹⁴. This practice was found to be destructive to the relationship between the parent and the teenager. Another study¹⁵ also emphasised that where communication was arrayed with threatening words such as those by parents in this study, the chances of shut down were high, which teenagers in this study also mentioned.

Cultural barriers to sexuality education communication run much deeper, because they challenge a worldview of the parent. Teenagers verbalised that the fundamental change of the worldview from parents seemed an insurmountable challenge. The barrier caused by the taboo nature of sexuality education continues to stifle crucial conversations in the homes. Sexuality education was found to be one of those taboo topics that parents can never discuss with teenagers in another study.¹⁶ This practice was found to be prohibitive of very essential discussions which may prevent HIV and early sexual debut among the teenagers. This study found that the fact that sexuality education is regarded as taboo might be associated with teenage pregnancy witnessed in their communities.

The study exposed the need to address the barriers that teenagers face when attempting to discuss sexuality with their parents if rural communities want to effectively deal with teenage pregnancy and HIV infections. Breaking the barriers may contribute to better understanding of sexuality by teenagers, which may decrease the incidence of such social and health challenges among families and communities. Recommendations for this study was that coordinated, formal and community based sexuality education communication strategies be formulated in order to help parents and teenagers to start discussing sexuality related matters.

Strengths and limitations

The study addresses an important aspect of the multisector approach to the challenge of teenage pregnancy and HIV infections among teenagers, that of giving voices of teenagers on barriers in sexuality education communication with their parents. When children are not guided at home the problem spills on to the communities, and this study addressed an important preventive measure to such a problem. The study brings to light the myths that teenagers have that may need to be addressed through targeted policy interventions involving parents.

Some of the strengths demonstrated by this study includes that 22 teenagers from the rural areas were offered a chance to share their experiences, which gave a voice to the rural community on issues that directly affect them. Despite the interesting views gleaned from teenagers who lived with parents, the researcher noted that some teenagers were scared to speak up, thinking that the researcher may share the findings with their parents. Some teenagers were busy with their mid-year examinations at the time of data collection, and the researcher felt that they could have shared more if they were not distracted by the examination times thus limiting the amount of information that could be obtained from the teenagers.

Conclusion

Parent-teenager sexuality education communication remains a challenge that studies have attempted to address over time. The purpose of the study was to explore the views and perceptions of teenagers in the rural KwaZulu-Natal on barriers to sexuality education communication with their parents. The purpose was achieved because teenagers shared their perceived barriers to free-flowing sexuality education communication with their parents. The barriers that teenagers shared should inform policy makers on areas that need strengthening for effective communication between parents and teenagers. We believe that strengthening of such policies would improve such communication and result in decreased incidence of unfavourable sexuality outcomes for teenagers.

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Authors contribution

Conceptualization: BG and DSH, methodology: BG, DSH and AHM; data collection, analysis and interpretation: BG, DSH and AHM; writing: BG, DSH and AHM, review and editing: DSH and AHM. All authors have read and agreed on the published version of the article.

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