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Parents as educators of sex and relationship education: The role for effective communication in British families

Triece Turnbull, Anna van Wersch, Paul van Schaik
School of Social Sciences and Law, Teesside University, UK

Abstract

Objective: To identify how British families discuss sexual matters and to determine if the use of a multimedia computer program increases knowledge to promote communication about sexual topics.

Design: A mixed-method approach in which families were interviewed within the family environment.

Method: Twenty families from the north east of England were recruited through purposive sampling. The first element of the research involved semi-structured interviews to identify how sexual matters were discussed within families. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the modified grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin.1 The second part of the research involved families exploring a sex and relationship education resource to determine if knowledge and confidence in knowledge enhanced communication about sexual matters within families.

Results: The majority of parents and their children were found to discuss sexual matters openly within families. The resource was found to affect communication of sexual topics and increased knowledge and confidence in knowledge of parents and their children.

Conclusion: The results highlight the feasibility of using multimedia computer programs to educate and increase communication about sexual matters within families. Future research needs to focus on more diverse populations to assess the accuracy of this research and the possibility of developing parent programmes with the aim of educating parents so they can provide effective sex education to their children.

Keywords
adolescents, educational intervention programmes, relationship education, school, sexual health

Introduction

Sex education provided in Britain has been criticized, in schools2 as well as the home.3–11 British so-called ‘Puritanism’ has been seen as one of the reasons for this.12 However, at a time when teenage pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and viruses, such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), are on the increase, more...
attention to the education of sexual behaviour is needed. Government initiatives are leading in the direction of schools in collaboration with families, but it is unclear how these initiatives have materialized, especially in relation to how families discuss sexual matters, which is an under-researched and poorly-understood area. What is known is that previous research suggests that parents demur from discussing sexual matters with their children, especially fathers who have been criticized for their reluctance in providing effective sex education to their sons. According to past research, this is mainly due to feelings of embarrassment and parents experiencing discomfort when discussing sexual topics.

Although parents’ personal experiences could be associated with how their parents discussed sexual matters when they were younger, parents in the 21st century have a main role to play in educating their children. This has been recognized by the government and education authorities, which is why schools are now encouraged to work with parents when providing formal sex and relationship education (SRE) to children. An excerpt to this effect can be drawn from the most recent SRE guidance:

Parents are key people in teaching their children about sex and relationships; maintaining the culture and ethos of the family; helping their children cope with the emotional and physical aspects of growing up; and preparing them for the challenges and responsibilities that sexual maturity brings.

Pressure is now being placed upon parents, as it is their responsibility to help their children develop, grow and remain healthy, whilst also aiding in the development of attitudes that their children form, and the development of their beliefs and values concerning identity, relationships and intimacy. However, for some parents this feels like a daunting task and, for the same reason, community programmes have been set up to help parents, especially in building on their knowledge and confidence to teach their children about sexual matters. Many of these programmes have focused on the different qualities of parents and on the importance of communication. However, parenting styles have been found to influence conversations regarding sexual matters.

‘Good-quality’ parents are thought to facilitate their children’s learning at all stages of their lives, providing them with the knowledge and skills to meet their full potential on the transition to adulthood. With this comes the importance of effective communication between parents and their children. However, communication is hard to define, as it includes diversities between people, settings and societies in the exchange of information, either verbally (e.g. through pitch, annotation and fluency) or non-verbally (e.g. through facial expressions, eye contact, mannerisms and posture). Over the decades, communication theorists have considered various factors that can be seen as the most important aspects of communication. However, Forchuk and Brown claim that interpersonal relationships, interactions and patterns within families are the most important features concerning communication. This is mainly because communication patterns promote meaningful learning and reach the needs of young people.

Although research suggests that parents do not discuss sexual matters with their children, this undermines the important role that parents have to play. It has even been suggested that, in the current technological era, parents could be the main sex educators of their children, as computers are a good medium to learn about sexual matters. This study therefore aims to investigate how parents discussed sexual matters with their children and whether the use of a multimedia computer program can affect knowledge and can increase communication within the context of British families.
Method

Design

The study used a mixed-method design. The modified grounded theory method of Strauss and Corbin\(^1\) was used to conduct semi-structured interviews. The questions asked were open-ended as a means of exploring parents’ and children’s own views. Sexual-knowledge questionnaires were completed to assess knowledge and confidence in knowledge of both parents and their children at three different phases of data collection (i.e. pre-intervention, post-intervention and follow-up).

For the education intervention, the multimedia computer program that was used was entitled ‘Sense, Sex and Relationships’, and was published by Sense Interactive CDs and the National Children’s Bureau. The contents of the CD-ROM are in line with the SRE Guidance developed by the Department for Education (DfEE) in 2000, which recommends what aspects of SRE should be taught at the different stages within secondary schools. The resource is accompanied by teacher and parent manuals offering effective ways to teach young people about sexual matters. More information of the SRE resource can be found at www.sensecds.com.

Participants

Parents and their children were recruited through purposive sampling from the boroughs of Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland in the UK. Families were recruited by word-of-mouth and by placing an advertisement in local libraries, sporting venues and locations where families were most likely to spend time together. In total 20 families took part in the study. These were 20 mothers (mean = 39, \(SD = 6\)), 6 fathers (mean = 42, \(SD = 7\)), 16 adolescent males (mean = 12, \(SD = 4\)), and 10 female adolescents (mean = 14, \(SD = 7\)). No participants reported having any learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), and all spoke English as their native language.

Materials and procedure

Strauss and Corbin’s\(^1\) constant-comparative method of the grounded theory allowed for the SRE-communication between parents and their children to be explored. Initially, two families were questioned and interviews were transcribed. Data from the interviews were then coded and categorized to allow for theory to be developed. As theory was being developed, questions were added to the original semi-structured interview format as a means of exploring further parents’ and their children’s views. This qualitative aspect of the research continued for 20 families whereby saturation had been reached and no new findings were emerging.

As already detailed the research required families to complete sexual-knowledge questionnaires after exploring the multimedia computer program. Completing the sexual-knowledge questionnaires at pre-intervention, postgraduate-intervention and follow-up stages of the research allowed for measurements to be taken to assess its usefulness for removing barriers and increasing SRE communication within families.

Results

The analyses of qualitative data revealed that the majority of parents do talk to their children about sexual matters. However, as the topic of ‘sex’ was not openly discussed when parents were growing-up – due to it being seen as a taboo subject – parents wanted better sex education to be provided to their own children. One mother revealed:
I just look back and think I want better for my children, and I want that closeness, which I think I have got which allows them to talk to me about things, but I didn’t have that with my mother. I think as well you see where your parents went wrong and I don’t want that with my children.

Furthermore, parents felt that it was their responsibility to teach their children about sexual matters. One mother in particular reported:

I just know that, as parents, we have a responsibility to give our children the knowledge they need for becoming adults.

However, there was a consensus from parents that schools should inform them of the SRE that is provided, as they felt this would allow them to be prepared and initiate conversations regarding sexual matters with their children. Mothers agreed that:

If the school informs parents I also think that prompts parents and helps them talk to their children.

I think they need to involve parents more and tell us what they are teaching our children so we can back up the information at home.

Although all of the parents in the study reported that they were not made aware by schools of the SRE topics that were taught to their children, in many instances they were told by their children about the SRE that was received. This demonstrated that children and parents do talk about sexual matters openly within the family. It was found that mothers talk to their sons and daughters about sexual matters and fathers do talk to their daughters about sexual matters, but more so with their sons. An excerpt to illustrate this was when fathers and sons spend quality time together:

Son: I just talk in general to my dad about almost anything and everything . . . when we are out biking.
Father: I think we tend to have quite a lot of conversations when it is just me and him when we are out bike riding . . . we spend a lot of time together alone, and these conversations are mixed in with something else like riding a bike so it takes the emphasis of the fact that we are talking about sex . . . masturbation . . . that is one of the things we have had a good conversation about when we went biking at Whitby, so he does know things.

Humour was also found to occur when fathers and sons had conversations about sexual topics, which also led to open communication about sexual matters within families. Family dialogue revealed:

Son: We were coming back from football that night.
Mother: What was that about?
Father: Asking about body piercing and why do people get them on their genitals and nipples.
Son: It can help increase the sensation when having sex, just for some people you know.
[Father and son laugh]
Mother:  And how would you know?
Son:    Dad told me.
Father: I told you I would answer any questions.
Mother: You could have told me.
Father:  I did, it was months ago.
[The family laughs together]

Although the majority of families claimed to discuss sexual matters openly based on the close relationship they had, it was found that a lack of parental knowledge led to feelings of embarrassment, which negatively impacted on communication in families. An excerpt to illustrate this came from a father whose sons did not talk to either parent because they, as parents, would get embarrassed with not knowing the correct information and appropriate terminology to educate their children:

I think sometimes it is embarrassing; we are just unsure of the terminology you use, because it was different for us and you lot are a lot more open and knowledgeable about things than we were.

However, parents were also found to be pro-active in finding the information needed to educate their children:

I think I have the up-to-date knowledge, but if I needed to know something I would go on the Internet so I could discuss it openly with my girls. (Mother)

Daughter:  I just ask my mum, because I can trust her and she won’t say anything to other people.
Mother:    Yes, and if I don’t know the answer I will find it out and then explain it to you properly, don’t I? I know other mums with kids in their early teens so I will drop it into the conversation when talking to them as though I don’t know and then I will tell her so nobody knows that I am asking for her. This way she doesn’t get embarrassed and she still finds out the answer to what she asked me about.

In families where parents educated themselves so they could teach their own children, sexual matters were discussed openly which contributed to a close and trusting relationship developing between parents and their children. It is therefore important to identify if the knowledge gained by using the multimedia program impacted on communication and led to sexual matters being more openly discussed within the family context.

Knowledge and confidence in knowledge were assessed when using the multimedia computer program. A three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that, from the 20 mothers who participated in the research, an increase in knowledge was significant from the pre-intervention to the post-intervention stage (mean difference = 2.14, p = 0.037), and from the pre-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean difference = 2.86, p = 0.025). The increase in confidence in own knowledge was also significant from the pre-intervention to the post-intervention stage (mean difference = 3.88, p = 0.03), and from the pre-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean difference = 4.47, p = 0.01).

Children’s knowledge and confidence in knowledge was also assessed with the additional variable of gender. From the 15 boys and 10 girls who participated in the research study, it was found that there was a significant increase in knowledge from the pre-intervention and post-intervention stage (mean difference = 10.83, p = 0.03), from the pre-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean
difference = 15.78, \( p = 0.004 \), and from the post-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean difference = 4.95, \( p = 0.005 \)). The increase in children’s confidence in their own knowledge was also significant for children from the pre-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean difference = 12.50, \( p < 0.001 \)), from the pre-intervention to the follow-up stage (mean difference = 17.86, \( p < 0.001 \)) and from the follow-up to the post-intervention stage (mean difference = 15.78, \( p < 0.014 \)).

However, gender was not found to have a significant effect on the knowledge and confidence in knowledge of children. These findings suggest that the multimedia program was beneficial, if not a facilitator, for providing good-quality sex education within families. When assessing parents, it was not viable to conduct any form of analysis on the findings from fathers as too few participated, even though the descriptive statistics showed an increase in knowledge and confidence in knowledge at the different stages of data collection.

Although these statistical results suggest that knowledge and confidence in knowledge was increased after using the multimedia program, the program was also found to affect communication regarding the discussion of sexual topics. Some important quotes that are pertinent to the investigation were collected from the qualitative data. It was found that the multimedia program prompted parents to discuss sexual matters with their children. One mother stated:

Different aspects of the CD prompt parents to discuss things that they think their children need to know.

In addition, it was found that parents concentrate on discussing sexual matters that are relevant to the gender of their child. Family dialogue to this effect was:

Mother: Well the CD did generate one of our conversations.
Son: Yes, CONTRACEPTION, mother!
[They both laugh]
Mother: I thought we had but then when I think about it afterwards we have mainly only discussed the condom and not the pill . . . I think it is just because I hadn’t thought the sexual act was close yet, so I hadn’t thought to discuss it with him. I mean, we have discussed condoms, but not other contraception in relation to girls as well. I hadn’t thought he was at that stage; well I was hoping not [laughs]. I mean, I didn’t expect him to become a priest but I was hoping he would delay sex for a few more years at least; but no, seriously, I am pleased we have discussed contraception from both sexes, but that just goes to show how useful the CD has been to us. It may not have reduced any barriers for discussing sex, but it has generated conversations so I can educate him and give him all the information that he wants and possibly needs in future, especially in relation to contraception.

Although this finding emphasizes that children want to learn about sexual matters from the perspective of the opposite sex, it was also found that the multimedia program educated parents and gave them the up-to-date knowledge to teach their children. One mother in particular stated:

There were things on the CD that I did not know, so I think it is useful for parents to get the up-to-date information, especially with regards to where they can get contraception from. I think it would be good also for the things that sometimes, as parents, we forget about. I will have learnt a lot about the different things on the CD, but everyone forgets things, even parents.

The multimedia program was furthermore effective in encouraging families to spend time together to select and discuss sexual topics based on the content of the CD-ROM.
I thought the content was really good but I am not totally computer-literate, so it was basically my son who selected the different sections. (Mother)

**Discussion and conclusions**

One of the most important findings from this research was that the majority of parents were found to talk openly with their children about sexual matters. These conversations were furthermore found to increase when using the multimedia program, demonstrating it to be a beneficial, if not a facilitator, for providing good-quality sex education within families. Although this increase in communication could possibly be equated to an increase in knowledge and confidence in knowledge of parents and their children through using the multimedia program, the SRE resource was furthermore found to raise topics that families had not previously discussed (e.g. contraception in the opposite sex). This was mainly between mothers and their children, but also for fathers who talked to, and educated, their children. However, this was more so with their sons where they talked openly about sexual matters, contradicting previous research findings. However, these conversations increased when family members spent more time together, which supports the research concerning how ‘good-quality’ parents can facilitate their children when learning about sexual matters and providing them with the skills and sexual knowledge to progress through adolescence into adulthood.33–35 However, this research has also highlighted the importance of schools involving parents in the SRE they provide, as recommended in government documents (e.g. SRE Guidance).15 This is not only regarding knowledge to prevent embarrassment within families, but also to prepare parents for talking about sexual matters with their children.

Although this research has found that parents are SRE educators of their children, more support needs to be given to parents. In particular, schools need to involve parents in the SRE that is provided to their children. Furthermore, since the multimedia program demonstrated that it could help increase knowledge and communication within families, schools could take the opportunity of integrating the multimedia education into the SRE curriculum and then work in collaboration with parents, especially by utilizing the SRE resource used in this study, as it provides both teacher and parent manuals. This would therefore allow for an integrated approach between schools and families to SRE of adolescents as a means of educating and preparing them sexually for adulthood.

Although this research has demonstrated how families discuss sexual matters and how conversation regarding SRE topics can be increased, more research is needed to further explore and demonstrate the role of parents. In particular, because parent-programmes enhance parents’ knowledge, it is important to establish if this allows them to educate their children and communicate sexual matters. This then would support claims that parents could be the main sex educators of their children,16, 43 especially where computers are used to learn about sexual matters.

**References**


