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Missing the Message on Sex

Survey: Mothers Say This, but Teens Hear That

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By Laura Sessions Stepp
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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Moms in America, take heed: What you think you're telling your teenagers about sex, and what they hear, may be two very different things. And it's your kids' perceptions that shape their behavior.

These are among the most recent findings of an ongoing national survey of 12- to 17-year-olds, released yesterday in a report by the University of Minnesota and, simultaneously, in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

Researchers wanted to know whether parental connectedness influences the age at which young people first engage in sexual intercourse. They interviewed more than 5,000 kids who identified themselves as virgins. They interviewed the kids' mothers separately. Then taking a tack rarely found in federally funded research, they returned to the teens one year later to see if they had had sex. (Fathers were not interviewed for this sample.)

At a news conference yesterday, panelists said closeness between mother and child plays a role in early sexual activity, particularly for younger teens, but in ways that vary between boys and girls.

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It matters to all teens, the report concluded, if they know their mothers strongly believe they shouldn't have sex. Teens are more likely to delay sex "when [they] perceive that their mother strongly disapproves," the Minnesota report states.

But kids often don't get the message that parents think they are sending. About 85 percent of the mothers surveyed said they strongly disapproved of their kids having sex "at this time." But when their children were interviewed, almost half of the boys and about one-third of the girls said they thought their mothers didn't disapprove.

Most mothers also told surveyors that they talked to their children about sex. But the substance of those conversations -- and the mothers' comfort level -- depended on whether they were talking to sons or daughters.

While mothers discussed sex more often with their daughters, they were more comfortable doing so with their sons, and twice as likely to recommend specific forms of birth control to sons than to daughters.

"I think there's an element of the double standard here," Robert Blum, a pediatrician and co-author of the report, said in an interview prior to the news conference. "The message to girls is: 'Don't do this, [sex] is going to affect your reputation, your future.' "

Conversations with boys are more straightforward, Blum suggested: "You better protect yourself."

Panelist Amie McLain, a sophomore at Howard University, offered another reason why mothers might feel less sure of themselves with their daughters: They're on their own. "Moms think they'll be supported by dads when they [the fathers] talk to sons about sex, but not to their daughters," McLain said.

The report failed to settle the question, raised by abstinence-only sex educators, of whether talking about birth control with a child increases the possibility that he or she will jump into bed sooner.

When some mothers in the study talked to their kids about birth control, their kids ended up believing that their moms might not *like* it if they had sex, but wouldn't be distraught over it. But unlike some earlier researchers, who reported that teens whose parents recommend contraception are more likely to have intercourse, the authors of this study concluded that "such recommendations were not associated with a greater likelihood of teen sex."

As important as conversations about sex are, the research released yesterday suggests that other things that parents do may influence kids more: expecting a lot out of their schoolwork, knowing where they are and whom they hang out with.

Mothers who reported being friends with the parents of their daughters' own friends, for example, had daughters who were less likely to engage in intercourse over the one-year study period.

"What evolves from those friendships," said Blum, "is this: The mom says: 'I have a pretty good sense of what that other mom values. She knows what I value, and from that will emerge an agreement. I will keep my eye out for her kid, and she will keep an eye out for mine.' "

That other eye may be crucial. There are some things kids just don't tell their parents. For example: When teens told researchers they were having sex, their mothers were clueless about half the time.

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