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Understanding Mothers’ Information-Seeking About Mother–Adolescent Sexual Communication

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Abstract: Mother–Child adolescent communication (MASC) has been consistently linked to positive sexual health outcomes for the child, and while most mothers talk to their children about sex at least once these conversations tend to be infrequent and highly uncomfortable. Few studies have examined what information mothers are looking for to help them navigate these potentially uncomfortable conversations. It also remains unknown what kinds of messages can be effective in motivating mothers to seek more information on this topic. This research examines the impact of a humorous public service announcement (PSA) on mothers’ (N = 442) information-seeking intentions and behaviors regarding talking to their child about sex. The study compares information-seeking intentions and behaviors for parents exposed to a humorous PSA to those of parents exposed to a non-humorous PSA. Results are discussed in light of implications for understanding how to improve the information supply about family sexual communication, and how to design effective interventions to increase maternal information-seeking.

Keywords: Health communication, Parent-Child Sexual Communication, Emotion, Humor, Information-seeking

Introduction

The sexual health of adolescents in the United States is poor. Ten million young people will be diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) this year and hundreds of thousands of young women will have an unplanned pregnancy (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011). One proven way to help decrease sexual health problems for young people is mother-adolescent sexual communication (MASC). When mothers talk to their child about sex their child is more likely to use contraception, delay intercourse, and have fewer sexual partners, thus decreasing their exposure to STIs and risk of unplanned pregnancies (Aspy et al. 2007; Hadley et al. 2008; Malcolm et al. 2013). However, mothers often report not having the information they need to help them decide what to say or when to say it (Beazley and Brock 1995; Elliott 2012, Pariera 2016). There is little extant research on mothers’ information-seeking needs and wants regarding MASC. This study examines mothers’ information-seeking intentions and behaviors with regard to mother-child sexual communication. Understanding what kind of information mothers are seeking is vital to understanding how to improve the information supply available to mothers, and ultimately increase sexual communication and better sexual health outcomes for young people.

Communication with both parents is beneficial to young people, but a large body of research has found that mothers are much more likely to talk to their child about sex than fathers are (Byers, Sears, and Weaver 2008; Guzmán et al. 2003; Atienzo et al. 2009; Heisler 2005). Sons and daughters are also more comfortable talking to their mothers than their fathers about most sexual matters (Byers, Sears, and Weaver 2008; Guzmán et al. 2003), so mothers are an important focal point for interventions designed at increasing sexual communication. Most mothers do talk with their child about sex at some point, but this communication can be infrequent and limited in scope (Center for Latino Adolescent and Family Health 2011). Mothers also tend to wait too long to talk to their children about sex to reap the full benefits (Atienzo et al. 2009; Beckett et al. 2010). While mothers report believing that these conversations are indeed important, they also report not being sure what to say and when to say it (Pariera 2016). Understanding what kind of information is of interest to mothers as they navigate these difficult conversations is crucial in devising interventions aimed at increasing this communication.
People engage in information-seeking for a variety of reasons, such as gaining more knowledge, reducing uncertainty, problem-solving, and decision making. A person’s evaluation of how prepared they are for something is strongly related to their information-seeking, such that perceiving oneself as highly unprepared for an upcoming activity can be a strong motivator to seek more information about how to perform that activity (Kuhlthau 2003). Information-seeking is a determinant of future behavior, in that if one is engaging in information-seeking, the behavior itself may not be far off. Indeed information-seeking has been associated with increased likelihood of getting vaccinated, managing illness, talking with a physician, and making medical decisions for oneself and others (Wong 2014; Lee and Kim 2015; Diaz et al. 2002; Oh et al. 2012; Bylund et al. 2007; Warner and Procaccino 2007; Jamal et al. 2015). Understanding mothers’ information-seeking intentions and behaviors is an important foundation for developing interventions aimed at increasing communication behaviors.

Research into what motivates mothers’ to seek more information about MASC has been lacking up to this point. There are two variables that warrant special attention on the topic: attitudes and past experience. It is unclear how mothers’ attitudes and past experiences with MASC are related to information-seeking intentions, but this information is vital if we are to understand how best to reach mothers and how to design effective persuasive messages for them. Attitudes are an important factor because they are consistently a major predictor of behavior and behavior change (Conner and Armitage 1998; Godin and Kok 1996; Ajzen and Fishbein 1977). Past experience is another key predictor of future behavior (Bandura 1977). Information-seeking is associated with reducing uncertainty, and so one’s need for information may decrease with experience. Mothers who have not yet talked to their child about sex may be more inclined to seek information than mothers who have, which would have significant implications for targeting mothers with different levels of experience in MASC.

Because information-seeking is associated with increased behavior, it is important to test messages that will increase information-seeking. This study aimed to understand how to design effective messages encouraging mothers’ information-seeking on MASC. All messages are presented in a certain tone, whether it be serious, fear-inducing, casual, or humorous, among others. Humorous messages are one potential way to persuade an audience to engage in certain behaviors. Humor can be a way to reduce negative thoughts (Eisend 2011) and increase attention (Eisend 2009). Humorous messages have been found to have positive and negative effects. They may lead to increased liking and processing (Bippus, Dunbar, and Liu 2012; Eisend 2011; Wrench and Booth-Butterfield 2003), but can also be dismissed by audiences. Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne (2007) found that humor leads to increased persuasion, liking, and processing of a message, but sometimes leads to the message being dismissed or trivialized. Because humor has had inconsistent effects, meaning sometimes it is persuasive and other times it is dismissive, it is necessary to understand how mothers react to humor and how it affects their information-seeking behaviors. Some research has shown that mothers are more inclined to seek information if they have a positive attitude about a given topic (Harmsen et al. 2013). Positive emotion has been associated with increased cancer information-seeking (Murphy et al. 2011), though Nabi, (2002) found that angry messages encouraged more information-seeking. The relationship between humor and information-seeking remains uncertain.

To create effective interventions aimed at increasing MASC researchers must understand mothers’ information-seeking intentions and behaviors, and how humor might affect those variables. This study looks at how a humorous appeal affects maternal intentions to seek more information about talking to their child about sex. The study also explores factors that affect parents’ information-seeking needs. Taking the past literature into account, the following research questions are addressed:
RQ1. Does exposure to a humorous or non-humorous PSA predict a greater increase in information-seeking intentions?
RQ2. Does exposure to a humorous or non-humorous PSA predict a greater increase in information-seeking behaviors?
RQ3: To what extent do mothers’ attitudes predict information-seeking intentions?
RQ4: Do information-seeking intentions vary between mothers who have and have not yet talked to their child about sex?

Methods

Sampling Procedure

To understand parents’ information-seeking intentions and behaviors, and the role humor plays in these, an online survey was administered to a convenient sample of mothers of adolescents. Because humor is highly culture-specific, the sample was limited to Caucasian women in order to reduce cultural variation within the sample (using ethnicity as a proxy for culture). Sampling was handled by Qualtrics, a survey company that recruits participants from across the United States. Participants were compensated $2 to participate in the study, which took about seven minutes to complete.

A sample of 475 mothers of adolescents between eleven and sixteen were recruited. Participants were required to view either a thirty-five second humorous or non-humorous (control) commercial before answering questions in the survey. They were timed for how long they spent watching the video and asked questions to ensure they had paid attention to the video. Sixteen participants were eliminated from the study based on these checks, and another seventeen were eliminated due to yea-saying on their survey responses. This resulted in a final sample of 442 participants.

Sample Characteristics

All participants self-identified as Caucasian mothers with a child between eleven and sixteen years old. The average age of the mother was 38 (SD = 9.55) and the average age of their child was 13.72 (SD = 1.69). Because some participants may have multiple children in the eleven to sixteen age range, they were asked to answer questions only about their oldest child in that range. Half of participants answered questions about a son (50.5%, n = 223), and 49.5 percent answered about a daughter (n = 219). Ten percent of participants had less than a high school diploma, 29 percent had a high school diploma or GED, 28 percent had some college experience, and 33 percent had a Bachelor’s degree or higher. This is close to national averages for Caucasians in the United States, (US Census Bureau n.d.). The sample was 51 percent Republican, 47 percent Democrats, and 2 percent Other.

Stimulus Materials

For this study two different public service announcements (PSAs) were used, one humorous and one non-humorous. The PSAs were similar, but one was designed to convey a more humorous tone while the other served as a control. Both PSAs begin with the words “The following adults had parents who never talked to them about sex” followed by six young adults revealing misconceptions they have about sex. In the humorous condition these statements take on a humorous tone, for example: “Why would I need condoms? I don’t know how to make balloon animals,” and “You can avoid getting someone pregnant by wishing extra hard.” In the non-humorous condition the statements match the topics in the humorous condition, but lack humorous overtones, for example: “I’m not sure why I would need to use condoms,” and “I doubt I could get someone pregnant.” Both commercials end with the words “Don’t let your child grow up to be like them…talk to your kids about sex. Early and often.” This was followed
by “For more information visit….” and the name of a website created for the study to measure actual information-seeking behavior.

The PSAs were developed with insights from experts in health communication and emotion research, then piloted on a sample of thirty-eight Caucasian, mothers of eleven to sixteen year-olds. The results from these participants showed that participants perceived the humorous PSA as funny, and the non-humorous PSA as not funny. No unintended reactions to the PSAs (feeling confused, afraid, angry, or disgusted by either PSA) were found. Based on the pilot study results, no changes were made to the final questionnaire or PSA.

Procedures

Participants were informed that they would be participating in a general health survey (to avoid selection bias). After viewing information about informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (humorous or non-humorous). After watching the PSA they answered questions about socio-demographic variables, MASC attitudes, and information-seeking intentions. At the beginning of the survey parents were asked the first name of their child, which was then piped into the remainder of the study, allowing the survey to be tailored to each participant (e.g., “How important is it to you to talk to Brittany about sex?”). At the end of the survey participants were provided with a link to the same website given in the PSA, with the text “If you would like more information about how to talk to your child about sex, click here.” Thus parents were exposed to the informational website twice, once during the PSA and once at the end of the survey.

Measures, Reliability, and Validity

Immediately after viewing the PSA parents were asked how funny they perceived it to be, on a 10-point scale from 1, meaning “Not At All Funny” to 10 meaning “Extremely Funny” (all descriptive statistics for scales and questions are given in the Results section). They were also asked the extent to which the PSA made them feel confused, surprised, angry, amused, afraid, and disgusted on a 10-point scale where 1 implied “Not At All” and 10 implied “Extremely.”

Information-seeking intentions and behaviors were assessed separately. Information-seeking intentions were assessed on the survey with a scale, while information-seeking behaviors were assessed by analyzing how many participants actually visited the informative website provided in the PSA and in the survey. Information-seeking intentions were measured by asking participants how much they agreed with three statements, all on a 10-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”: “I would like advice on how to talk to my child about sex,” “I have a lot to learn about how to talk to my child about sex,” and “I would be interested in learning more about how to talk to my child about sex” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$).

Information-seeking behaviors were assessed by creating an informational website and directing participants to it at the end of the survey and the PSA. Two identical websites were created (see Figure 1). Participants in the humor condition were directed to one website and participants in the non-humor condition were directed to another website. Both websites were the same in every way, with the exception of slightly different URL addresses, which was needed in order to distinguish whether participants came from the humor or non-humor condition. The websites had six pages: Home, Helpful Tips, Overcoming Embarrassment, Why It Matters, Handling Specific Questions, and Videos (the latter linked to information videos gleaned from other websites, not the PSA videos used for the study). All the information on the website was written based on recommendations from other parenting resource websites and other studies on the topic. It was not possible to know who each individual visitor to the websites was, only to know whether they were from the humor or non-humor condition. Also, because the website was new and unadvertised it was highly unlikely that regular web users outside the study would have located the website in the time frame that the survey was administered and web traffic calculated.
To assess attitudes toward MASC, participants were given six attitude statements and asked to indicate their agreement on a 10-point scale. The scale included the phrase “Talking with [child] about sex…” followed by the phrases “…is embarrassing,” “…brings us closer,” “…is a positive experience,” “…makes me nervous,” (reverse coded) “…is something I look forward to,” and “…is uncomfortable” (reverse coded). Principal component analysis revealed two components with eigenvalues greater than one and both components were retained. The two-component solution explained 73 percent of the total variance. A varimax orthogonal rotation was employed and the rotated solution was interpreted as a positive attitude factor, and negative attitude factor. The first component, Positive Attitudes, consisted of “brings us closer,” “is a positive experience,” and “is something I look forward to.” The second component, Negative Attitudes, consisted of “is embarrassing,” “makes me nervous,” and “is uncomfortable.” Both scales had high reliability with Cronbach’s α for Positive Attitudes as .69, and Cronbach’s α for Negative Attitudes as .88.

Participants were also asked about their past sexual communication with their child. First they were asked if they had ever talked to their child about sex, and if not they were asked whether or not they planned to. If they answered yes to having had talked to their child about sex in the past, they were then asked about the frequency of past communication with a scale asking “In the previous 12 months, how often have you talked to [child’s name] about the following issues?” Parents then indicated the frequency with which they talked about eight topics such as birth control, when to have sex, dating and relationships, and abstinence. Parents answered on a 10-point scale from “Never” to “All The Time.” Principal component analysis revealed all items loaded onto one factor, and Cronbach’s α was high at .95.
Results

Descriptive analysis revealed that the humorous PSA was perceived as funny ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 2.90$) and the non-humorous PSA was not perceived as funny ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.68$). The extent to which participants in either condition reported that the PSA made them feel confused, angry, afraid, or disgusted (all of which were unintended) were below three, on the 10-point scale. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to see whether reactions to the PSA varied significantly between groups. As would be expected, how funny the PSA was significantly higher in the humor condition ($t(38) = -3.76, p < .001$). Most participants had talked to their children about sex, with 80.1 percent reporting they already had ($n = 354$) and 19.9 percent reporting they had not, but planned to ($n = 88$). No participants reported that they did not plan to ever talk to their child about sex. Frequency of past MASC was near the mid-point on the 10-point scale ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 2.27$).

Overall, information-seeking intentions were moderate on the ten-point scale ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 2.86$) (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics on all variables of interest). The first research question asked, in which condition (humorous versus non-humorous) does exposure to the PSA predict a greater increase in information-seeking intentions? An independent samples t-test revealed that information-seeking intentions did vary significantly between PSA conditions, with higher information-seeking intentions in the non-humor condition ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 2.88$) than in the humor condition ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 2.82$, $t(440) = 2.07, p = .039$).

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Variables of Interest ($N = 442$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age of Mother</td>
<td>38.00</td>
<td>9.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age of Child</td>
<td>13.72</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information-seeking Intentions</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Attitudes</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>7.47</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCSC in past 12 Months</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: All variables except age were measured on a 10-point scale.

The second research question examined information-seeking behaviors, which were assessed by analyzing how many people from each condition visited the informational website. Using Google Analytics, web traffic records indicated that twenty-four people visited the informational website from the non-humor condition, and twenty-two people visited the informational website from the humor condition, for a total of 10 percent of all participants. There was no significant difference between the number of participants who visited the website from either condition. Participants in the humor condition spent an average of thirty-two seconds on the website, and visited an average of three of the six pages within the website. The most visited pages, aside from the homepage, were Helpful Tips, Overcoming Embarrassment, and Why It Matters. Participants in the non-humor condition also visited about three pages per visit, and those were the same pages as participants in the humor condition. However, they spent over twice as long on the website, with the average time at one minute and eight seconds.

To address the third research question about how mothers’ attitudes relate to their information-seeking intentions a linear regression was conducted for the entire sample with information-seeking intentions as the outcome and parents’ negative attitudes, positive attitudes, past MASC and child’s gender as the predictor variables. There were no serious violations of multicollinearity, homogeneity of error variances, normality of residuals, and linearity. A significant model was found ($F(4, 439) = 30.53, p < .001$, $Adj.R^2 = .22$) such that negative attitudes and positive attitudes were the only significant predictors. As negative attitudes decreased and positive attitudes increased, information-seeking intentions also increased (see Table 2).
To address the fourth and final research question about whether information-seeking intentions would vary by whether or not participants had already talked to their child about sex, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed that information-seeking was significantly higher for parents who had not talked to their child about sex ($M = 6.97, SD = 2.32$) compared to those who had talked to their child about sex ($M = 4.96, SD = 2.84$) ($F(1, 441) = 37.83, p < .001$), by almost two full points on the ten-point scale.

**Discussion**

This study explored the role that humor plays in mothers’ information-seeking behaviors and intentions regarding talking to their child about sex. To do this, an experiment was conducted with parents viewing either a humorous or non-humorous PSA, followed by a survey about their reactions to the PSA and their interest in learning more about how to talk to their child about sex. Mothers had a moderate interest in information-seeking and results indicate that parents in the non-humor condition were actually more motivated to seek information about MASC. Furthermore, although roughly the same number of mothers in both conditions visited the website, mothers in the non-humor condition spent twice as long on the website. These findings corroborate past research that emotion is associated with information-seeking (Nabi 2002), by demonstrating that humor is negatively associated with information-seeking. It may be that humor trivialized the topic of sexual communication and therefore parents were less motivated to look for more information. While it may be tempting to use humor to make light of these potentially awkward conversations, these findings suggest that a non-humorous tone might actually be more effective in persuading mothers. Future research is needed to have a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between emotion and information-seeking, but this study adds credence to the idea that humor does affect information-seeking behavior, albeit in a negative way.

The results also indicate that mothers’ negative and positive attitudes are a major predictor of information-seeking intentions. This is in keeping with past research that positive attitudes affect information-seeking. Parents with low negative attitudes and high positive attitudes were more likely to want to seek more information about MASC. Because of this, researchers must be careful to avoid messages which might enhance negative attitudes, such as messages highlighting the potential awkwardness of MASC. Promoting the positive aspects of MASC, such as increased closeness and more well-being for young people, may be more likely to motivate parents to seek the tools and information they need to handle future conversations with their child.

The final research question found that parents who had already talked to their child about sex had much lower information-seeking intentions. These findings have significant implications for several aspects of MASC research. For one, parents are less interested in information if they report having already talked to their child about sex. This could pose a challenge for reaching parents who have already initiated these discussions. Because sexual communication is more effective when it is ongoing, parents may think that once they have had “the talk” they do not need think about the issue again. Interventions designed to encourage ongoing MASC are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE(B)$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$(sig.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Gender</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past PCSC</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Attitudes</td>
<td>-2.26</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>-10.44**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = .22$ Adjusted $R^2 = .21$

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$
important in order to eliminate the norm that this is a one-time conversation. This also adds more evidence to the argument that parents of younger children should be the target of future interventions, as parents may be more open to informational interventions before they have talked to their child about sex.

Together the findings from this study indicate that mothers are interested in getting more information about how to talk to their child about sex. Mothers clicked on links to information about overcoming embarrassment, why talking about sex matters, and helpful tips for doing so. This suggests that it may be beneficial to provide this information to parents early on in their child’s development. For example, many parents initiate sexual communication with their child when their child is in sex education in school or when their child reaches adolescence. Reaching out to parents at this time, or just before it, with useful, evidence-based resources on how to talk about sex, might be a key step in increasing the frequency and quality of mother-adolescent sexual communication.

Limitations

This study has many important findings, but there are some limitations to keep in mind when interpreting the results. One of the primary limitations of this study is the nature of the sample. For one, sample selection was not random, in that participants self-selected to be on panels with the survey company. Also, the sample did not include fathers, non-white participants, or parents of younger children. In creating these parameters it was possible to control for variability within the sample, but these groups should be incorporated into future studies to test whether the findings differ by gender and ethnic variables, and if so, to find ways to tailor campaigns effectively for different groups.

Conclusion

The results from this study have significant implications for finding ways to increase the frequency of mother-adolescent sexual communication, and increase positive sexual health outcomes for young people. To help mothers improve the health and well-being of their children we must understand what mothers want to know, and what motivates them to seek this information. This study found that parents are generally interested in having more information and resources for how to talk to their child about sex, and that using humor is not an effective way to reach mothers. Researchers, interventionists, and campaign designers must find ways to provide mothers with the information they need to have these sometimes uncomfortable conversations, and in doing so increase positive sexual health outcomes for young people.

Author’s Note

The results of this study were part of a larger study on mother-adolescent sexual communication. Researchers considering including this publication in a meta-analysis should contact the author for details.
REFERENCES


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