

**PEOPLES' PERCEPTION OF MOTHER-DAUGHTER SEXUAL
COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN ENUGU NORTH LGA OF
ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

In many African societies, sexual communication between female adolescents and their mothers is not openly encouraged because of the inherent culture of silence that surrounds sexuality. Sexual communication between mothers and their daughters has therefore remained a challenge and the consequences are that female adolescents become vulnerable to reproductive health problems such as teenage pregnancy, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. Although studies on adolescents mother- daughter sexual communication patterns in other parts of the world are widely reported in literature, very few research on the phenomenon exist in Enugu state, Nigeria. This study investigated peoples' perception of mother-daughter sexual communication pattern and adolescents reproductive health in Enugu state, Nigeria. The study is based on a survey of 294 respondents selected through the multi-stage sampling technique. The instruments used for data collection comprised of structured questionnaire and in-depth interview (IDI) guide. The findings among other things show that private face to face communication pattern on adolescents sexuality is adopted by majority of mothers in Enugu, Nigeria. However, this pattern is usually spontaneous and unplanned and takes place occasionally. Again, the discussions do not involve all the reproductive health issues as only a few, such as dangers of pre-marital sex, menstruation and physiological changes are mostly emphasized while the use of contraceptives is ignored. Based on the findings, systematic and effective use of face to face pattern of communication, improved sexual communication skills on sexuality education were recommended.

Key words: Sexuality, Adolescents, Sexual communication, Reproductive health

Introduction

Sexuality is part of every human culture; yet, the way people communicate it may differ among cultural backgrounds (Shimaoka, 2013). While communication patterns may vary by race or ethnicity, they also clearly vary by gender (Moran and Corley, 1991). Sexual communication can be seen to include both the acts of obtaining information and consulting others for advice or support regarding all issues pertaining to sexuality, as well as the acts of providing information and responding to others who want to engage in conversations about sexuality (Shimaoka, 2013). Warren (1995) makes the important distinction between sexual education and sexual communication. He noted that sexual education is unidirectional involving the provision of information in a top-down manner, from expert to novice, whereas sexual communication is bidirectional, involving two partners in a mutual dialogue with the viewpoint of both being valued. Sexual communication, he argued implies the co-creation of meaning about sexual beliefs, attitude, values and behaviours between persons exchanging sexual information (Warren, 1995). Hence, sexual communication is mostly encouraged among couples in Africa, even though it is shrouded in secrecy. In most African communities, the rules of the game have been to consign sexuality to the realm of marriage (Ikpe, 2004). According to Amanze (2003), when discussions on sex and human sexuality are held among adolescents, the language used is mythological. Thus, it is intended to hide the true meaning of what is being discussed because of the inherent culture of silence that surrounds sexuality in Africa.

Adolescents, according to World Health Organization (WHO), are individuals within the age group of 10-19 years (WHO, 2017). This period of adolescence spans through the second decade of life and it is characterized by major bio-psycho-social changes which have great implications in the area of adolescent reproductive health (Moore and Rosenthal, 1993). These changes and their challenges include: adjusting to the altered appearance, functioning of a maturing body, learning to deal with sexual desires, confronting sexual attitudes and values, experimenting with sexual behaviours, and integrating these feelings, attitudes and experiences into a developing sense of adulthood (Moore and Rosenthal, 1993). During this stage, the adolescents especially female adolescents are usually curious and ask many questions because they do not understand their own physical changes and sexual needs which make them vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and other reproductive health problems (Kajula, 2005). Adolescent girls are confronted with numerous challenges, and the decisions they make can have both short-term and long-term consequences for their health and well-being (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2010). Neglecting this population would lead to serious reproductive health hazards (Obono, 2012).

Scholars have shown that parents are the change agents who can become valuable sources of information and advice when it comes to shaping the sexual beliefs and behaviour of their adolescents (Eaton, Fllisher and Aaro, 2003). Parent-adolescent sexual communication is the most effective way of helping adolescents understand their surroundings and be equipped to make better decision about sexually related

issues (Wagman, Cooper and Todd, 1981). According to Kerr and Stattin (2000), aspects of parents' behaviour such as parental monitoring and control have been assumed to foster mature and responsible social behaviour among children and adolescents. Studies have shown, however, that control is not enough. Collins and Laursen (2004) added that interpersonal warmth, accepting attitudes, bidirectional communication, an emphasis on training social responsibility and concern for the impact of one's action on others are more important factors contributing to socially responsible behaviour among adolescents. Research suggests that mothers play a more active role than fathers in sexual socialization and sex information provision (Feldman and Rosenthal 2000). Further, studies from the United States of America (USA) also showed that mothers are better communicators and communicate more than the fathers (Botchway, 2006). Mother's communication tends to be educational, focusing on hygiene, emotional sexual feeling (Botchway, 2006). However, the dynamics of mother – daughter relationship and communication is greatly influenced by the culture and social environment in which they live (Ezumah, 2003). It has been established in literature that the social and cultural environment of most African communities are governed by culture of silence when it comes to discussing sexual issues (Ezumah, 2003). Nevertheless, this process of communication is important because in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, girls have inadequate and inappropriate information skills to cope with their life tasks as girls and prepared for adulthood and HIV/AIDS prevention (ARHNC, 2004). This study investigated peoples' perception of mother-daughter sexual communication pattern on adolescent's reproductive health in Enugu state, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The National Reproductive Health Policy and Strategy (Federal Ministry of Health, 2001) has observed that the reproductive health status of the Nigerian adolescent is poor. According to the document, paramount among the factors responsible for the current high level of reproductive ill-health among adolescents are inadequate knowledge on sexuality issues, the greater practice of unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple and casual partners especially with adolescent girls (Federal Ministry of Health, 2001). The socio-cultural and health consequences of unprotected adolescent sexual behaviour are more severe among adolescent girls than boys (Miller and Moore, 1990). The consequences for adolescent girls are said to be associated with unwanted pregnancy, adolescent child bearing, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) like (HIV/AIDS) and other related socio/cultural repercussions such as drop out from school/ lower economic opportunities and social condemnation by the society.

Although adolescence is a period of transition, growth, exploration, and opportunities, some adolescents in Nigeria are poorly informed about protecting their reproductive health during this new phase of life, making them susceptible to the health risks associated with unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STIs, and HIV/AIDS. According to Ikpe (2004), most adolescents came to know about their sexual side through self-discovery. Adolescents especially girls are constrained from seeking information among elderly ones about sexual matters for fear of being labeled

prostitutes (Obono, 2012). The fear of being stigmatized as a wayward girl has left many adolescent girls to withdraw in silence about their sexual needs. These stereotyped sexual norms and peer pressure have exposed adolescent girls to risky sexual behaviour (Kim, Kols, Nyankaurutamoto, Marangwanda and Chiba, 2001). Adolescent girls in Nigeria face similar challenges and the gap in sexual communication with their parents increases their vulnerability.

Mother – daughter communication on sexuality issues remains a challenging issue in Nigeria as well as in many sub-Saharan Africa countries as the socio-cultural milieu constrains such communication. Most girls do not seem to be comfortable talking about sexuality issues with their mothers because it is generally seen as ungodly (Akinwale, Omotala, Manafa, Afeneye, Idown, Sulyman and Adavale, 2006). The manner in which sexuality communication happens between a mother and a daughter is mainly when there is a problem (Kirkman, Rosenthal and Feldman, 2005). This is because many parents find it difficult to acknowledge that adolescent girls are sexual beings and can be sexually active (Kajula, 2005). Also, it has been observed that many mothers lack the comprehensive sexual information and skills needed to communicate with their daughters effectively.

Although studies on adolescents mother-daughter sexual communication patterns in other parts of the world are widely reported in literature, very few research on the phenomenon exist in Enugu North Local Government Area of Nigeria. This study seeks to fill this gap and contribute usefully to a growing research interest in sexual communication and adolescents' sexuality knowledge by analysing peoples' perception of sexual communication pattern between mothers and their female adolescents in the home and how it affects their reproductive health in Enugu North LGA of Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

- (i) To determine people's perceptions on sexual communication between mothers and their female adolescents at the home in Enugu North LGA of Enugu State.
- (ii) To find out the patterns of sexual communication mothers use when discussing with their female adolescents on sexuality and reproductive health issues in Enugu North LGA of Enugu State.
- (iii) To find out the essential issues mothers discuss with their female adolescents in Enugu North LGA of Enugu State.
- (iv) To ascertain ways to improve sexual communication between mothers and their daughters at the home in Enugu North LGA of Enugu State.

Research Method

A cross-sectional survey design was used to gather data among residents of Enugu North Local government area of Enugu state, Nigeria, which is one of the 17 local government areas in Enugu state of Nigeria. Enugu North LGA has its headquarters in the city of Enugu. It is an urban area with all the infrastructures of urbanization because of the presence of University of Nigeria Enugu campus. According to 2006 National Population Census, it has a population of 121,625 males and 123,227 females, a total of

244,852 residents. The target population for this study is limited to residents from 10 years and above which is 193,921 (NPC, 2006). A sample size of 310 respondents was chosen for the questionnaire and IDIs.

Multi-stage sampling approach was used in selecting the political wards, households and individuals that responded to the questionnaire in the survey. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents for In-Depth Interview. The questionnaire data were computer processed and analyzed using SPSS software 19 programme. Simple percentages and frequency tables as well as graphic illustrations were used to describe the main characteristics of the study participants. Data collected from In-depth interview (IDI) were analyzed using the descriptive method of qualitative content analysis. This involves using direct description of the respondents' views.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed. However, 294 which is 98% of them were retrieved. Females constituted 51% while males constituted 49% of the participants in this study. Majority of the respondents are between the ages of 29-34 years (41.5%). In terms of marital status, 42.8% are married while 39.1% are still single. Majority of the respondents are civil servants in government organizations which is 49.2% of the entire respondents. For the highest educational qualification, majority of the respondents 42.1% are B.Sc. holders.

People's Perception of Sexual Communication between Mother-Female Adolescents

Overwhelming majority of the respondents, 88.0%, perceived that it is right for mothers and their female adolescents to communicate on sexual issues in the home while 45.5% perceived that sexual communication will help to build good friendship between mother and female adolescents; followed by 38.1% of the respondents who perceived that it will help female adolescents to make informed decision about their sexual behaviour. However, the result also showed that majority of the respondents, 52.2%, have the perception that most mothers do not actually communicate with their daughters on sexual issues in the homes although they perceive it to be right.

In the IDI report of a 20 year female student, she said:

I think it is ok, but the only problem is that parents have this superstitious belief that sex is not something to be talked about because talking about it will make the adolescents to go out. If they can do it, it will help to build good friendship between them because the girls can be confident to share their problems with their mothers.

Another female adolescent (21 years) said:

It is very important that mothers become friends to their children, relate to what they are passing through, and tell them that they have been there before.

A 19 year old female adolescent said:

In my own opinion it is not that common, you hardly see mothers communicating with their daughters on sexual issues, except those mothers that are enlightened but uneducated mothers don't engage their daughters in such discussion rather they impose it on her that she can't see this guy, she can't go out, instead of sitting her down to discuss sex and its consequences.

Also a young mother,32 years,emphasized that:

I don't see anything wrong with sexual communication between a mother and her daughter, this is because if you don't provide the information the girls will definitely get it from the internet or anywhere else and then she will end up getting the wrong information. So mothers should start it on time before the child gets the wrong information out there.

Table 1: Patterns of Sexual Communication

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Private face to face communication on sexual issues	146	48.8%
Using force and shouting at any sight of sexual misconduct	48	16.1%
Giving strict instruction on sexual issues that must be obeyed	100	33.4%
Total	294	100

Considering respondent's opinion on patterns of sexual communication, table 1 shows that majority of the respondents 48.8% indicated that mothers use private face to face discussion pattern when communicating with their female adolescents on sexual issues while 33.4% indicated that the mothers only give strict instruction on sexual issues that must be obeyed.

From the IDIs, a 25 year old female adolescents said:

I don't really know, but what I can say is that it must be in a conducive environment, so that the girl child will be free to talk, most mothers will want to make sure that the child has a relaxed atmosphere to open up on such issues. The problem is that it is only few mothers that use this pattern, majority will prefer shouting down their daughters.

According to a 22 year old female student:

Yeah, some mothers do shout at it especially those ignorant ones when they see their daughter hanging out with a man. They always go with the assumption that she is going to bring disgrace to this family while some take their daughters inside and quietly talk with them. I prefer calm explanations from my parents to shouting down me down on such issues.

A 40 year old mother said:

The pattern you use will depend on the situation. At times, if something happens you may use such scenario to teach the adolescent girls. For instance, if there is a case of teenage pregnancy or sexual assault around the neighborhood, the mother may use it as an opportunity to teach the girl child. Then again when she is having her menstrual period for the first time you might use such atmosphere to introduce sexual topics.

Table 2: Frequency of Communication

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	11	3.7%
Often	15	5.0%
Not very often	171	57.2%
Not often	47	15.7%
Not at all	50	16.7%
Total	294	100

From table 2, 57.2% of the respondents think that the discussion does not come up very often but usually comes up only when mothers see their female adolescents with the opposite sex; 47.8% supported this reason, while 16.1% think that such discussion does not happen at all.

Another female adolescent said in the IDI:

I think it is a kind of spontaneous thing in this our society, they don't make it an organized thing, maybe they see the girl go out with one boy, then it will occur to them that it is time to talk to this girl before she will go and get pregnant.

Topics Discussed

About 49.8% of the respondents think that the danger of pre-marital sex is the topic that is mostly discussed. This is followed by 33.1% who think that it is adolescent's menstrual cycle while 11.4% think it is physiological changes in female adolescents that are the most discussed topic between mother and their female adolescents. Conversely, 66.9% respondents think that the use of contraceptive is the less frequently discussed. From the IDI, a mother who has female adolescent of 17 years in her house said:

We discuss secondary sexual characteristics because as the child is growing she will be noticing changes in her body. You tell her at this age to expect this kind of thing and look at what she is expected to do. We also discuss girl-boy relationship and the safety of it but we don't talk about contraceptives.

A 20 years old female adolescent said:

Most mothers discuss issues like puberty leading to menstruation. In such scenario the mother will tell the daughter how the menstrual cycles are being regulated but a good mother will not tell her child about contraceptive because from the biblical angle it is a sin.

Another female student of 27 years said:

I think their discussion is focused more on be careful, make sure you have it with the right person, let this girl not bring disgrace to the family like unwanted pregnancy. This is their main focus which to me is not the right way. They should try to know if she is sexually active, is she having problem with relationships and proffer solution on how to help her to face the reality of our times.

Effects of Sexual Communication on Adolescent's Reproductive Health

Majority of the respondents, 53.1%, think that sexual communication between the mother and her female adolescent will help to enhance adolescent's reproductive health knowledge while 32.4% think it will help to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Conversely, majority of the respondents, 48.6%, think that the consequences of inadequate sexual communication will increase the rate of unwanted pregnancy among female adolescents while 38.1% of the respondents think it will keep increasing the spread of HIV and AIDS in the society. From the IDI a young mother of 32 years said:

Once the child has that prior information on it, it helps in shaping the behaviour of the child. The child will get the right information even though some of them may still go out with the peers. If the information is even earlier enough it can help to shape their behaviour not to make mistakes.

One 22 year old female adolescent also said:

Come to think of it when you discuss sexual things with your daughter, it will give her exposure. I believe in what is called exposure, it helps a lot. When you discuss sex and its effects with adolescents in the home they will begin to see beyond the emotions because they will have enough information to make informed decision. Some girls are so ignorant that they don't know how their menstrual cycle runs, when they are safe or not, when to use protection or not, that is why you see a lot of teenage pregnancy and HIV in our society today.

Another 19 years old female adolescents said:

Sexual communication at home affects the sexual behaviour of the girls as a result of the one on one contact with their mothers. The girls will have more knowledge of it and feel confident and mature to make her decision before the opposite sex, that is why it is not good for a mother to be so strict on her girls.

Discussion

Although most of the findings are consistent with other studies on mother-daughter sexual communication yet there are few exceptions. Thus, majority of the participants agreed that it is right for mothers and their daughters to communicate on sexual related issues in the home, but only few mothers actually engage their female adolescents in such discussions within the home. This is in agreement with the shared belief that issues on sexuality are still shrouded in the culture of silence in Africa. According to Ezumah (2003), social and cultural environment of most African communities are governed by culture of silence when it comes to discussing sexual related issues especially among adolescents. This is also because some sexual topics are regarded as unholy and sacred for the adolescents in African culture. This is in support with the findings of Okonkwo and Ilika(2003), Amazigo, Silva, Kaufman and Obikeze(1997) and Aniebue(2002) who had earlier published parental opinion and discussion on adolescent's sexuality to be very low in ranking among adolescents' preferred sources of sexual information in Nigeria. However, this contradicts the findings that 74.4% of the female adolescents have engaged in discussions on sex, contraception, abortion, STIs and the risk factors of HIV/AIDS with their mothers in Ugep, Nigeria (Obono, 2012). According to Obono (2012), it was however revealed that perceived sexual activities of young people in contemporary Ugep society was a propelling factor for the high level of mother-daughter reproductive communication in the area. This factor must have influenced the high rate of reproductive communication between mothers and their daughters in Ugep. Nevertheless in Enugu North LGA Nigeria, a lot of adolescent girls are sexually active and may engage in risky sexual behaviour yet parents do not deem it necessary to communicate with their adolescents on sexual related issues. It is also surprising that even in the urban areas where most people are assumed to be educated and exposed; secrecy in discussing sexual issues among adolescents is still widespread. Researchers have demonstrated that parents generally believe in the importance of providing sex education for their children (Alexander, 1984). However, parents also report feeling overwhelmed by this task; they find it daunting and they perceive themselves as ill-equipped (Rosenthal and Collis, 1997; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; Warren, 1995). This also supports Thompson and Johnson report that even the most well informed parents with good intention may find it difficult to give their own children, especially adolescent's information about sex (Thompson & Johnson, 2009). This portrays the need for continuous awareness programmes to enhance the understanding of parents and need for protective measures

with special emphasis on adolescent females who are usually more vulnerable and in a more disadvantageous position as far as unwanted pregnancy, STI are concerned (Nwokocha, Bob-Okon and Ibe, 2013).

Furthermore, this study showed that majority of the respondents think that some of the mothers use private face to face pattern of communication when discussing with their daughters on sexual issues. This is in a strong agreement with the evaluation of the effect of parent- adolescents' sexual programme by Kranss, Tiffany and Goldsent (1997) which shows that adolescents are three times more likely to remember conversations done with their parents in private than the ones done in a public setting. Howard (1988) also agreed that parents' learning to engage their adolescents in a face to face discussion, learning to listen, looking for natural opportunities to talk about sex with their adolescents and showing respect for their feelings and opinions have proved to be effective in communicating sexual knowledge to adolescents. Nevertheless, according to majority of the respondents in this study, the private face to face communication pattern is usually spontaneous and unplanned and takes place occasionally. Some earlier study on mother-daughter communication about sex revealed five communication styles: avoidance, reactive, opportunistic, child-initiated and mutually interactive (Rosenthal, Feldman, and Edwards, 1998). The findings of this study agreed with this report because majority of the respondents think that most mothers can be described as opportunistic communicators. The opportunistic communicators mothers are characterized as willing to discuss sex-related topics, but did so infrequently, used events, occasions, and catalysts (i.e. Television, school sex education) to initiate discussions while the interactive communicators mothers are mutually interactive and are characterized by openness, intimacy, and emotionally based. These mothers intentionally worked to foster open communication, create time for their adolescents amidst busy schedules, and to be good listeners. Frequency of communication may vary, but overall they communicated more often than the opportunistic group because both mothers and adolescents initiated discussions and mothers particularly related to their own personal sexual practices. According to Thompson et al (2009), open, warm and frequent discussion of sexual matters was more likely to delay sexual activity and lower teen pregnancy rates. Contrarily, controlling and invasive parental involvement was found to increase risky sexual activity, teen pregnancy and rebellion among adolescents. Therefore, sexual communication should occur more frequently and have predetermined goals, steps, and methods.

More so, from the present study; majority of the respondents agreed that mothers mostly discuss topics like dangers of pre-marital sex, menstrual period with their female adolescents but the issues on contraceptives usage are usually ignored in the discussion. These are consistent with previous findings in literature. In a study on mothers' and adolescent daughters' perceptions of communication about sex revealed that the most frequent topics were: pregnancy, negative consequences of sex before marriage, dating behaviour guidelines, menstruation, family values and religious values (Kody, 2008). In another study by Owuamanam (1993) among the secondary school

students in Nigeria showed that parents provided information on marriage, menstruation and sexually transmitted diseases, while peers and magazines provided information on sexual intercourse, ejaculation, contraception and romance. Despite their importance to adolescent future, reproductive health topics particularly contraceptives were the less discussed (Kiragu, 2001). Therefore, the parents should give information on how and when a contraceptive should be used with all sense of dignity, responsibility and morality among adolescents rather than leaving them entirely ignorant of it.

Past researchers have shown that parent child communication regarding topics of sexuality is of fundamental importance (Regnerus, 2005; Nwokocha, Okon and Ibe, 2013, Kody, 2008). Additionally from this study, the likely positive effects of mother-daughter sexuality communications on adolescents reproductive health is that it will enhance the reproductive health knowledge of the female adolescents and will reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa. This is because most adolescents are sexually active and may be vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STIs), hence, adequate reproductive health knowledge will help them to avoid risky sexual behaviour. Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) reported that by talking about sexuality and risky behaviours, parents give their adolescents the ability and knowledge needed to make safe decisions regarding their sexuality. Further on the negative effects, majority of the respondents expressed the opinion that the negative effects of inadequate sexuality communication between the mothers and their daughters will increase the rate of unwanted pregnancy among female adolescents. Majority of the respondents believed that good communication skill mostly on the part of the mothers is the needed way to enhance effective mother-daughter sexuality communication. Thus, mothers' and daughters' approach to communication and skills may serve as a support or barrier to their communication about sex. (Pluhar, 2001). The single greatest predictor of the quality of parent-adolescent sexual communication has been found to be quality time given to such discussions (Hutchinson, 2002). Communication is a skillful art; hence parents should develop it in order to communicate effectively on their adolescent's sexuality issues.

Conclusion

Sexual communication between mothers and their daughters have been seen as part of the process of parent – child socialization in the home. However, many parents especially mothers still find it difficult or occasionally struggle to engage their daughters in such discussion particularly on contraceptives usage amidst increasing rate of risky sexual behaviour and poor reproductive health knowledge among adolescents especially girls in Nigeria.

Recommendations

There is need for government and development partners to bring programmes that will create the awareness on comprehensive adolescents' reproductive health education that will also foster good communication and friendly relationship between mothers and

their daughters on sexuality issues. There is also need for mothers to develop their interpersonal communication (IPC) skills and frequently use it for effective communication not only on values but information on sexuality issues with their daughters.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, the study was on peoples' perception which may include people who may be biased or do not have any knowledge on adolescents sexuality and reproductive health issues. A more in-depth study focusing on mothers who stay with female adolescent in the house will give a clear view on the dynamics of this phenomenon. Secondly, the sample size which is considered large enough to accommodate the statistical computation used in this study may be too small to represent the views of the entire population even though this is a survey. Finally, getting parental consents for adolescents to participate in this study was a little difficult and may have influenced the findings of this study because majority of the respondents were adults who did not need parental consents to participate.

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