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Strengthening Intergenerational Communication within the Family: An AIDS Prevention Strategy for Adolescents

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Introduction

Rates of HIV infection among young people have increased in many countries, including Mexico. Due to the magnitude of the problem, it is necessary to design and implement effective prevention strategies that encourage delayed sexual initiation and safer sex practices among adolescents. While school-based sex education programs are increasing, little attention has been given to intergenerational communication within the family as an intervention strategy. Previous research has indicated that such communication can be an important source of information and influence on sexuality for adolescents.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- Describe the source, frequency, and content of communication on sexuality, gender roles and expectations, pregnancy, contraception, STDs, and HIV/AIDS that exist between parents and adolescent males and females, from the perspective of both adolescents and parents.
- Determine the factors that facilitate and inhibit such communication between adolescents and parents, from the perspective of both adolescents and parents.

- Compare the source, frequency, and content of communication on sexual topics for adolescent boys with that for adolescent girls.
- Identify messages which adolescents find credible and useful.
- Propose intervention strategies for developing and/or strengthening intergenerational communication on sex-related topics in an effort to foster delayed sexual initiation and safer sexual practices among adolescent males and females.

Methodology

This research project was designed to be a comparative study of the perceptions of parents and adolescent males and females with regard to communication on sex-related topics. The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, focus groups were conducted with mothers of adolescent children, as well as with adolescent females and males. Preliminary individual interviews also were conducted with fathers and adult relatives of adolescents. These data were used to develop two interview schedules—one for parents and one for adolescents.

The interview sample was made up of male and female adolescents, between 13 and 16 years of age, randomly selected from students attending the third year of a public secondary school located in a neighborhood

made up of low to lower-middle income households in Mexico City. The sample also consisted of their mothers and fathers who were interviewed at school or at home.

Results

Ninety-nine adolescents (50 males and 49 females) were interviewed. The average age was 14.3 years. Nearly all of the mothers of the females and males were interviewed; 48 and 48 respectively. Fifty-eight percent of these mothers had only attended or completed primary school, and one-third worked outside the home. It was much more problematic to interview fathers. Only 44 female and 44 male adolescent respondents had fathers. Of those, 25 fathers of females and 32 fathers of males were interviewed. The reasons for fathers' non-participation, as reported by both adolescents and their mothers, were that the fathers had too much work, did not get along well with the family, were not interested in the adolescent, or simply refused to be interviewed. Of the fathers who were interviewed, 36% had only attended or completed primary school, and over one-third were unemployed.

Quality of communication

Parents and adolescents were asked to describe their perception of the quality of communication with each other. The parents' and adolescents' perceptions were then compared. Mothers and their children generally shared the same perception of their communication. About two-thirds of the females and males rated communication with their mother as good or very good. A similar percentage of mothers indicated that their communication with their son or daughter was good or very good. It was found that the majority of males and females who said their communication with their mothers was good or very good had mothers younger than 40 years of age.

Sixty percent of girls and nearly fifty percent of boys classified their communication with their fathers as "regular," bad, or very bad. The perception of the males and females with regard to father/son and father/daughter communication was generally similar to those of the fathers who participated in the study.

Frequency of Communication

Adolescents and their parents were asked about

frequency of communication about daily events, boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, and sexuality in general.

With regard to communication about daily events and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, adolescent females and males reported that they talk more frequently with their mothers than with their fathers. Adolescent daughters reported more frequent communication with both parents than adolescent sons.

It was frequently expressed during both the focus groups and the preliminary interviews that it is most appropriate for adolescents to receive orientation on sexual matters from the parent of the same sex. Findings from the study did show that communication within the family on sexual topics generally occurred along gender lines, with mothers more likely to talk to daughters and fathers to sons. However, a significant proportion of female respondents (22%) and male respondents (30%) indicated that sexual themes had never been discussed with their mother. Moreover, a higher percentage of adolescents reported that they had not engaged in any sex-related communication with their father. Approximately one-half to three-quarters of adolescents had similar perceptions as their parents regarding the frequency of communication on sexual topics. But sons and mothers were less likely to agree on the frequency of communication as compared to sons and fathers, daughters and mothers, and daughters and fathers.

Content of Communication on Sexuality

Adolescent respondents were asked whether they had ever discussed the following issues with their parents and vice-versa: puberty (which included bodily changes, and menstruation/wet dreams), masturbation, sexual relations, pregnancy, contraception, STDs, and HIV/AIDS.

The most often mentioned topic of communication between male and female adolescents and their mothers was puberty, followed by HIV/AIDS. With regard to communication between fathers and daughters, both fathers and their daughters reported that HIV/AIDS was discussed more than other topics. HIV/AIDS and puberty were the most often mentioned topics of conversation between sons and fathers.

About one-half of girls and mothers reported no mother-daughter communication about sexual relations

and contraceptives. This figure was slightly higher than mother-son, father-daughter, and father-son communication. Similarly, nearly three-fourths of girls and boys as well as mothers reported no mother-child communication about STDs. While 83% of male respondents mentioned that they had never discussed STDs with their fathers, only 60% of the fathers who participated in the study reported no communication on the topic.

It is important to note that topics which should be related to communication about HIV/AIDS, such as sexual relations, STDs, and contraception—which would include condom use—reportedly were not discussed between as many adolescents and parents as HIV/AIDS itself. For example, nearly twice as many boys reported that their mothers spoke to them about HIV/AIDS as compared to the number of boys who said their mother spoke to them about sexual relations. This suggests that the communication about HIV/AIDS was general and did not contain specific information on prevention. Indeed, when the content of the communication between parents and their adolescent children was analyzed, most of the messages included general references to modes of transmission and that the disease was fatal.

Few adolescents reported any communication with either parent about masturbation, against which there is a strong societal taboo in Mexican culture. The messages that were given by both mothers and fathers about masturbation were overwhelmingly negative. The following quote shows that masturbation had a particularly negative connotation for young women: "for women it is bad and ugly and it means that she really wants it."

The content of the communication between parents and adolescents was further analyzed by examining the type of message or messages given. *Informational* messages were those that referred to the transfer of information, such as the biological aspects of puberty or the modes of HIV transmission. *Directive* messages were those that instructed the adolescent clearly and specifically what he/she should or should not do, given a particular situation. These messages included for example, that "you must change your sanitary napkin every four hours" or that "you must not have sex before you are married." *Value-laden* or *judgmental* messages were those that stated whether certain behaviors were considered "good" or "bad." For example, "it is bad to have a girlfriend at your age" or "it is not good to use contraceptives."

Communication between adolescents and parents could be composed of messages that belonged to one or more categories. The seven categories used for analysis were: Information only; directive only; value-laden only; information + directive; information + value-laden; directive + value-laden; and information + directive + value-laden.

For all topics except sexual relations, the most common type of message communicated to adolescents, as perceived by the adolescents, was exclusively informational. Informational + directive and exclusively directive also were common. With regard to sexual relations, at least one-half of the females and males who reported communication with either their mother or their father reported receiving no messages with informational content—the messages either were exclusively directional or value-laden.

Common examples of directive messages were "you should think very carefully about having sex—but you shouldn't have it now," and "you shouldn't have sex before marriage." A few boys reported receiving messages about how to have sex and with whom: "use a condom to avoid pregnancy," "have sex with 'healthy' people" and "don't have sex with prostitutes." One girl reported that her father told her, "if you have the desire to have sex, use contraception."

More girls than boys reported receiving value-laden messages about sexual relations from both parents. Examples of value-laden messages for girls were "they are bad at your age" and "they are bad because you can get diseases." But, a few girls and boys reported receiving more positive messages such as "[sexual relations] are beautiful when you are married" and "they are good but at an appropriate time."

It is important to note that some informational messages were wrong or misleading, particularly about HIV/AIDS. For example, some males reported that their mothers said that "AIDS is a disease of homosexuals" or that "prostitutes give you AIDS."

Interestingly, when asked specifically about communication about contraceptives with both mothers and fathers, almost all of the boys and girls indicated that the communication was exclusively informational, and therefore not containing directive or value-laden elements. Not surprisingly, more boys than girls reported receiving specific information on the topic from fathers. In addition, all of the adolescents who reported getting specific information about sexual relations from fathers were boys.

Usefulness of communication on sex

Adolescent females and males were asked to what extent communication with their parents had oriented them about sex. A significant proportion of respondents felt that their mother and father had oriented them a great deal. This was surprising given that many girls and boys said that few sexual topics were ever discussed at home. This contradiction was corroborated by case studies of a number of families in which both the adolescent member and the parents indicated that there had been little communication on sexual topics, yet the adolescent felt that the communication had oriented him/her very much. This suggests that adolescents' expectations of communication with their parents is very low.

Adolescents also were asked about the usefulness of their communication with parents. The majority of messages considered useful by adolescents had to do with when to have sex. However, girls were more likely than boys to report that useful messages given by parents directed them to "not have sex now" or "not have sex until marriage." The messages that boys found useful tended to emphasize "taking care," "using protection," "noting who you have sex with," "being prepared," or "using a condom."

Both parents and adolescents agreed that useful messages about sexuality should give specific information, be directive, but not be judgmental or value-laden.

Obstacles to communication

While many parents reported relaxed and positive feelings when discussing sexual matters with their children, about one-fifth said that they felt very nervous and 28% mentioned being very worried during these interactions. The most commonly mentioned obstacles to communication reported by mothers and fathers were time/work constraints, their child's difficult character, and not being able to reach an agreement with their son or daughter. Lack of trust and lack of knowledge also emerged as important obstacles for mothers. During the course of the interviews, mothers often said they did not feel comfortable talking to their sons about certain topics (e.g., wet dreams, masturbation, when to have sexual intercourse) because they did not have enough knowledge of male physiological development.

The most often mentioned obstacles to

communication reported by adolescents were time/work constraints, not being able to reach an agreement with their parents, embarrassment, lack of trust, and fear. The father's difficult character also was identified as an obstacle by numerous adolescents. Male adolescents, more so than female adolescents, mentioned "family problems" as an obstacle to communication.

Desire for communication

Despite the obstacles perceived by adolescents and parents, both groups wanted to increase the frequency of intergenerational communication on sexual matters. Nearly 80 percent of females would like to talk more about sexuality with their mothers, and 60 percent said they also would like more communication on the topic with their fathers. Slightly more than 60 percent of sons reported they would prefer increased communication about sex with both their mothers and fathers. Not nearly as many adolescents would like to talk with either parent about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, however. The majority of parents interviewed wanted increased communication with their adolescents on both topics.

The topics which adolescents would most like to discuss with their parents differed for boys and girls. The specific topics girls wanted most to discuss were sexual relations and pregnancy. Boys were interested most in discussing contraception and sexual relations. It is interesting to note that more girls wanted to talk about pregnancy than about contraception. Nearly twice as many boys wanted to talk about contraception than girls whereas twice as many girls than boys wanted to discuss pregnancy. This finding probably reflects the high value placed on maternity in Mexican culture, and the stigma attached to girls who "prepare for sex" by knowing about and using contraceptives. Although masturbation is taboo in Mexican culture, especially for girls, it was interesting to note that ten girls wanted to discuss this topic with their parents.

Conclusions

The results from this study show that a gap exists between the level of communication about sex that adolescents want with their parents, and the level that they actually have with their mothers and fathers. Parents did express overwhelming interest in wanting to meet their children's need for increased

intergenerational communication on sexual topics, but felt restricted by a number of obstacles.

As a result of conducting this study, parents requested that the research team conduct a course for them on how to improve communication with their children. This request highlights the need for developing methods and materials for parents to better equip them to meet the communication needs of their adolescent children. Additionally, there is a need to conduct operations research on the impact of improved communication between parents and adolescents on adolescents' adoption of preventive behaviors.

The full report is available by contacting:

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