

When prompted, fathers will talk with their kids about delaying sexual activity

August 31 2012, by Stephanie Stephens



Although mothers are usually the ones who have "the birds and the bees" talks with their children, with targeted prompting and guidance, fathers will also step up to the plate. That's the finding of a study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* that analyzed mothers' and fathers' responses to a public health campaign about the benefits of having parent-child talks about delaying sexual activity.

"Our findings show that fathers can increase communication frequency

on a potentially awkward topic. Then, as their children age and even more important and sensitive topics come up, these fathers will have developed the kind of relationship with their children that can help conversation flow more smoothly," lead study author Jonathan Blitstein, Ph.D., a research psychologist at RTI International, an independent, not-for-profit research institute in North Carolina.

The 18-month study utilized data from the Parents Speak Up National Campaign (PSUNC). Results show that fathers of pre-adolescent and [adolescent children](#) exposed to a multi-media campaign increased their communication efforts compared to the control group. Mothers exposed to the same campaign did not increase their communication significantly, perhaps because they were already engaging in these discussions.

Engaging in these talks has critical implications the authors wrote, since previous studies show such conversations can also influence other positive, healthier sexual behaviors such as more use of contraceptives—including condoms—and having fewer sexual partners.

"Parental emotional bonds with children, parental monitoring of [adolescent behavior](#) and parental communication about sex are all linked with better sexual [health outcomes](#) among youth," said Aubrey Spriggs Madkour, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of global community health and behavioral sciences at the Tulane University School of Public Health and [Tropical Medicine](#).

"Public service announcements or PSAs can reach fathers 'where they are,' and hold great promise for engaging them in these important discussions with their children," she said.

Madkour noted that the present study was conducted under more tightly controlled conditions than may be expected in a public rollout of a PSA.

For example, campaign materials were sent directly to parents, who also received prompts to watch them.

"As a next step in the research, researchers will need to demonstrate that in real world conditions, where parents may or may not see or dedicate their attention to the PSAs, the effects of the campaign are also positive," Madkour said.

Study findings may open the door for effective communication around other risky behaviors, noted Blitstein. "It's a great opportunity for [fathers](#) to get more involved. So why don't they? We don't really have that answer, but we shouldn't feed the belief that mothers have sole responsibility."

More information: Jonathan L. Blitstein, et al. Repeated Exposure to Media Messages Encouraging Parent-Child Communication About Sex: Differential Trajectories for Mothers and Fathers. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. September/October 2012, Vol. 27, No. 1 43.

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