Study finds enthusiasm for digital and online sources of sexual and reproductive health information

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Amid growing interest about the potential for using cell phones and the Internet to engage teens and families in health interventions, a new study has found that many parents and youth are enthusiastic about using digital and online technologies for sexual and reproductive health education, and express a need for trustworthy sources of information.

Based on a series of focus groups held in Los Angeles and San Diego, CA; New Haven, CT; New York, NY; Sarasota, FL; and Washington, DC, with a total of 62 parents and 106 adolescents, the study, "Potential for Using Online and Mobile Education with Parents and Adolescents to Impact Sexual and Reproductive Health," was published online February 13, 2014, by *Prevention Science* and is coauthored by Vincent Guilamo-Ramos of New York University's Silver School of Social Work, Leslie M. Kantor, vice president of education for Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and researchers Jane J. Lee, Deborah S. Levine, Sarah Baum, and Jennifer Johnsen.

"The Internet and mobile phones were a common source of sexual health information for the parents and teens in this study," commented Guilamo-Ramos. "However, both parents and teens expressed concern about the accuracy of the information they find online, as well as what they saw as an overwhelming amount of material on the Internet."

Many adolescent participants stated that online and mobile technologies

can't replace asking direct questions of people with whom they have established relationships. The study found that "adolescents preferred sexual health information that was personalized and honest, which they frequently sought from trusted adults."

The study notes that parents have a central role in preventing their children from experiencing unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, and the quality of relationships that adolescents have with their parents was a major theme that emerged from the focus groups. Adolescents thought that undertaking a joint learning experience with their parents about sexuality might be "awkward." Some adolescents also said that their parents would be uncomfortable using digital technologies in general, pointing to a generational divide that parents, less familiar with the Internet, also acknowledged.

These findings helped inspire Planned Parenthood to develop a digital tool encouraging teens to talk with their parents about sex and sexuality titled, "Awkward or Not?" The tool is available, along with eight additional digital tools based in part on this research, at plannedparenthood.org/apps.

"This research was invaluable in developing a set of digital tools for teens, designed to help them stay healthy and better plan for their futures," said Kantor. "Since launching in October, the complete set of tools has been used by close to 90,000 young people from across the country."

The study concludes that sexual health interventions delivered via the Internet and mobile technologies can help engage and educate families – particularly African American and Latinos who continue to experience significant sexual and reproductive health disparities. Additional research into the effectiveness of newly developed digital tools for

parents and teens, as well as barriers to youth and parents using such technology, is needed.

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