

# Checked off 'the talk' with your teen? Not so fast: Once isn't enough

October 1 2018, by Andrea Christensen

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Laura Padilla-Walker. Credit: Nate Edwards/BYU Photo

Patting yourself on the back for gritting through "the talk" with your kid? Not so fast: new research from Brigham Young University family life professor Laura Padilla-Walker suggests that when it comes to your teens, one vague and generic conversation about sex is not enough.

In her study, just released in top-ranked *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Padilla-Walker found that ongoing [communication](#) about sex between parents and their adolescent [children](#) benefits the parent-child relationship and leads to safer sexual activity at age 21.

"Our current culture is highly sexualized, so children are learning about sexuality in a fragmented way from an early age," said Padilla-Walker, who has been publishing in top family science journals for nearly two decades. "Research suggests that parents can be an effective means of teaching their children about sexuality in a developmentally appropriate manner, but that does not occur if parents only have a single, uncomfortable, often one-sided talk."

Padilla-Walker evaluated parent-child communication among 468 14- to 18-year-olds and their mothers, plus 311 of their fathers. She contacted participating families every summer for 10 years and evaluated their level of sexual communication.

Each summer, participants responded to a four-item measure assessing parent-child communication about sexuality and avoiding sexual risk.

The study found that both teens and their parents reported relatively low

levels of sexual communication, though teens reported even lower levels than their parents did. Those levels, for the most part, stayed constant.

"Whether or not parents think they are talking about sexuality often, children are generally reporting low levels of communication," said Padilla-Walker. "So parents need to increase sex communication even if they feel they are doing an adequate job."

An increase in sexual communication between parents and children, she found, can help adolescents feel safe going to their parents with questions and concerns. She also found that ongoing [sexual communication](#) resulted in safer sexual activity at 21, a finding that should increase the urgency parents feel to have conversations with their children.

Even if parents don't anticipate that their children will be sexually active before marriage, said Padilla-Walker, "all children are developing sexually and need continuous and high-quality communication with parents about the feelings they are experiencing."

Moving forward, Padilla-Walker hopes to explore the quality of conversations parents have with their kids about sex, specifically whether [parents](#) are being open and approachable or are using fear tactics and negativity.

"I would like to see an upward trajectory of parent-child communication as children age," she said. "Parents should talk frequently with their children about many aspects of [sexuality](#) in a way that helps the child to feel comfortable and heard, but never shamed."

**More information:** Laura M. Padilla-Walker, Longitudinal Change in Parent-Adolescent Communication About Sexuality, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.06.031](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.06.031)

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