

What influences how parents and their gay adolescent sons discuss sexual health at home?

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Credit: University of Pennsylvania

Parent-child discussions about sexual health and sexual identity are complicated, particularly with a male teen who identifies as gay,

bisexual, or queer (GBQ). New research from the University of Pennsylvania shows that even as parents become savvier in these conversations, departing from gender stereotypes and embracing more accepting attitudes, factors beyond the home will still affect the message parents convey and their child hears.

"We like to think about these conversations as an exchange between two people, the child and the parent. Unfortunately, they don't live in a silo," says Dalmacio Dennis Flores, an assistant professor in Penn's School of Nursing and lead researcher on the work. "Fifty years after Stonewall, they're still part of a larger heteronormative system that they both must navigate."

The latest findings, published in the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, stem from earlier research Flores conducted at Duke University. For the initial study, he interviewed 30 15- to 20-year-old males who identified as gay, bisexual, or queer about how they discuss sex and health with their [parents](#). Despite frustration or confusion over what they may have learned at home, 29 of 30 participants still said they preferred their parents be their initial source of [sexual health](#) information.

For the current work, Flores, with colleagues from the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Medical University of South Carolina, dove into what might affect communication about sexual health between parents and a gay, bisexual, or queer son. The researchers found that a whole host of factors, from siblings and peers to mass media and religion, can reinforce heteronormative ideas, even when parents try not to.

Flores offers an example to explain. Consider a family with two brothers; the older sibling is straight, and the younger sibling is gay. One parent talks to the older son about using condoms to prevent unwanted

pregnancy, and, though the information isn't targeted at the younger son, he takes it in regardless. "It negates whatever inclusivity the younger son might hear later on," Flores says. "He hears the message first about not getting a girl pregnant, and it privileges a certain narrative." The message, that a condom is only for pregnancy prevention, may also inadvertently minimize its value in regard to male-to-male sexual behaviors.

"Parents need to be mindful of what they say to other children in the house," Flores notes. "Is it consistent with what I might tell my other child if I find out he's gay? What messages do they hear at a friend's house? What messages do they see on TV?"

Religion can add an extra layer of complication, particularly if the family follows one that's not inclusive of all sexual orientations. In such cases, Flores recommends parents take the time to explain their nuanced views, that they may not adhere to a blanket belief. "Just having one-time caveats with kids makes a whole lot of difference for someone who is perhaps questioning his sexual orientation, who is insecure, who is wrestling with the idea of whether he is 'normal,'" he says. "That's where parents occupy a significant position."

This research only considers the perspective of male children, a limitation Flores says he hopes to change by incorporating information from parents in two ongoing studies. It also only focused on cisgender, school-going male adolescents, excluding large swaths of the GBQ adolescent population. "My hunch is that these findings are applicable across the board," he says, to transgender people and queer females, but he doesn't yet have the data to support it. Perhaps that will come in the near future.

For now, he says he wants to keep encouraging parents to have inclusive dialogues with their LGBTQ children, which is anecdotally getting better

but still has room to improve.

"Traditional ideas about masculinity are still pervasive. Everything around their kids' life still reinforces them. If parents can counter those and are purposeful in not perpetuating traditional masculinity, that would be a huge reassuring influence for their gay, bisexual, and queer children," Flores says. "This is the new parenting charge."

More information: Dalmacio Flores et al. Hegemonic Masculinity During Parent-Child Sex Communication with Sexual Minority Male Adolescents, *American Journal of Sexuality Education* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/15546128.2019.1626312](https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2019.1626312)

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