



# Sexual Development:

## Influence of Peers and Media on Adolescent Sex Ethics and Behaviors when Parent Communication Quality is Low

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### Introduction

This study investigates the influence of the quality of sex communication on adolescents' choice of sex information sources and how these sources correlate with their sex ethics and behaviors.

Quality discussions between parent and child about sex are instrumental to the formation of adolescents' sexual beliefs (Grossman, 2017) and behaviors (McGinn, 2016). Absence of communication about sex between parent and child usually means that the child is seeking out answers from alternative sources other than their parents (McGinn, 2016; Negy, 2015; Somers, 2014), but the influence of these alternative sources are yet to be determined.

Peer pressure can be both positive and negative on adolescent development (Adimora et. al, 2018). Although positive peer pressure can keep adolescents from exhibiting risky sexual behavior (Adimora et. al, 2018), negative peer pressure is the biggest determinant as to whether a child will develop risky sexual behaviors and beliefs (Bongardt et. al, 2014).

The media can have a significant impact on the development of adolescent sexual beliefs and behaviors through the information about sex they provide (Scull et al., 2018; Merrill & Liang, 2019), the positive attitudes toward risky sexual behavior (Coyne et al., 2019), and the expansion or substitute for peer influence (Ursula & Azeihangwisi, 2019; Trudeau, 2016).

Our study looked at the links between alternative sex sources (peers and media) and sex ethics and behaviors when using parent communication quality (controlling communication) as a moderator.

❖ **H1:** Adolescents who have low quality communication with their parents about sex will be more likely to turn to alternative sources (peers and the media) for information about sex.

❖ **H2:** When controlling communication is high, adolescents who turn to the media or peers for sex information will have a more casual sex ethic.

❖ **H3:** When controlling communication is high, adolescents who turn to the media or peers for sex information are more likely to practice risky sexual behaviors.

### Methods

Data were gathered from 620 families, containing adolescents between the ages of 12-17 (Mean= 14.5, SD = 1.70) , 50.5% were female and 55.3% were white, 26% were black, 12.6% were Latino/a, and the rest were other racial groups. through a Qualitrics online survey measuring parenting approaches, sex beliefs, and sex behaviors for both the child and parent.

#### ❖ Controlling Communication

❖ Ex: My parent has very strong opinions about my sexual behavior. (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

#### ❖ Peer Influence

❖ Ex: How likely would you be to go your close friends for information about sexuality? (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely)

#### ❖ Perception of Peers

❖ Ex: I feel pressured to have sex, because a lot of people my own age have already had sex. (1 = Never, 6 = Almost Always)

#### ❖ Media Influence

❖ Ex: How likely would you be to go to the internet or media sources for information about sexuality? (1 = very unlikely , 5 = very likely)

#### ❖ Sex Ethics

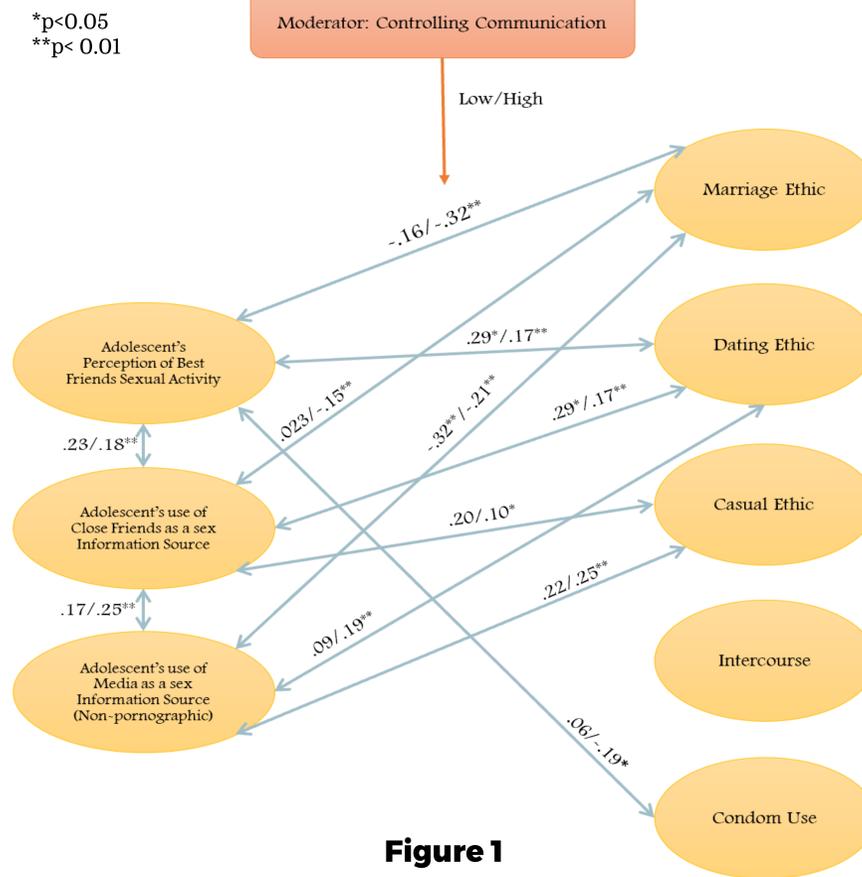
❖ Ex: Couples shouldn't start having sex until they are married. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

❖ 3 Ethics: Marriage, Dating, Casual

#### ❖ Sex Behaviors

❖ Ex: When you have had sex with this partner in the last 6 months, how often did you/your partner wear a condom? (1 = Never, 5 = Every Time)

❖ 2 Behaviors: Intercourse and condom use



**Figure 1**

### Results

We used a T-test for our first hypothesis. For the second and third hypotheses we used Correlations splitting the data by high and low controlling communication as a moderator.

❖ **H1:** When parent-child sex communication was low quality (M = 1.72 for peers; M = 2.06 for porn) compared to high quality (M = 1.39 for peers; M = 1.83 for porn), adolescents were more likely to seek sexual information from peers and pornography (t = 30.43, p < .001 for peers; t = 11.32, p < .05 for porn).

❖ **H2:** When controlling communication was high, going to peers and the media for sex information was positively correlated with a more casual sex ethic.

❖ **H3:** When controlling communication was high, there was not a significant correlation between media and peer sources on adolescent sexual behavior. However, when controlling communication was high there was a correlation between decreased condom use and adolescent's perception of best friend's sexual activity.

See figure 1 for correlation values and significance



### Discussion

This study sought to understand the relationship between quality parent-child sex communication and influence of peers and media on adolescent sexual ethics and behaviors.

In line with our first hypothesis, low quality parent-child sex communication had higher mean levels of going to peers about sex information, however there was no mean difference between low- and high-quality communication and the media as a sex information source. This is contrary to findings of the media having a growing influence on adolescent sexual beliefs and behaviors (Bleakley et. Al., 2011), but does suggest if parents are not communicating well, teens will turn to peers.

Our findings supported our second hypothesis that when communication quality is low (controlling communication is high), adolescents going to peers and the media for sex information was positively associated with a casual sex ethic and negatively with a marriage sex ethic. However, when quality of communication was more controlling the association was not significant for the media. This finding supports past studies that determined that adolescents viewing sexual interaction in media outlets develop more permissive attitudes toward sex (Scull et al., 2018).

The negative correlation between adolescents' perception of their best friend's sexual activity and condom use supported our third hypothesis. However, contrary to our last hypothesis there was not significant correlation between using peers and the media as a sex information source and engaging in risky sexual behavior. This suggests that peers and media have more influence on the development of sexual ethics rather than actual behaviors except in regard to adolescents' perception of their peer's sexual activity.

**Limitations:** There were limitations to this study. Only correlations were ran, which can not determine causation or directionality. It is likely that there are bidirectional relations between sources of sex information and sexual ethics and behaviors (intercourse and condom use).

**Future Directions:** Future studies should include survey questions that more reliably measure peer and media influence and involvement in adolescents' sexual development. It would also be helpful to focus research on older adolescents who are more likely to be engaging in sexual behavior to get a more accurate report of sexual behavior.

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