Reviewer's report

Title: Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters: gender differences in the determinants of parent-child communication about sex

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Reviewer: Sharron Ogle

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Background (para 1)
   The first line states that “there have been recent declines in rates of sexual activity among teens and preteens in the United States” without clear reference to the source data – is it from ref (1)? There is also no mention given of how much this decline is and in what time frame.

2. Background (para 1)
   The mean age of the children in this study was around 12 years but most of the background data is presented in relation to those of 15yrs and older – is there any literature specific to the age group targeted in this study? Either that, or can you justify the use of this data in relation to your data set?

3. Methods (measures, para 1)
   I have some concerns regarding the wording or some of the questions presented in the questionnaire. Two were very specific and value-laden: whether to be married before sex; and the negative impact on social life because of loss of respect. What was the purpose of using these specific questions? Also, the use of a 1-4 scale that used ‘1’ to represent the highest value, and ‘4’ to represent the lowest is counterintuitive and bad practice. I realise it is not possible to change these now, but they point to a general problem in the design of this study.

4. Methods (data analysis, para 1)
   What evidence is there for this first statement? Please either reference a suitable study or re-word it.

5. Methods (data analysis, para 2)
   I would wish to see the full distribution of each variable to assess the overall spread of responses in each case. It is not clear why only the extreme responses are presented – this will need justification or else the full data set should be presented in order to assess the validity of analyses related to them.

6. Results (sample description)
   There is clear evidence of sample bias here wrt education but no attempt is made to speculate how this bias might affect the outcomes of the study. There is
also evidence of higher rates of black mothers than black fathers in the study group – could this also influence the results? Finally, the striking difference in marriage rates between mothers and fathers is very interesting – what significance might this have?

7. Results (comparison of mothers and fathers, para 1)
What specific data supports the first statement that “mothers generally talked with both sons and daughters more than fathers did”? I dislike the use of “a great deal” or a “moderate amount”: first, it was stated in the methods that only the extreme values would be presented; second, it is not clearly stated how these descriptions relate to the 1-4 scoring system. NB why were scoring and descriptive methods BOTH used? Which was presented to the participants?

A separate comment is that it is not necessary to suggest that results ‘approached’ statistical significance: q<0.1 is not significant by your own criteria.

8. Results (table 4)
Although these comments really related to methodology and so cannot now be addressed, I have included them here as I feel they have potential implications for variable interpretation of questions by parents:

a. “disapprove of child being sexually active as a teenager” – there is surely a world of difference between a 13 and 19 year old being sexually active and a parent’s attitude to this? There is the legal aspect if nothing else. In the same section, there is reference made to “teens” and “young teens” which is inconsistent and can make comparison of responses difficult.

b. the “expected outcomes of talking” section presents a series of questions which offer a mixture of ‘will’, will not’, ‘would’ and ‘would not’ options. Changing the wording of the questions can be confusing for participants and are generally bad practice.

9. Results (table 4)
As stated previously, I would require to see the full data set – only including “% strongly agree” results does not give any indication of the spread of opinion. For example, if the remaining respondents had all “agreed” or “strongly disagreed” the interpretation of the results would differ markedly.

10. Results (comparison of sons and daughters, para 6)
There is another example of selective reporting of responses where “52% of mothers of daughters… compared with 28% of mothers with sons” where my previous objections again apply.

11. Conclusions (para 2)
There is insufficient justification for statements made that interventions are necessary (also made in the discussion section of the abstract). It is stated that “fathers need additional support to talk to children about sex”. However, there is no evidence presented that increasing father communication has a significant
impact on reproductive behaviour in sons or daughters, or that fathers in particular can influence the behaviour of their children. In addition, there is no account taken of the children’s attitudes to talking to their parents – a study comparing children with their parents found that it was the children presenting a barrier to communication rather than the parents. (Ogle, Reilly & Glasier, 2008. Communication between parents and their children about sexual health. Contraception: 77; 283-288)

I would similarly comment on the assertion that it is important to encourage “sons in particular to delay sexual activity” – why? Apart from the risk of contracting STIs, it could be argued that boys have less to lose in being sexually active at a younger age than girls. Also, does it matter what age the boy is if he is acting in a safe way? I would like to see reference to studies here that promote the need for boys avoiding sexual activity until they are ‘older’.

11. Conclusions (para 3)
There are a number of statements made here that require some kind of evidence, either from this study or the literature in general, to justify them:

a. "mothers differ from fathers on a wide range of factors..." – which and in what proportion of the total?
b. “differences tended to be more pronounced with daughters than with sons.” – which data supports this?
c. …"reassurance that their sons and daughters will listen to them…” – what evidence is there that they will?

11. Conclusions (para 4)
As above, justification is needed for the following statements:

a. …"their reflection of double standards related to sexual activity.” Which are?
b. “…the potential negative consequences for boys of early sexual activity…” – which are what?

11. Conclusions (para 5)
Related to a comment already made above, it is stated that “results may differ for samples with a higher proportion of minorities…” but there is no attempt to say in what way they might be affected and therefore what bias may be present in this study.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Abstract (results)
There is no mention in this section of what factors are associated with the differences in the outcomes stated, despite this being a clear part of the stated aim of the study.

3. Background (para 2)
“Most adolescents and adults” – can you state a % here please and refer back to the original work from which it is derived.

4. Methods (para 5)
What is the relevance of including the efficacy study here? It caused confusion on initial reading as it is not part of the data being presented in this paper.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Abstract (Background and method)
There is a minor inconsistency between the stated single aim “to describe how factors that influence parent-child communication about sex differ by gender” in the background section and the two sections in the methods section i.e “(1) parent-child communication about sex-related topics, and (2) factors that influence that communication”. I would suggest clarification that data regarding (1) is a pre-requisite to assessing (2).

2. Methods (data analysis, para 2)
Why should Type I errors be of such a concern in this particular study?

3. Results (comparison of sons and daughters, para 1)
The second sentence is ambiguous and could be re-worded.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.