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## Communication between parent and child regarding sex; Does a parents [sic] sexual orientation make a difference?

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## Communication between parent and child regarding sex; Does a parents [sic] sexual orientation make a difference?

### Abstract

There have been numerous studies conducted on the subject of gay parenting. Though the myths have been debunked over and over, many people still believe that same-sex couples will not make suitable parents. There are a number of reasons one might have this opinion, but one justification people vocalize is that gay parents raise gay children. Studies have concluded this to be false, yet there is still a concern amongst many who oppose same-sex couples adopting. A question that has been brought up by people who have little to no experience with this situation is "how do gay parents talk to their children about sex?" This is the research question that this study will attempt to answer. This research will attempt to determine whether or not there are differences in the way that homosexual and heterosexual parents approach this subject with their children. The hypothesis for this research is that heterosexual and gay parents have similar communication patterns when speaking with their children about sex, and that little or no differences will be discovered with this research.

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Dennis Patrick

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD REGARDING SEX; DOES A PARENTS  
SEXUAL ORIENTATION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

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## INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous studies conducted on the subject of gay parenting. Though the myths have been debunked over and over, many people still believe that same-sex couples will not make suitable parents. There are a number of reasons one might have this opinion, but one justification people vocalize is that gay parents raise gay children. Studies have concluded this to be false, yet there is still a concern amongst many who oppose same-sex couples adopting. A question that has been brought up by people who have little to no experience with this situation is “how do gay parents talk to their children about sex?” This is the research question that this study will attempt to answer. This research will attempt to determine whether or not there are differences in the way that homosexual and heterosexual parents approach this subject with their children. The hypothesis for this research is that heterosexual and gay parents have similar communication patterns when speaking with their children about sex, and that little or no differences will be discovered with this research.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a multitude of research studies on the topic of sexual communication between parents and their children. It is an important research topic because it studies how children develop their sexual identities at a young age and how that shapes them as an adult. The topic also affects all human beings, whether or not they are a parent themselves, as they were once a child and the way their parents interacted with them about the subject provides a framework for their sexual lives as adults. Sexual communication between parent and child is a continuous cycle. It must be studied in order to observe what effects are being felt by the child and how that shapes them in their adult life. The topic may be widely researched, however, there is an area that has not fully been explored yet. The way that same-sex parents speak with their children on the topic of sex has not been looked at to discern if there is a difference between the styles of same-sex and opposite sex couples and how they speak with their children on the topic of sex.

**Importance.** It is widely agreed upon that it is extremely important for parents to take an active role in their child's sexual education (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, and Gard, 2010). An estimated 50-70% of adolescents have their first sexual encounter between the ages of 15 and 17 years old, making the issue an important one for most families (Abrego, 2007). While some schools do offer a voluntary class for junior high and high school students to take that teaches some of the basic elements of puberty, it is not created to be used as a complete guide to sexual issues for children. These classes are rather created with the intent to be used as a supplemental course to aid parents. There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the overall usefulness of curriculum based sexual education courses as well. In the United States, only 22 states mandate that sexual education courses be offered for students (National Conference for State Legislatures, 2015). Even in those 22 states, some of the courses offered do not teach students what they need

to know if they choose to be sexually active, including how to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, it is vitally important for parents to take on the responsibility of protecting their children by giving them the knowledge they need to be safe. It has been concluded that parents do in fact have the ability to influence their children's decisions if they keep the communication line open and talk about the issues regularly with their children (Aspy, Vesely, Oman, Rodine, Marshall, and McLeroy, 2007).

Research has found that it is important for parents to create a dialogue that allows for ongoing conversation on the topic of sex. According to a study done that surveyed 312 teenagers and their parents, children and teenagers are more likely to wait to have sex if they are more educated on the subject and feel comfortable talking with their parents about it. According to this research children who speak with their parents about sex more often reported feeling closer to their parents as a result of this as well. Parents who cover a larger variety of sexual topics in these discussions have children who reported feeling more comfortable talking about it overall (Gordon, 2008).

The importance of communication is highlighted in this study as well. Good communication between parents and their children is an essential component in any healthy relationship, especially when it comes to the topic of sex. The results from the research conducted on these 312 teenagers showed a correlation between levels of communication and the numbers of unplanned teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and the length of time a teenager waited to before entering a sexual relationship with their partner. The families who described their communication as open and ongoing had the most desirable outcomes and the children felt most comfortable in those situations. The families who reported having good communication on this subject reported having a better communicative relationship overall as

well, not just when it came to the topic of sex. The study found and cited communication to be “very important” and gives advice on how one can create a foundation that promotes a healthy environment that everyone can feel comfortable speaking in (Gordon, 2008).

Claire McCarthy of Harvard University looks at what good communication is supposed to look like. She found that kids who had an ongoing discussion with their parents on sexual topics were less likely to have sex early on, and were more likely to wait longer. She also found that kids with this same amount of healthy communication who did choose to have sex were more likely to choose to use contraceptives and engaged in sexual activities with fewer partners. Her research cited four important components of good communication. The first component was to start the discussion early on in childhood. Creating a solid communication foundation early on will set the tone for the future. If it becomes a normal conversation in adolescence it will continue to be normal throughout the child’s life. The second component of good communication is to talk often about the subject. As other researchers have found, it is important for the conversation to be ongoing and not just a one time talk. The third component of good communication cited is to keep the conversation versatile. It is important to cover a variety of topics, not just intercourse. Other topics that are important to discuss might include masturbation, sexual orientation, and sexually transmitted diseases, among other things. The final component of good communication is to ensure you are discussing your child’s feelings as well. It is easy to forget that sex can be emotional as well as physical when one is covering the basics with their child. Ensuring that your child feels comfortable with their decision to have sex and explaining the feelings that might come with that decision is paramount in meeting this final component of good communication (McCarthy, 2008).

**The challenge.** Sexual communication can be a challenging topic of discussion for anybody, but it can be especially difficult when it is with one's own child. It is also something parents struggle with cross-culturally. In an article published by [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk) Katy Winter speaks out about British families and the difficulty parents have in speaking with their children about sex. Over 60% of the parents polled found it difficult to communicate with their children about the topics they found to be sensitive (Winter, 2014). Because of the challenge that comes with talking about sexual issues it is especially important for parents to take the first step in beginning the conversation with their children. Many parents have reported that one of the biggest reasons they do not speak with their children about sex is because they believe their children will obtain the information elsewhere (Regnerus, 2007). It is easy to ignore the subject, but it is harmful to the child in the end. The child may look for answers in places that could be potentially harmful, such as the internet or friends who are misguided in their own knowledge. Armed with incorrect knowledge the child might feel as if they know enough to protect themselves and choose to engage in sexual activity, with potentially life threatening consequences. It is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable, and according to an article by Serena Gordon in *HealthDay Journal* it is a good idea to let your children know you are uncomfortable so that they understand that even though it may be uncomfortable for everyone it is still important enough that it has to be talked about (Gordon, 2008).

**Advice.** There is plenty of advice for parents on speaking with their child about sexual issues. There are a plethora of websites that offer advice to parents who are looking for guidance on the topic. Many of these websites are created by the medical community and offer medically up-to-date material for parents to utilize from all stages of a child's life. Some examples of these

medical-led websites include [plannedparenthood.org](http://plannedparenthood.org), [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org), [kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org), and [webmd.com](http://webmd.com).

Dr. Claire McCarthy of Harvard University has an article published by Harvard Health Publications that gives a detailed list of advice for speaking with ones child about sex. She first states the importance of speaking with your child about sex, and talks about the power that a parent has in providing information to their child, saying it is not something that should be wasted. She advises having the conversation be ongoing in order to gain the most benefits from the communication. She walks the reader through the process, beginning with advice on getting started and then transitions through different phases of a child's life, puberty and becoming a teenager. Some of the advice she gives includes "Give your kids good medical information – especially about contraception and preventing sexually transmitted infections. We all hope our teens will be abstinent. It's something we want to encourage, but life can take unexpected turns" and "Anticipate the changes your child's body will go through and talk about them. Don't wait for the school health talk. Be positive about the changes; stress that they are normal and good" (McCarthy, 2012).

**Influences.** There are many influences that can determine how a parent communicates with their child on sex. In her research, Tiffany Abrego studied the factors that influence communication between parents and their children on the topic of sex. She found that there were many influences, such as religion, that could affect the communication between the parent and child. The study found that increased communication between the parent and child increased safe behaviors when engaging in sexual activities, demonstrating the importance of the communication for the overall safety of the adolescent. In the end Abrego concluded that it

would be beneficial for more studies to be done to determine if a parents own sexual experiences provided any influence (Abrego, 2007).

Dr. Claire McCarthy of Harvard University states “Sexuality is part of life. Whether it's toddlers sticking their hands in their diapers, teens kissing in the backseat of cars or long-time married couples who still enjoy seducing each other, we are all hard-wired to have sexual feelings. Yet it's not easy for parents to accept this fact. It's hard to talk about sex. It's so emotionally complicated. And our feelings about it are so tied to our values and our experiences” (McCarthy, 2012). This is an important statement because it highlights that one’s personal feelings about sex are connected to his or her own experiences and values that are personal to each individual. The article does not go into more detail on this subject, and more research could be done on this topic.

There has been an abundance of research conducted on the importance of talking with your children about sex and the effects that come from both successfully communicating on the topic and not communicating about it at all. It has been determined that it is important to talk to your children about sex, and that positive effects come from that communication. There has been a lot of research on how heterosexual parents talk with their children about the topic, however there has been little research on how gay parents talk to their children about sex. More research needs to be done in this area to determine whether or not there is a difference in the communication styles between gay and lesbian parents and straight parents on this important topic.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The initial plan consisted of having 10 participants, five from each control group. The first control group, called “group one”, consisted of participants who identified as heterosexual parents. The second control group, referred to as “group two”, was made up of participants who identified as gay or lesbian parents. Given the brevity of the answers it was decided that extra participants could be useful for providing more data to analyze and the extra responses received were recorded. The final participants consisted of 12 people between the ages of 18-65 who have children and have already spoken with their children about sex. Five of the participants identified as straight and seven identified as gay or lesbian. The participants were voluntarily recruited by referral to the researcher through mutual contacts.

### **Procedure**

The couples were interviewed through an online survey. A standard email was created and sent to each of the participants at the same time with a consent form attached. The participant was asked to first read the consent form and decide whether or not they would like to continue with the process. If they chose not to continue, their participation ended there and no further actions needed to be taken on their part. If they chose to continue with their participation they were asked to click on the enclosed link which brought them directly to the survey. The participant was asked to respond to the survey within a week of receiving it, and was encouraged to be as detailed as possible with their answers. The survey was a questionnaire consisting of six open-ended questions and took the participants approximately 15 minutes to complete. The questions specifically asked in the survey were:

1. What is your sexual orientation and what is the sex of your child or children?
2. What age did you first approach the topic of sex with your children and why did you choose this age?
3. What sexual topics did you focus on the most, and why?
4. Was the discussion ongoing or did you have the talk only once?
5. How comfortable were you when you first spoke with your child about sex?
6. What did you find to be most challenging for both you and your child during these discussions?

The participants were informed that their participation in the study was completely anonymous and their information would be kept confidential in the final project.

## RESULTS

### Age

In the heterosexual group two of the participants could not identify the exact age that they began speaking with their child about sex. The other three participants were sure about the ages they stated because they were able to link the age to something else that triggered the discussion. One participant recalled speaking with their child at age 11 because it was the year before the school offered the sexual education course. Another remembered that their child was 13 because this is when their child became curious about the subject. The last participant able to recall the exact age tied the experience to finding Hentai, a type of animated pornography, on their child's computer device and remembering feeling that this type of pornographic material was beyond the understanding of the child at the age of 14. The first participant unable to recall the exact age of their child at the time of the first discussion stated that it was early on, and could say that the age was young and the child was in school and not yet a teenager. The final participant in this group stated that they dealt with the issue whenever it came up, but weren't exact on the age the topic first began to occur.

The second group, consisting of parents who identify as gay or lesbian, had two more answers than the first group. All of the participants from this group were able to recall their child's exact age at the time of first discussion. Three of the parents stated that the discussion began at age eight. Two of those people went on to state the conversation lasted from eight to age ten because this is when the child began to have questions and understand issues going on around them. One parent stated that the conversation began at the age of 13 months, and was an ongoing process from there. Another participant stated that they began the conversation lightly at age six, but developed the conversation more at age eight and went into more detail by age ten.

## Topics

In the heterosexual group only one participant cited talking about love in their discussion about sex. Three of the parents in this group talked about protection during their discussions, and three included discourse about pregnancy. One of the parents stated that they believed disease and pregnancy to be the most important issues when speaking with their child about sex. Another participant stated that their child asked them when they would be old enough to have sex, and the participant answered that when they were ready to support a child they would be ready to participate in intercourse. One participant focused a great deal on respect, emphasizing the importance of respecting their selves and their partners both physically and emotionally. Love, intimacy, monogamy, and protection were cited as one parent's points of discussion to aid in their attempt to help their child make good choices.

In the second group the answers were a bit more detailed. Three participants recalled discussing safety in their conversations, and like the first group only one parent stated love was a topic covered in their discussion. Two participants talked about discussing the use of condoms with their child, and how to properly and safely use them. One parent talked about their adopted child's past and how sexual abuse occurring before the adoption affected their child during their pubescent years. The parent was committed to ensuring their child was comfortable in their body and felt no shame. This particular parent talked about a wide range of topics with their child, including the use of condoms, intercourse with both sexes, avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies, and how to communicate with their partner about using protection if their partner does not want to. One parent found it easier to explain the act of mating when relating it to the animals on the farm they lived on. Their discussion began with an explanation on how different species have young and relating it then to humans.

### **Frequency of discussion**

In the first group three of the participants stated that the discussion about sex was an ongoing topic. One parent stated that they talked about sex often with their child and they were comfortable discussing it. Another stated that the discussion was returned to over the years as their children matured and formulated new questions and concerns. Two participants stated they only had the talk once, but of those two one stated they would give little reminders once in a while to their children to keep vigilant.

In the second group only one participant stated that they had the discussion only once with their child. All of the other participants indicated that the discussion was ongoing. One parent stated that the discussion was ongoing due to circumstances that prompted dialogue such as rape, teen pregnancy rates, and the issue of abortion. Another parent stated that creating a relaxing environment that would alleviate nervousness was their justification for advancing the conversation throughout the years. Two parents wanted their children to feel like there was open communication between them and they could talk to them whenever they needed to about the subject.

### **Comfort level**

Most of the participants from group one rated their comfort level at very high. Every participant said that they were comfortable, but one stated that they were reasonably comfortable rather than very comfortable. This participant took notes of which questions their child was asking and researched the answers to get back to the child at a later time. Another parent stated that they remained calm because the situation that brought about the conversation was comical; they recalled comparing the pornography found on their sons computer to “sonic the hedgehog

porn". It was important to this parent to help their child feel comfortable in their sexuality and their choices regarding sexual activity.

Group two's answers were more varied, and the answers ranged from "very comfortable" to "comfortable" to "fairly comfortable" and finally "a bit uncomfortable". Only one parent talked about being nervous, but despite this feeling still found the topic easy and wanted their child to know it was an important topic to discuss. Like a participant from the first group, one parent found their child looking up sex on the internet and felt the need to address it promptly. Another participant found that the motivation he and his husband felt to not become grandparents yet helped ease the discomfort and incentivized them to begin the conversation when they did. This participant spoke with their child about many topics such as same sex dating, dating violence, consent and rape, among other important subjects and felt at ease during all of the conversations.

### **Challenge**

In group one the answers were all very different. One parent found the most challenging part of the discussion to be trying not to giggle. Another found the looks on their children's faces to be the hardest part when they learned about sexual activities. One participant said that the hardest part for them was being neutral due to not knowing their son's sexual orientation yet. This parent wanted their child to feel comfortable in his own skin and know that he was free to love whomever he wanted without judgement from his family or without worrying about what others might think. Another participant stated that their child has special needs, and it is common for him to tell his parents everything matter-of-factly. The parent gave the example that if her son has a wet dream he will tell his parents during breakfast, and while this is okay to talk about

with his parents it's not something that can be discussed with others. Setting up communication boundaries and learning about privacy was the biggest challenge for this participant.

As in group one, the answers given were all varied when it came to the challenges faced by both the parent and the child. One participant said that they were surprised at the easiness of the conversation, as they were expecting it to be much harder. The most challenging thing they found for their child to understand was sexually transmitted diseases and how they can be spread from person to person. Another parent found discussing masturbation and appropriateness to be the most difficult challenge. One participant, the parent of a teenage girl, stated that the most challenging thing for them was getting their daughter to want to talk. They found that talking to their child at night while driving so they wouldn't have to be face to face was the best solution to combat this hurdle for them. Having their kids giggle at the mention of certain body parts proved to be the most difficult part of the conversation for one parent. Another parent found the most difficult thing for them was getting their sons to understand that sex is supposed to be enjoyable for both the male and the female. They stated:

“We told our sons that we wanted them to have mutual respect and pleasure within a committed relationship, if they were going to engage in sexual activities. At the same time, we had to say, if you are not doing so under such parameters, then at least do XY and Z to protect yourself and your partner. The hard part of the conversation was getting my boys to understand that women have a right to enjoy their role in the sexual activity. They did not get that concept at first and were annoyed that we were even bringing it up. There was genuine "guys are the only ones who get anything out of sex" attitude and being patient with that mentality in order to get them see an alternative, was hard to do, at

first. For me, that patience with ignorance was a challenge and I was amazed that they had such opinions (at first), given that we teach and practice the opposite.”

## DISCUSSION

The results received indicated that there were similarities in the answers given across the board. It was found that the initial hypothesis was supported, and that heterosexual and gay parents have similar communication patterns when speaking with their children about sex. Research has shown that children who are raised in a same sex couple home are just as well off as those raised in heterosexual environments (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power, & Davis, 2014;) Prickett, Martin-Storey, & Crosnoe, 2015; Perrin, Cohen, & Caren, 2013; Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008), though the processes have not been looked at. This study looked at the process involved with one inevitable aspect of raising children: communicating about sex. According to the results concluded from this study the process is similar for all types of parents, regardless of their sexual orientation. These results indicate that one reason the outcome is good for children of same sex parents is that they are getting educated on important issues in a similar way.

The results indicated that almost all parents were following advice given to parents about communicating with their children about sex regarding frequency of the discussion. As mentioned previously it is recommended that the communication on this subject be ongoing and almost every single parent stated that their conversation was doing just that. Parents from both groups found it important to keep the conversation going throughout their child's adolescence and made sure that it happened by approaching the subject more often than once. Because this subject is such an important topic to discuss with one's child, it was impressive to note that all of the participants were on the same page with this piece of advice.

The conversation seemed to get started in a similar way for parents in both groups. Most participants claimed the talk happened when topic "came up". This indicates that the parents felt it was best to allow the conversation to begin organically and did not bring it up when it wasn't

necessary. Most parents let the topic come up when the *child* was ready to talk, not when the parent was ready to talk. This fact shows clear evidence that the child's needs were being put first by parents from both groups.

Although, as cited earlier, research has indicated that typically parents find speaking to their children about sex challenging, most of the participants in this study found that they were overall pretty comfortable talking with their kids about this subject. It was found as a common theme in the study that the participants were aware of the importance of the topic and the significance of having the talk regardless of any challenges felt. The challenges faced by all participants varied greatly, regardless of which group they belonged to. No two parent's challenges were exactly alike, suggesting that every family unit has its own unique set of trials and needs to deal with them in whichever ways they see fit. This displays clear evidence that all families are unique and that sexual orientation plays no part in this area of raising children.

Parents from both groups showed concern for their child's health and well-being. All of the parents who participated demonstrated that their choices were constructed out of love and deep affection for their child or children. All participants undoubtedly want what is best for their child, and their sexual orientation was not a factor in this undeniable fact.

## **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

One of the most prominent limitations of the study was medium in which the interviews were conducted. Online surveys often only prompt short answers from participants, as they are not being asked in a conversational manner. People also tend to talk more than they type, even when asked the same question. As a suggestion for future research it would be beneficial for the researcher to conduct the interviews face to face in order to get more lengthy responses providing more detail for analysis.

Another limitation of the study was the fact that the sample size was very small and did not represent members of either community outside of this immediate area. It would be beneficial for a study to be conducted using a larger number of participants which would provide a greater landscape for the researcher to analyze. Participants should be recruited from different areas in order to provide representation from those areas and not just one place.

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