Messages About Abstinence, Delaying Sexual Debut and Sexual Decision-making in Conversations Between Mothers and Young Adolescents

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STUDY OBJECTIVE: Little is known about the information shared during family discussions about sexuality. From a public health perspective, abstinence is one of the most important sexuality topics parents can talk about with adolescents. We sought to characterize the messages mothers communicate to young adolescents regarding abstinence. DESIGN: Content analysis of dyadic discussions that occurred between June 2011-December 2012 between mothers and their 10- to 14-year-old adolescent sons and daughters. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and a grounded theory approach to content analysis performed. SETTING: Urban city in Western Pennsylvania. PARTICIPANTS: Twenty-one dyads; 15 mother-daughter dyads and 6 mother-son dyads. INTERVENTIONS: None. MAIN OUTCOME MEASURES: None. RESULTS: Four key themes emerged reflecting the high priority mothers placed on abstinence, delaying their adolescent's sexual debut, and nurturing sexual decision-making skills. Theme 1 focused on ensuring that adolescents understand what abstinence means. In defining abstinence, only 1 mother explained what sex is. The 3 remaining themes emphasized sexual decision-making and emphasized when it is acceptable to stop being abstinent (theme 2), why abstinence is important (theme 3), and mothers' desire to engage in ongoing discussions, particularly when an adolescent was considering becoming sexually active (theme 4). Messages did not vary according to mothers' age or according to adolescent age, gender, or race. CONCLUSION: Mothers convey complex information about abstinence and sexual decision-making to young, non-sexually active adolescents. Message tailoring on the basis of the adolescents' age or sex was not observed.

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Authors: Ramchandani K, Morrison P, Gold MA, Akers AY

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