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BRIEF REPORT

Parent sex education beliefs in a rural South African setting

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This study explored beliefs held by African community parents which are important in their children's sexual health education. The informant parents ($n = 30$) were predominantly rural dwelling (female = 70%; black = 95%; rural = 80%; age range = 30 to 65 years old) from the Free State, South Africa. They reported on their child sex education beliefs; addressing appropriateness, resources, and content issues. Thematic analysis revealed that parents were more comfortable engaging in sex education with their older or young adult children rather than the younger children. Moreover, the parents considered sex education topics on sexual intercourse and instruments taboo subjects. Resourcing parents regarding sex education would require working around cultural barriers about the age appropriateness of sex education, as well as permissible content.

Keywords: children, culture, parents, rural, sex education, strategies

Introduction

Parents' involvement in school health education committees provides a valuable opportunity to engage them as partners in the sexual health education of their children. In other words, parents can be critical partners in bringing sexual education closer to the children in their everyday lives (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod, & Letsoalo, 2009). However, engagement in sexual health education by parents cannot be assumed to happen, as some may have cultural barriers to open communication and sharing regarding the sexual health of their children (Simmers, Simmers-Nartker, & Simmers-Kobelak, 2014). In most African communities, talking about sex is taboo and people have sex rather than talk about sex (Ramarumo, Mudhovozi, & Sodi, 2011). Parents may hold to the belief that sex talk with children is taboo (Shrage & Stewart, 2015). At the same time, teenage pregnancy is on the increase in South African public schools, which calls for parents to partner with schools in sex education (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2011). The aim of the South African Basic Education Life Skills Programme is for sex education to develop young people's knowledge and skills necessary for healthy relationships, effective communication, and responsible decision-making; all of which will protect them and others from HIV infection and optimise their health (Selesho, Twala, & Modise, 2012). In this regard, family involvement in sex education programmes has the potential to promote positive adolescent reproductive health beliefs and behaviours. Choudhary (2014) asserted that parents in rural African communities may hold stronger taboos regarding sexual health education, as a result of their comparatively little exposure to public sexual health education resources, than parents in urban areas.

Goal of this study

This study aimed to explore rural South African parents' beliefs about sexual health education and their children. Findings may help to inform HIV/AIDS and sexual health education programmes customised for rural South Africa.

Method

The study utilised a phenomenological qualitative inquiry (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2009) to gain an in-depth understanding of the sexual health education beliefs of rural South African parents. A phenomenological inquiry approach was appropriate as the study aimed at unravelling the personal beliefs of parents regarding appropriate sex education for their children.

Participants and setting

The participant parents ($n = 30$) were a convenience sample (female = 70%; black = 95%; rural = 80%; age range = 30 to 65 years old) in the Free State Province of South Africa. The participants were mainly black, and Setswana/Sesotho speaking. The majority of the participant parents (97%) self-identified as Christian faith followers.

Data collection and procedure

Participants were recruited at the church and at work. Participants volunteered to take part in the study and provided informed consent. The participant parents completed a semi-structured individual interview on their personal beliefs and roles in the sex education of their children. The parents completed the interviews at convenient locations for them and the researcher. Interviews were conducted by the researcher in English (17), Setswana (5), and Sesotho (8). Interviews were concurrently transcribed and translated by a professional company. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. The names of respondents were not identified for ethical reasons.

Data analysis

Data was thematically analysed using open-coding procedures (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). These procedures involved systematically organising, categorising, and summarising data; followed by describing it in meaningful themes. Themes were assigned codes in an attempt to condense the data into categories.

Findings and discussion

The thematic analysis resulted in the two themes: (i) Sexual education is for older adult children; and (ii) Sex talk with children is Taboo.

Theme 1: Sexual education is for older adult children

About 80% of parents were of the belief that sexual education was for older adult children rather than younger children. Only 20% of parents believed sex education by a parent was appropriate for their younger children. For instance, some of the parents made the following observations:

My child is still young to be taught about sex, I think the age is very important if you want to teach your children about sex. When my child is 16 years I will start teaching him or her about sex because he/she will be matured and understand about sex stories. (Respondent # 17; male; 36 years)

I will only teach my child about sex if she is sexually active but if she is not sexually active I will not start teaching her about sex. (Respondent # 11; male; 41 years)

As an educated parent I think it is important to teach my child about sex as early as possible at any age and not to wait until he or she old or exposed to sex then I start teach him or her about sex. (Respondent # 27; female; 29 years)

These findings suggest that parents have reservations regarding sex education and their children. Those who supported their involvement in the sexual education of their children, said:

Children are taught about sex when they go to Bogwera [cultural initiation schools for boys] or Bojale [cultural initiation schools for girls] according to our culture. (Respondent # 10; female; 33 years)

It is much important to educate children about sex education because you give them the consequences about sex and to protect themselves at all times using condoms and contraceptive against sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. (Respondent # 6; female; 28 years)

Sex education for our children is important because it educate our children about unplanned pregnancy at the early age because they will end up dropping from the school because they cannot cope with their studies and at the same time to do parenting. (Respondent # 21; female; 30 years)

If they do not hear it from their parents where else should they hear it from, we need to make sure that

we talk about sex education to our children, they will be comfortable and be able to share with us about sex education, our children must not learn from the strangers and media but from us as parents. (Respondent # 10; female; 33 years)

Parents must be empowered regarding how to teach their children about sex education. Unesco (2015) and Francis (2011) state that parents must be equipped with skills to communicate with youth on sexual and reproductive health matters; including that it is their responsibility.

Theme 2: Sex talk with children is taboo

When asked about the role parents should play regarding talking about sex to their children, about 90% of parents indicated that they were not comfortable talking about sex with their children, as that was taboo. They believed that talking about sex was for other people, especially teachers at schools. For example, some parents said:

I cannot talk [to my child] about sex, I am not comfortable and at the same time [I cannot not] even use of a condom. (Respondent # 2; female; 63 years)

How do I start talking about sex to my child as a parent....it is very difficult to talk to my own child about sex. (Respondent # 15; female; 65 years)

Since I am not educated, I do not feel free to talk to my own child about sex, I better ask his uncle because they more or less on the same level with my boy and he is in better position to talk to each other freely to talk about sex. (Respondent # 25; female; 64)

These findings suggest a cultural belief that sex talk with children is a taboo subject (Selesho & Moidise, 2012). However, it was unclear from this study why some parents were open and forthcoming in discussing sex and HIV with their young adult children, while others were not. Future research should investigate strategies to be used to assist parents so they are able to talk freely about sex education with their children. Families that are open in sharing knowledge about HIV prevention with their children could be important in family-based interventions which prevent young adults from contracting HIV. As examples of statements on sex talk with children as a taboo, some of the parents made the following observation:

As a single parent mother it is difficult to talk about sex to my boy as a woman, if she was a girl it was easy for me as a woman to talk about sex. (Respondent # 8; female; 44)

If I talk about sex, I encourage her to practice it and my culture does not allow me to talk sex to my own child. (Respondent # 14; female; 55)

However, a few parents said that they had no problems talking about sex with their children. Such parents said:

I do not have any problem to talk about sex education to my own children. I feel free and my culture allow me to do so. (Respondent # 31; female; 36)

Our children get the information about sex education from their friends and it is a wrong information that mislead them, therefore it is important that we take a lead as parents instead of getting wrong information from their friends. (Respondent # 7; female; 43)

Children like to experiment, therefore as parent we need to educate our children about sex, otherwise they will do experiment because they are not informed about sex. (Respondent # 18; female; 40)

The findings from this exploratory study are mixed. Regardless of this, though, rural parents should be educating their children about sex education in culturally appropriate ways (Gill, 2013).

Limitation of the study

This study had the limitation that the parent informants may have been guarded and conservative in their responses because they were concerned about social desirability. Future studies should interview children about their opinions on how they perceive sex education within their families and community.

Summary and conclusion

In order to involve rural parents in the sex education of their children, it may be helpful to normalize sex education for them as being simply one aspect of the total education of the child. Parents would also need help in understanding the importance of the timing of child sex education (to provide it when the child reaches adolescence rather than later) as the risk of sexually infected infections is high among teenagers and young adults. Parents could learn how to engage in the sexual education of their children from community social clubs and networks for peer education. Sex education should be a community dialogue which empowers the entire community.

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