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"Did I Say Too Much? Did I Say enough?": Balancing the Competing Struggles Parents Experience in Talking to Their Children About Sex-Related Topics

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ABSTRACT

Parents are often the first-line resource for their children regarding relationships and sex-related topics. Although there has been increasing research on difficulties parents perceive surrounding these conversations, less research has been done to assess the complex personal experiences and perceptions parents navigate surrounding open, honest, and comprehensive sex-related talks with their children. The qualitative study included 78 U.S. parents/guardians across 12 focus groups discussing their experiences and communication surrounding sex-related topics with their children. Using the constructivist grounded theory approach we found that parents are trying to navigate a balance between four *competing struggles* in conversations about sex-related topics with their children, including: (a) sexual education and overexposure, (b) family values and breaking the cycle, (c) accurate information and influencing sources, and (d) parent control and child autonomy. Our findings offer insights into parents' common struggles, inform future research, and promote more meaningful parent-child communication about sex.

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Family often is the first place young people come to understand relationships and sex-related topics. Parents' conversations with their children about relationships and sex can play a critical role in young people's relational and sexual health. Research consistently finds adolescents who discuss sex-related topics (e.g., intimate relationships, pregnancy, birth control, sexually transmitted infections [STIs]) with their parents are more likely to delay sexual activity (see Flores & Barroso, 2017; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012 for reviews) and after becoming sexually active, are more competent in safety practices (e.g., consent, birth control, fewer sexual partners; Aspy et al., 2007; Beckett et al., 2010). In fact, when parents and adolescents engage in ongoing, thoughtful conversations that cover relationships, safety, pressures, and emotions, adolescents perceive their parents as effective sources of sex-related information compared to adolescents who only engage in a one-time, one-dimensional conversation (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2015, 2018).

Conceptually, many parents want to engage in meaningful conversations with their children about intimate relationships and sexual health, but in practice often shy away from these conversations out of fear, uncertainty, embarrassment, and lack of knowledge (Holman, 2021; Pariera, 2016). Although many parents feel ill-equipped to have open, honest, and comprehensive conversations about sexual relationships and health, research suggests these are the conversations adolescents find most meaningful in helping them navigate relationships and sexual risk (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018; Pariera

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& Brody, 2017). To further understand the reluctancies and difficulties parents perceive surrounding these anticipated conversations, we conducted focus groups with parents from a variety of backgrounds to investigate their individual views, concerns, and uncertainties, as well as to spark discussion and explore their collective experiences about parent-child communication regarding sex-related topics.

Parental communication about sex

Parental communication about sex-related topics has received considerable attention as a key factor that significantly improves adolescent self-efficacy and sexual health (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). Parents also are in a unique position to engage in dialogue with their children about sex-related topics early, both before puberty and before they engage in sexual activity. Parents who value their role as a positive sex educator and create normalcy in talking about bodies, relationships, and sexual health often become "askable parents," which encourages their children to feel comfortable asking questions and sharing concerns (Ashcraft & Murray, 2017). Unlike other information sources (e.g., media, peers, school curriculum), parent-child communication can be continuous, address child's time-sensitive developmental questions or needs, and emphasize familial beliefs and values about sexual relationships and health.

Researchers suggest that early and regular parent-child conversations about sex-related topics can lessen adolescent uncertainty and sexual risk-taking (e.g., early sexual debut, no contraception or condom use), as well as establish a sense of normalcy around sex-related discussions (Aspy et al., 2007; Beckett et al., 2010; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). Parents tend to speak less to children or younger adolescents about sex-related topics because they believe it is not yet appropriate, and many parents only initiate conversations when they suspect their adolescent is dating or sexually active (Byers et al., 2008; Pariera, 2016). As Pariera (2016) suggested, avoiding sex-related conversations earlier in children's development often creates a "circular problem in that parents think their children are too young to talk about sex, but as the child gets older that barrier is replaced by a perception that their child does not want to hear what they have to say" (p. 281). Thus, parents miss the opportunity to create comfort and normalcy around sex-related topics like puberty, sexuality, and healthy relationships from a young age.

Notably, if these conversations occur, parental conversations about sex-related topics occurs earlier with daughters than with sons (Beckett et al., 2010) and often falls within the mother's realm of responsibility (Coffelt, 2010). Mothers discuss sex-related topics more frequently and cover a wider range of topics with daughters compared to sons (Coffelt, 2010). However, frequent mother-son communication about sex is associated with reducing their son's sexual anxiety and stigma surrounding sexual communication (Denes et al., 2022). Fathers are more likely to engage in conversations about sex-related topics with sons than with daughters, but when fathers engage in discussions with daughters, they often communicate more about morality and sexual pressures from partners (Wright, 2009). Although the association between race/ethnicity and parental frequency of communication about sex-related topics is mixed (Flores & Barroso, 2017), some researchers suggest that Black and Hispanic/Latinx parents engage in more frequent conversations about sex with their children due to the negative consequences (e.g., adolescent pregnancies, STIs) they have observed in their communities (Wilson & Koo, 2010). Overall, research has found that adolescents whose parents talk to them early and often about sex-related topics were less likely to be influenced by misinformation and misleading viewpoints from other sources (e.g., peers, media, pornography) than those adolescents whose parents did not talk with them about these subjects (Bleakley et al., 2009).

The quality of parent-child communication and topics covered have a unique impact on adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors. Jaccard et al. (2002) suggested that the impact of the sex-related message sent by parents to children may vary depending on the way the messages is conveyed, parents' authoritative approach, and children's perceived autonomy. Therefore, effective parent-child communication about sex often includes sincerity, less control, warmth, and

higher levels of self-efficacy (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018; Pariera & Brody, 2017). For example, parental communication on sex-related topics that was characterized as open, attentive, accessible, and comprehensive was associated with reducing risky sexual behaviors (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018) and increased adolescents' willingness to engage in future communication about sex-related topics with their parents (Padilla et al., 2023). Daughters commonly receive messages on abstinence, moral standards, emotional consequences, and resisting partners' advances (Coffelt, 2010) whereas sons receive more positive sex messages and details in preparing them for safe sexual activity (Wright, 2009). Generally, parents and adolescents consistently report little to no discussion about more sensitive topics such as sexual intercourse, masturbation, and sexual satisfaction or desires (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018; Pariera & Brody, 2017). When parents go into more depth, they tend to focus on sexual values and decision-making rather than specific information about sexual behavior and safety (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018). Overall, research has found that parents commonly engaged in surface-level conversations about reproductive health and sexual safety but avoided more comprehensive (e.g., open, honest, detailed) conversations due to perceived lack of information, personal emotions (e.g., fear, uncertainty, discomfort), and cultural barriers (Holman, 2021; Pariera, 2016).

Moreover, parents' lack of regular, accessible, and comprehensive content often stems from receiving little or no framework from their own parents growing up (Holman, 2021; Kenny & Wurtele, 2013). Parents often view their own parents as ineffective sex educators or did not have a helpful communication model to emulate (Kenny & Wurtele, 2013). Although some parents use negative or unhelpful communication experiences they received from their own parents as motivation "to do better than their parents had done with them" (Ballard & Gross, 2009, p. 460), uncertainty on how best to engage in meaning discussions with their own children still exists (Holman, 2021). Thus, with lack of meaningful or productive conversations within their own family growing up, they are often predisposed to continue the cycle of superficial and unhelpful discussions with their own children. Parents' own emotions, religious expectations, generational pressures, and gender norms also seem to keep them from engaging in more comprehensive discussions about sex and relationships (Holman, 2021). By further understanding parents' hesitancies or struggles to sex-related conversations might also be a way to break this cycle of superficial and inadequate parent-child conversations about sex-related topics.

Taken together, the current literature provides valuable insights into the communication factors and continued struggles parents identify surrounding sex-related conversations with their children – even when they recognize these conversations may guide their adolescents to healthier intimate relationships and behaviors. In this study, we asked parents to share experiences and discuss common challenges they perceive in communicating with their children about sex-related topics in the most honest, open, and comprehensive way. We therefore asked the following research question.

RQ1: What struggles do parents identify in sex-related communication with their children?

Method

To understand parents' struggles and experiences surrounding sex-related communication with their children, we adopted Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach that seeks to understand how individuals "construct meaning and actions in specific situations" and recognizes the individuals' contextual values or beliefs in time, position, and interaction inform their world view and behaviors (p. 239).

Participants

A total of 78 parents/guardians (55 women and 23 men) ranging in age from 29 to 70 years of age ($M = 42.56$, $SD = 7.75$) took part in one of 12 focus groups (varying 4–10 parents in each). Most participants described themselves as the parent ($n = 74$; biological or legal), with four ($n = 4$) participants identifying as grandparents. In terms of race, 39 identified as White/non-Hispanic, 17 as Black/African American, 15 as Hispanic/Latinx, 4 as multiracial (Black and White), 2 as Asian, and 1 as American Indian.

Procedures

We conducted 12 focus groups to elicit group interaction on topics often viewed as challenging to communicate about in families. We engaged in a purposeful sample (Tracy, 2013) to solicit parent participants, with the goal of recruiting a sample that reflected the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity for the geographical area. Flyers were posted at libraries, universities, high schools, clinics, and community organizations within two large Midwest metropolitan areas. To qualify for the study, individuals needed to be at least 19 years of age and a parent or legal guardian of at least one child between the ages of eight and 18 years old. If individuals fit the study requirements and were interested in participating, they contacted the lead author. All focus groups took place in private meeting rooms at local universities and libraries.

Focus groups included eight mother and father groups, two with mothers only, and two with fathers only. Ten focus groups were conducted in English ($n = 66$; 47 mothers, 19 fathers), and two focus groups were conducted in Spanish ($n = 12$; 8 mothers, 4 fathers) with a professional translator assisting. The lead author served as the focus group interviewer and moderator. Within the Spanish focus group, the lead author and translator both served as the interviewers and moderator. Two trained undergraduate research assistants were present at all focus groups to welcome participants, collect consent forms, and provide instruction on completing an online survey prior to participating in the focus group. Focus groups ranged from 90 to 180 minutes ($M = 138$ minutes, $SD = 24.79$ minutes) and were audio recorded.

The lead author used a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions to elicit in-depth participant responses and probes to generate discussion (Tracy, 2013). Many of the open-ended questions sought to understand participants' experiences around sex-related communication in their own families. (i.e., parents' role in communication about sex-related topics, common challenges they encounter). Focus groups were conducted until we began to see informational redundancy and no new experiences emerged (i.e., theoretical saturation; Glaser, 1978). Each participant received a $50 gift card for involvement. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the authors and participants were assigned pseudonyms, resulting in 231 single-spaced pages of data.

Data analysis

To begin the analysis, the authors each read through three transcripts (i.e., focus groups 1, 7, 10) to gain familiarity with the data and then met to discuss significant themes relevant to the research question. We then followed first and second cycle coding methods to identify themes within the data (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). We started by carefully reading and reviewing half of the data (i.e., focus groups 1–6). We did this by independently engaging in line-by-line initial coding process to identify ideas, nuances, and patterns within the data. We adapted Owen's (1984) criteria for (a) *recurrence* of similar meanings, (b) *repetition* of the same words and phrases, and (c) *forcefulness* of emphasis during the interview. We each completed one memo per transcript, which allowed us to summarize data, identify initial codes, and highlight similarities with previous transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Within this initial coding, we noticed parents' experiences were filled with *competing struggles* surrounding control in sex-related conversations. Based on the multiple methods within first cycle coding, we then applied versus coding, or coding that "captures the actual and conceptual conflicts within, among, and between participants" to the same data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 61). By applying both initial and versus coding, we inductively developed initial binary codes in relation to parent-child communication about sex. These initial binary codes led us to second cycle coding of grounded theory, wherein our theoretical analysis was built on our observations, and we individually engaged in focused coding to search for the most frequent or meaningful binary codes in the data (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). In this phase of analysis, codes were originally grouped into six broad competing struggle themes that were reflective of participant experiences. During this phase we met regularly to establish reliability and refine themes by discussing transcripts, individual memos, and the initial codes (Charmaz, 2014).

To verify the initial findings and resolve any coding discrepancies, the lead author engaged in data conferencing with two scholars versed in family communication and qualitative approaches (Braithwaite et al., 2017). During the meeting, the lead author discussed the broad findings and sought feedback on coding process and original five competing struggle themes. Through this process, the five original themes were collapsed into the four competing struggle themes and a more accurate phrasing of themes was developed to reflect the complexities of balancing the struggles parents face in communication about sex with their children. In addition, the lead author engaged in member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) by emailing twelve participants a summary of the study findings. Based on their feedback, we revisited the transcripts and found additional examples that illustrated the complexities of balancing the competing struggle to better reflect parents' lived experiences about sex communication.

Results

In seeking to understand parents' perceptions and shared experiences surrounding parent-child sex-related communication, we found parents are trying to navigate the balance between multiple competing struggles, such as: (a) sexual education and overexposure, (b) family values and breaking the cycle, (c) accurate information and influencing sources, and (d) parent control and child autonomy.

Sexual education and overexposure

In *sexual education and overexposure*, parents described how they struggle with wanting to educate their children about sex-related topics without exposing certain topics *too* early or normalizing sex in a way that promotes sexual curiosity. As Rick, a 53-year-old White father explained, "in theory sex education at home is a great idea, but what if my teenagers see it as permission to have sex?" This struggle emerged in all focus groups and became more salient as children approached puberty, as parents felt pressured to be more detailed about puberty, sexual activity, contraception use (e.g, condoms, birth control), and risks (e.g., pregnancy, STD) associated with becoming sexually active. This struggle manifested in two ways.

Some parents felt this competing struggle and avoided sex-related conversations altogether out of fear of overexposure or creating interest in sex. For example, Carlos, a 40-year-old Hispanic dad emphasized, "I want to educate my son, but I talk myself out of it because if I don't say anything I can't confuse him, right?" Grace, a 47-year-old African mom also mentioned, "with education comes knowledge and what if that knowledge is used to have sex way before they're ready, I don't want to play a role in that. So, I avoid the conversation." Kim, a 49-year-old White mother agreed with Grace's comment and furthered, "I know talking about it [sex topics] may help my kids, but what if sharing details makes them want to try stuff? So, for now I just haven't said anything." While some parents expressed this internal struggle to

have conversations with their children kept them from saying anything, more often parents voiced that they did talk with their children, but the same internal struggle kept them from being more honest, open, or comprehensive in those conversations. Tammy, a 46-year-old African American mother noted:

> Now that my kids are almost teens, I'm having more detailed conversations about body changes, sex, and staying safe. I don't want them getting pregnant or some disease because they felt pressured or thought it was cool to have sex. But I'm freaking out. Did I say too much? Did I say enough? What if I talk to them about safety too soon? Or worse they think their mom is okay with sex if it's safe.

Tammy acknowledges the importance of talking to her children about sexual safety, yet worries that being more descriptive may unintentionally encourage sex. In another focus group, three mothers worried that sex-talk may lead to encouragement but also misunderstanding:

> *Maggie* (34-year-old White mother): I think kids are oversexualized these days with TV, movies, and social media. So, it's hard as a parent. I often struggle with wanting to teach them about sex, you know how intercourse works, masturbation, and even consent. I worry about what if I tell my daughter too much about sex and then she goes off and does it.
>
> *Laura* (47-year-old White mother): I struggle with the same thing. We have an almost high-schooler and we want to be the one who educates them about sex and relationships but shit it's hard to think of your own kid having sex. What if I say something that confuses them?
>
> *Amy* (47-year-old White mother): Yea, I've struggled with this in talking to my son. I'm pretty sure he's gay and I want to talk to him about anal sex. Um, then I worry about what if I talked to him about what it means to like the same sex and how sex works with two men and it's too just confusing. Or offends him? I'm afraid I'll mess it up.

These parents' lived experiences highlight the complexity of these conversations to show that while parents want to educate their children on sex related topics, concomitantly, they do not want to portray that sex in adolescence is okay. Parents know they should be having discussions with their children regarding topics such as sexual safety, consent, and autonomy, but the internal conflict they face of having these conversations before they perceive their children are ready for them is substantial.

Family values and breaking the cycle

In *family values and breaking the cycle*, parents emphasize the struggles they face in communicating family values, beliefs, and cultural expectations while also acknowledging they need to break the familial or cultural cycle of silence, teen pregnancies, and gender and racial norms. Many parents emphasized how communication around sex was extremely taboo and often avoided in their families growing up. Yet, they wanted to create change to be more open and honest with their own children, especially if it can protect them from risk. For example, Hadley, 33-year-old White mother stated, "I was a teen parent and my parents never talked about sex, obviously that didn't work [group laughs] . . . I want to raise my boys with Christian values and the importance of waiting till marriage, but you better believe I'm also teaching them about sexual safety." Other parents further described that while their religious beliefs were important, they were also conflicted on it being the only message they share with their children about sex. The following parents exemplified this struggle:

> *Frankie* (36-year-old White mother): I was raised Catholic and no disrespect to the Catholic religion, it came with a lot of guilt. I mean, we were told you could not masturbate. We were told that you couldn't have sex before you got married and if you did, there were dire consequences. I didn't want my children to have that type of guilt that I had because that type of guilt affected me all my life. I want them to see their religion as important, but also know that talking sexual health shouldn't be feared.
>
> *Lilly* (35-year-old Hispanic mother): I agree. Sometimes, we have families, and it doesn't matter what religion they are, but their religion has this curtain that closes these topics and says, "We don't talk about it," or "It's bad," or when you have a religion that says no, no, no . . . It's hard because we need to be able to create a way to talk about our faith and sex to prepare our kids. But I just don't know how.

This theme also included the parents struggling with honoring past reason(s) for generational silence while also wanting to break stereotypes of teen pregnancies. This struggle was especially evident in focus groups composed primarily of people of color. For example, Angela, a 40-year-old African-American mother addressed how past generations did not discuss sex or sexuality in Black communities due to the ramifications of slavery and racism. She explained:

> Black bodies were legally and socially controlled by White people . . . .when slavery existed our bodies were viewed as property, and I think that's part of the reason I never heard my parents or grandparents talk about sex. So, I respect that. Now we've got too many young Black kids getting pregnant, not finishing school, and it's our job to educate them, even if we weren't.

Replying to Angela, Erin, a 33-year-old African-American mother echoed that her parents never said anything, and "a lot must be due to their racial trauma. I'm trying to figure how to talk to my kids now and not feel some resentment for how much I needed my parents to help me." When these mothers spoke of how historical racism and discrimination caused a culture of silence around sex-related topics, most parents in the room showed agreement with nods and verbal "yes" or "so true" replies. It was clear they emphasized the past generations' experiences but also want to eradicate silence around sex-related topics in their own families.

Moreover, many Hispanic parents iterated the conservative nature of their culture and expressed how they often struggle to honor their religion and culture while normalizing sex conversations in the family to reduce teen pregnancies as exemplified in this dialogue:

> *Robert* (49-year-old Hispanic father): Most of us in the Hispanic community, we came from families that are very conservative. . .. They didn't really talk to us about sex and everything so as we grew up, we learned by ourselves, and for many of us that was too late.
>
> *Amelia* (29-year-old Hispanic mother): Yea, and I think many of us respect our religious upbringing and um are well aware of the rates of teen pregnancies in our [Hispanic] communities. But how do we instill both religious morals and sexual safety?
>
> *Robert* (49-year-old Hispanic father): It's hard. That's why we need to talk to our kids more. Especially fathers, so the next generation is more educated and open. We need to end this pattern of teenage pregnancy in our communities.

The discordance between religious beliefs and sex is not new. For these parents, they respect their religion and conservative cultural values; they want to instill these same values in their own children. Their struggle emerges when trying to uphold the importance of religion in their children while, at the same time, being more open and honest about sexual safety to prevent teenage pregnancies. Because of their upbringing, it is difficult for them to find a balance between teaching their children sexual safety and the value of religion.

Accurate information and influencing sources

In *accurate information and influencing sources*, parents acknowledge the struggle of providing developmentally and medically accurate information while consistently competing with other influences such as peers, media, and social media. Parents often struggle with wanting to talk with their children in their own time and way, but the perception of this oversexualized society forces them to engage in conversations before they – or even their children – may be ready. As Tim, a 49-year-old White father states, "Our kids are going to learn about sex and the question is where do you want them to learn it from first? From their peers? From social media? From porn on the internet? It's everywhere." Candice, a 55-year-old multiracial mother expands:

> If I could control everything, I wouldn't talk to my kids about sex stuff until they were older, but social media makes you talk sooner. Kids are maturing sooner too so I struggle with wanting to wait till they are more physically ready. I can't, cause my daughter is already asking questions about sex based on things she sees on her Snapchat. I just want it all to slow down.

This struggle further emerges as parents discuss talking to their children sooner than planned because they are being exposed to sexual information and pressure by media and peers:

> *Anthony* (41-year-old African-American father): They [kids] can see it [sex] anywhere and it is graphic. My son is always asking me questions. So and so said this. So and so did this. I had the sex talk with him at 10 because it's all over TV. Everywhere. I wanted to catch him before he got all the wrong information. But at the same time, it's hard because I didn't want to have these conversations that soon.

> *Ruth* (62-year old African-American grandmother): And then you talk about TV. When did they show bra and panties on TV? You see that now. Every youth show has a sex scene in it. So as a parent it's really difficult to know when's the right time. And you just want to preserve that time of innocence as long as possible. But then you're right, that you have all this outside interference and you're thinking, what did we get ourselves into? . . . As parents, our role is to help them decipher what they see in the media or hear from friends . . . so ideally, we'd be the ones to help them to cycle through that.

> *Lisa* (57-year-old White mother) Yes. It's hard to balance protecting their childhood from what's happening in their friend groups. They [peers] make fun of each other if they haven't done it . . . As a parent I'm having these conversations with her way before I was ready, but I want her to get correct information.

These parents highlight the pressure the media and peers put on them to be prepared to talk about sex-related topics and answer questions much sooner than anticipated. Being educated and prepared earlier than anticipated is particularly important if they want to help their children navigate the information they are receiving from multiple sources – sources that do not have accurate and realistic information. It is clear from these discussions that parents are willing to have these conversations with their children, but are unsure of when the best time is to do so since their children are simultaneously receiving information from outside sources. As the influence of peers, media, and social media on adolescents is likely not going away anytime soon, it is important to find ways to help parents navigate these dynamics to have these conversations with their children.

Parent control and child autonomy

In *parent control and child autonomy*, parents discuss their struggle with the desire to set clear expectations to guide their child's actions while also acknowledging their child's need for autonomy. Many parents struggled with the idea that while they try to educate the best they can and even set explicit guidelines or rules around intimate relationships, their teens ultimately make the final decision. As Nate, a 40-year-old White father explained, "It's difficult as a parent to let go and realize, you're not going to make this choice for your child. I mean, at whatever point your child's going to choose to have sex, that's really going to be their decision."

Some parents even reflected on the difficulty of their own adolescence as related to finding a balance of parent guidance and child autonomy, as exemplified by these two mothers:

> *Sofia* (33-year-old Hispanic mother): I remember the teenage years being rough. Geez, I mean I wanted stuff my friends had, wanted freedom, . . . and was way too sensitive to anything my parents said. Now as a parent, I realize I'm not that different from my teen self. I'm not going to be their friend, but I want to try to respect their space and time when it comes to sex and relationships. Not come at them with rules. How do I say it, I want to be a sex educator and talk to them about things in their lives that may relate to sex and respect that what they have to say on sex even if I don't agree?

> *Jessica* (47-year-old White mother): Yea. It's hard to give them freedom about stuff you don't want them to do. I just want to set clear rules around relationships like no dating till 16 like my parents did, but that just led to me lying about who I was hanging out with so.

In addition, parents expressed creative ways to set expectations around sex-related topics while also acknowledging the importance of giving their child space – but this was not without struggle. Hannah, a 56-year-old White mother highlighted this:

> Instead of setting rules you can say, well you have a choice. And if you go down this road, this could happen. You decide, you know what I mean? It's hard because in the end you hope you gave them enough information to make the right choice, but it's not your choice to make.

This theme emerged in all the focus groups as parents acknowledge that while they may have expectations and hopes for their children around relationships and sexual behavior, in the end their children are the ones that decide. It was clear it was not an easy realization that parents felt in their discussion and one they were even struggling with as they said it.

Discussion

In many ways, our findings confirm what previous literature has suggested about parents' hesitations surrounding parent-child communication about sex (Holman, 2021; Pariera, 2016) and parents' gravitation toward basic topics and surface-level conversations (Holman & Koenig Kellas, 2018). Examining the four competing struggle themes *collectively* illuminate three important implications of our findings as they relate to facilitating parents ability to talk with their children about sexual health.

First, despite parents' conflicting emotions in regard to sex communication, at their core, they are concerned about the health and safety of their children and worry about how to best support them. Parents acknowledge their responsibility as sex educators, and their competing struggles seem to become even more challenging as their children approach puberty, become more independent, and expand their social networks. As past research suggests, parents wanted to talk to their children about sex-related topics but varied in the comfort and self-efficacy in doing so, leading to the struggle of how to do it in the best way (Holman, 2021; Pariera, 2016). Communication scholars could further explore these competing struggles within the health belief model (HBM), a framework utilized to understand individuals' health-related behaviors and decision-making processes (Janz & Becker, 1984; Rosenstock, 1974). By considering the components of the HBM (i.e., perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy), scholars can further understand some of the factors that may influence parents' struggles in discussing sex with their children. In particular, *cues to action* and *self-efficacy* would provide a nuanced perspective of what prompts within the environment (e.g., media, school programs, conversations with health-care providers, or child curiosity) motivate parents to engage in conversations about sex with their children. Moreover, parents' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively about sex is central to establishing foundational communication around relationships and sexual health. Lack of self-efficacy may arise from limited knowledge about sexual health, inadequate communication with their own parents, and personal discomfort (Holman, 2021).

Second, parents' social identities and cultural norms moderate their approach to educating their children about relationships and sexual health. Parents are simultaneously negotiating their racial, cultural, or religious identities as they are crafting communication about sex-related topics within the family. Parents recognized that they want to have these conversations differently with their children than their parents did with them, but face difficulties how to do so while simultaneously honoring past traditions, religion, or their cultural upbringing. In all focus groups, religious values and beliefs emerged as challenging the provision of sexual health and safety information (e.g., contraception, condom use), but cultural factors were emphasized more in focus groups with parents of color. Many of the Black and Hispanic/Latinx parents discussed the intersection of race and/or religion as shaping conversations with their children. Black parents shared how historical and institutional racism played a role in why many of their own parents avoided sex-related topics, leaving them with little information about sex or a script for meaningful conversation. Historically, Black bodies and sexuality – especially Black women's bodies – have been legally regulated and viewed as property (Dennis & Wood, 2012) which emerged as an explanation for generational silence.

Future research could build on our study by using Communication Theory of Identity (CTI; Hecht & Phillips, 2022) to examine how parents develop, manage, and express their social identities (e.g., race, religion, parent) within the context of parent-child communication about sex. CTI frames identity as dialectic, layered (e.g., persona, relational, enacted, and communal), and both changing and stable (Hecht & Phillips, 2022). Exploring parents' identity frames and identity gaps using CTI may provide insight into the competing struggles parents experience. Identity frames are the lenses through which individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences (Hecht & Phillips, 2022). Parents' identity frames regarding sex, influenced by personal, racial, and religious ideals, may impact their approaches to communication about sex. Identity gaps emerge when an individual's desired identity and their perceived identity differ (Hecht & Phillips, 2022). Thus, highly religious parents may experience identity gaps when discussing details about sexual safety as it does not align with the religious script of abstinence. Applying CTI can provide insight into the complex interplay between parents' identities, communication processes, and their competing struggles in discussing sex-related topics with their children.

Third, these findings suggest interesting avenues for future translational research on parent-child communication about sex-related topics. Because of the private and often taboo nature of sex-related topics in the United States many parents feel they are "on their own" to navigate open, honest, accurate, and comprehensive conversations with their children (Holman, 2021). In a way, the current focus groups design allowed parents to share personal stories, express emotions, and provide empathetic support to each other in a way that built connection, understanding, and feel less alone as their navigate conversations with their own children. Although there were moments where parents verbally and nonverbally disagreed with each other's parenting opinions or strategies, some moments sparked curiosity and self-reflection that indicated they were not alone in their struggles. For example, Erin, a 33-year-old African-American mother remarked, "I've learned a lot from hearing all your stories. You'll have given me a lot to think about in the way I talk to my own kids about sex. I don't always have to be perfect, but more present." There is significant opportunity for communication researchers to design parenting interventions that provide parents with a space where they can make sense of their struggles together in a way to learn, be better than past generations, and feel less alone when it comes to parent-child communication about sex.

Koenig Kellas et al. (2020) developed a group intervention named *narrative parenting* that uses narrative frameworks such as Communicative Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) Theory, narrative medicine, and Narrative Theory of Identity to help parents discuss and listen to each other's stories of parenting successes and failures. Through their narrative intervention, parent participants reported a "sense of connection, common ground, and feeling less alone" after completing the intervention (Koenig Kellas et al., 2020, p. 370). The various competing struggles illustrate how many parents are "walking a tightrope," afraid to fall off. How can we utilize interventions such as narrative parenting to "widen" where they are walking and move them to a balance beam … and then to the floor? We can do that by (a) providing community, (b) increasing their knowledge and self-efficacy, and (c) helping them recognize that their family experiences and social identities may conflict, but that there are ways to manage the competing struggles. Over time parents will be able to learn new skills and have sure footing from which to navigate the ever-challenging process of keeping their children safe and healthy in all aspects of life. By employing translational scholarship such as narrative parenting (Koenig Kellas et al., 2020), scholars can contribute to the development of practical resources and workshops that empower and support parents in discussing sex-related topics with their children effectively. These efforts can enhance parent-child communication, promote healthy sexual development, and contribute to the overall sexual well-being of their children.

Limitations and future directions

Our study included limitations. Because this study was exploratory, our recruiting occurred via purposive sampling and within two large Midwest metropolitan areas. Parents who attended the focus groups may be more likely to view communication about sex as valuable

and more willing to talk about it than other parents that may not want to attend a focus group. Although focus groups were used to create an open atmosphere for parents to discuss similarities and differences in their experiences and communication, this setting may not have been conducive to all parent participants. There may have been times where shy or reserved parents may not have felt comfortable sharing their experience, especially if there were dominant group members whose experiences did not align with their own (Suter et al., 2011). Thus, the results of this study should be interpreted in the context of self-selection bias and method design. Future researchers may want to work with local organizations (e.g., family health clinics, church groups, or planned parenthood) and schools to include a wider range of experiences, as well as supplement other forms of methods (e.g., interviews, surveys).

The parents' racial/ethnic backgrounds well represented the local demographics of the area and included both English and Spanish speaking parents. However, the parent sample was primary mothers and most parents identified as straight/heterosexual (94.9%) and Christian (82%). Future researchers should recruit in a way that allows for more diverse samples based on gender, sexuality, and cultural background.

Conclusion

Hearing from parents about what difficulties they experience navigating communication about sex-related topics with their children is a significant piece of the "sex talk(s)" puzzle. This study reveals that parents want to be a well-informed source for their children on sex-related topics yet encounter multiple competing struggles to having open, honest, and detailed conversations. The findings provide valuable insights into understanding common struggles parents face as they try to guide their children through healthy, safe, and meaningful intimate relationships.

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