

This is the accepted pre-proof version published as:

Hyde A, Carney M, Drennan J, Butler M, Lohan M, and Howlett, E (2010) 'The silent treatment: parents' narratives of sexuality education with young people'. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 12 (4):359-371.

DOI: 10.1080/13691050903514455

The silent treatment: parents' narratives of sexuality education with young people

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Abstract

This paper is based on research undertaken in Ireland that sought to understand how parents communicate with their children about sexuality. Forty-three parents were interviewed and data were analysed using a qualitative strategy, namely, modified analytical induction. Data indicated that while parents tended to pride themselves on the culture of openness to sexuality that prevailed in their home, they often described situations where very little dialogue on the subject actually transpired. However, unlike previous research on the topic that identified parent-related factors (such as ignorance or embarrassment) as the main impediments to parent-young person communication about sex, participants in our study identified the central obstacle to be a reticence on the part of the young person to engage in such dialogue. Participants described various blocking techniques apparently used by the young people, including claims to have full prior knowledge on the issue, physically absenting themselves from the situation, becoming irritated or annoyed, or ridiculing parents' educational efforts. In our analysis, we consider our findings in light of the shifting power of children historically and the new cultural aspiration of maintaining harmonious and democratic relations with one's offsprings.

Key words: Sexuality, young people, sex education, parents, Ireland.

Introduction

Until the most recent period, the conventional wisdom in sex education circles in Ireland (Fullerton 2004) and Britain (Health Development Agency 2001) was that the more parents communicated with their children about sex, the better were likely to be sexual health outcomes for young people, usually measured in terms of the age of sexual debut or the use of contraception at first intercourse.

This discourse on the positive impact of parent-child sex communication, based on a small number of retrospective studies, has recently begun to be questioned in the wake of a large-scale longitudinal study of school pupils in Scotland (Wight *et al.* 2006). In Wight *et al.*'s research, ease of communication about sex with parents was found to have little impact on young people's sexual behaviour, and in some instances displayed a U-shaped relationship, with boys who reported being 'uncomfortable' in talking to their fathers about sex more likely to indicate condom and contraceptive use than those who reported being either very comfortable or very uncomfortable in this regard. Wight *et al.* (2006, 490) speculate that, for boys, high levels of ease in talking to parents 'might legitimate sexual activity, and/or not taking precautions, though causation could plausibly be in either direction.' These findings may well rattle the confidence of sex educators about what advice to give parents about how to approach sexuality education, and send signals out to researchers about just how little is known about the subtleties of parent-child communication about sexuality.

The overall aim of the present study was to explore parents' approaches to communicating with teenage children about issues relating to relationships and sexuality. In this paper, we focus specifically on the issue of 'openness' around sexuality in interactions between parents and

their teenage children, which must be distinguished from interactions between parents and younger children. Based on participants' descriptions of interactions with their teenage children, we explore what emerged as the most dominant impediment to parental communication about sexuality (notwithstanding that the impact of this on sexual outcomes for young people is unclear), namely, the young people's responses and reactions to their parents' educational attempts. The issue of which party – the parent or the teenager – is deemed (by parents) to exercise the greater degree of control in interactions on sexual topics is also examined. We did not set out to focus on parents' constructions of their child's influence or conduct in communications about sexuality, nor even specifically to analyse the concept of openness. As occurred in other studies (Kirkman *et al.* 2005), the significance of openness in parent-child discussions about sex emerged spontaneously during the course of data-gathering. However, as will become clear later, the impact of the teenagers' conduct on the nature of the communication was fore-grounded as an issue by parents themselves to a much greater extent than has been reported in previous research.

Background

Although there is no shortage of research into a range of aspects of parent-child communication about sexuality, the bulk of this comprises quantitative studies from the USA, with very little research on the topic from Ireland and the UK. Of the modicum conducted on the Irish side of the Atlantic Ocean, the main emphasis has been on determining whether parental sexuality education brings positive results in terms of sexual health. As indicated earlier, no consensus has yet emerged about whether or not it actually does, with some studies indicating a positive relationship between the two (Wellings *et al.* 1999, 2001; Stone and Ingham 2002), but with another major study referred to earlier indicating that the level of comfort in talking to parents

about sex bore little relationship with young people's sexual practices (Wight *et al.* 2006). Part of the difficulty with these evaluation studies relates to methodological weaknesses; many quantitative studies have attempted to measure the impact of communication about sexuality between parents and children on the basis of whether sex was ever discussed or not, what levels of comfort or ease were experienced in sex communications, or by using other crude categories left to the interpretation of the respondent. The fact that findings from such studies have shown contradictory results, even in similar social contexts, sends signals to social researchers that communication between parents and their children about sexuality may be more complex than is at first envisaged.

Let us turn our attention to the few qualitative studies that offer more in-depth insights into parent-child communication about sexuality (Solomon *et al.* 2002; Kirkman *et al.* 2005; Frankham 2006; Walker 2001). Both Solomon *et al.* (2002) and Kirkman (2005) centralised the notion of 'openness' in their analyses of relationships between young people and their parents. Solomon *et al.* (2002, 968) conducted an investigation of 70 British families in which teenagers and their parents were interviewed to gain their perspectives on patterns of closeness and special relationships within the family. Although the research did not specifically focus on sexuality but rather on 'intimate talk' more generally, many parents in that study described having open dialogues with their children about issues pertaining to the body and intimacy (the examples provided by Solomon *et al.* in this regard deal mostly with menstruation). Similarly, many teenagers' narratives were rich with accounts of sharing secrets, disclosure and honesty as they described their evolving relationship with their parents. While Solomon *et al.* (2002) found that the notion of open communication between children and parents was an important ideal for the participants in the study, this familial aspiration proved problematic; for some teenagers,

the more information they disclosed to their parents, the greater the risk of loss of control over their private lives. Therefore, while the majority of teenagers valued the ideal of opening up with their parents, for some, disclosure was problematic since parents could utilise this information to reassert control, thereby decreasing their autonomy and independence. Accordingly, teenagers' sole source of power in this situation is to withhold information about their personal lives. According to Solomon *et al.* therefore, while both parents and their children subscribed to the discourse of openness within families, nevertheless tensions emerge given that both parties have opposing goals in the trading of information, goals which conflict with this ideal. For parents, gaining information from their teenagers equated to the retention of power and control, whereas the withholding of information from their parents on the part of teenagers was a strategy by which they could gain privacy and power. Consequently, Solomon *et al.* (2002, 981) observed that, "Parents and teenagers may desire openness; but in practice, they experience 'closed-ness.'"

Based on interview data from young people and parents drawn from 19 families in an Australian context, Kirkman *et al.* (2005) also problematised the notion of 'openness' in their analysis of parent-child communication about sexuality. They noted that what exactly is meant by openness in the literature tends to remain implicit. They found that while the vast majority of participants spontaneously advocated open communication about sexuality between parents and children, participants held very diverse and contradictory views on what openness actually entailed. For example, some young people described their parents as open about sexuality, yet admitted that they never discussed the issue. Indeed, Kirkman *et al.* argue that pinning down the dimensions of openness and how it may be measured is more complex than many of the quantitative scales normally used can capture. They identified a variety of facets to how

openness was constructed by participants, namely that openness could imply answering questions but without 'keeping a spotlight' on the topic and that openness could merely mean possessing an open-minded outlook. They found a sense among participants that openness and privacy need to be balanced, and also that degrees of detail about sexual issues needed to be tailored according to the age and maturity of the child. Constraints on levels of openness included the gender of the parent or child (some issues were deemed to be either 'male' or 'female' concerns); the degree of taboo associated with the issues; normative expectations about what is considered to be appropriate knowledge for a child; and knowledge and comfort level of parents. Interestingly in relation to the present paper, very little was made of young people's own reticence in engaging in discussions about sexuality with their parents. Whilst this was alluded to occasionally in Kirkman *et al.*'s article, as will become clearer a little further on, it was far more marginal in relevance compared to findings from our study.

Walker's (2001) British study of how parents (40 mothers and 21 fathers) talk about sexual matters with their children, specifically in relation to the factors that impact upon parents communicating with their children about sex, found that a range of factors restricted parental involvement in sexuality education. These included parents' lack of awareness about the young person's need for sex education; not viewing sex education as an aspect of their role; feelings of embarrassment in discussing the topic; uncertainty about what they, as parents, should communicate; and a perception that they should undertake a formal 'talk' about sex. For Walker (2001, 142), then, "fear of losing face" in front of their children was a key factor inhibiting the provision of sex education, with fathers particularly citing this as a reason which contributed to their unwillingness to engage in sex education with their children. While the child's embarrassment was mentioned (very fleetingly) in their paper, it was clearly deemed

insufficiently relevant to make it into the summary of key inhibiting factors in parents' attempts to communicate about sexuality with their children.

Other studies have also placed a heavy emphasis on the factors associated with the parent in explaining the quality of parent-child sexuality education, and less so on those associated with the child. Pluhar *et al.*'s (2008) research found that mothers who possessed greater comfort and self-efficacy (i.e. confidence in their ability to discuss sexual matters with their son or daughter) for engaging in discussions about sexuality reported more frequent communication with their children. Similarly, those mothers in Dilorio *et al.*'s (2000) research who expressed higher levels of self-efficacy, in conjunction with possessing positive outcome expectancies associated with talking about sex, were also more likely to do so.

To summarise, existing qualitative analyses tend to place far greater emphasis on the notion that parents are reticent, embarrassed or lacking when it comes to communicating with their children about sexuality, and less so on parents' perspectives on their attempts at sexuality education. The analysis that follows provides insights into how parents position themselves in terms of sexuality education with teenagers and is limited insofar as the views of young people themselves on the topic were not interrogated.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative methodology using both purposive and snowball sampling, in which 39 interviews (36 individual, two interviews with 2 participants, and one with 3 participants) were conducted with 43 parents (both mothers and fathers) from a variety of geographical locations throughout Ireland. The inclusion criterion for participation was that all

participants would have at least one child aged 10-19 years at the time of the interview. Ethical approval was obtained from the university at which the research was conducted, and informed consent was obtained from participants prior to interview.

For purposive sampling, parents were recruited through a variety of channels, primarily through Parents' Committees at schools and in addition, local community-based organisations and agencies were used as selection sites. Using the Department of Education and Science's website (www.education.ie), in conjunction with schools' own websites, a sample of 10 schools was identified. These were located in a variety of areas to ensure socio-economic diversity and included primary and second-level schools, as well as those in rural and urban locations. Positive contact was established with the Parents' Associations of seven schools, all of whom put the research team in contact with potential participants.

As data-gathering got underway, the targeted recruitment of those less well-represented in the early interviews, namely those in lower socioeconomic groups and fathers, was deemed necessary. In order to secure access to parents in lower socio-economic groups, communication was made with a community development worker of a Resource Centre in an area undergoing community regeneration. Five mothers were recruited in this way; although the community worker had also encouraged men to participate, none came forward. To increase the number of men in the study, male-dominated sporting clubs were also targeted, but with little success. The use snowball sampling did bring modest success in terms of the challenges in male recruitment. Nonetheless, while the final sample revealed a fairly even mix of working and middle-class participants (based on O'Hare *et al.*'s 1991 occupational scale), fathers remained underrepresented in the sample (see Figure 1).

Other characteristics of the sample are as follows: forty-two were white and one was from an ethnic minority group; fourteen parents were from rural areas and 29 from urban areas. The number of children that participants had varied from 1 to 7, and the ages of the children ranged from 5 years to 27 years. All but 4 participants were the parents of teenagers. Between them, the 43 participants had 121 children, 54 females and 67 males. The excess of male children over female children that arose entirely by chance had implications for the analysis insofar as more data on the parents' approaches to educating young men in relation to sexuality were available.

Table 1. *Sites of selection of participants*

Schools		Snowball sampling		Community organisations		Total number of participants
Male	7	Male	4	Male	0	11
Female	14	Female	13	Female	5	32
Total number of participants						43

A topic guide was used to structure each interview to ensure a consistency in themes covered. During the course of fieldwork for the study, on a few occasions the proposed strategy of individual interviewing was altered to accommodate the wishes of participants. The location of the interviews varied with the majority of parents choosing to be interviewed in their own homes.

Modified analytical induction, the strategy used for data analysis, is a well-established strategy in qualitative research for analysing data obtained through depth interviewing (Bogden and Biklen 2007). It begins with sensitising concepts, that is, categories originating in social theory or extant literature to which the researcher has been exposed. These concepts, or hunches, give rise to tentative questions that guide the emerging interpretations. A hypothetical explanation, which emerges on the basis of analytical work, identifies the common elements of cases (Punch 2005). Modified analytical induction was the data analysis strategy of choice for this study mainly because, since whole transcripts are compared carefully to other whole transcripts, it offers a holistic perspective on data.

Results and discussion

Data are presented around two broad themes: (1) Parents' quest for a culture of openness; and (2) The exercise of control in information management in parent/child discussions about sexuality.

Parents' quest for a culture of openness

One of the most consistent themes across data was that parents wanted to foster good and democratic relationships with their children. Parents often prided themselves in the culture of openness about sexuality that prevailed in their home and believed themselves to have a liberal and open-minded attitude to sexuality. This culture was often contrasted with their own experiences of a silence about sexuality in interactions with their own parents and their

perceived ignorance about sexual issues during their own adolescence. A key characteristic of this culture was to impart to children the idea that they should feel free to ask questions or to raise any issues about sexuality if they so wished. Thus, openness sometimes represented a desire and positive disposition on the part of parents towards communicating with their children, a phenomenon also observed in previous research (Jackson and Scott 2004; Kirkman *et al.* 2005). An example is as follows:

It's a case of, 'Yes, look as parents we don't know everything but you are our children and we do care for you and while it might be a thing that you feel comfortable talking to your friends about, that's normal, but do keep us in the loop'. (Philip)

Other aspects of this openness were to invite their children to come to them should they be confused or upset about any issue on the subject of relationships or sexuality.

However, while parents spoke about openness, the latter often went on to describe situations where very little free-flowing dialogue about sexuality subsequently occurred between themselves and the young person. Indeed, situations of genuinely relaxed, two-way dialogue about sexual issues between parents and teenagers were almost never described by participants, concurring with Kirkman *et al.*'s (2005, 53) finding that "adolescents...who described their parents as open in communicating about sexuality...at the same time declar[ed] that they never discuss the subject". While there were a few exceptions, parents reported that they (rather than young people) were more likely to raise the topic of sexuality and also more likely to want to pursue it. While parental embarrassment and lack of knowledge or confidence about discussing sexuality did feature in data, from participants' perspectives, by far the strongest and most consistent impediment to communicating about sexuality related to the

young people themselves in terms of their expected or actual responses when sexual issues were raised.

Participants reported that teenagers did not tend to ask questions, nor did the latter take up their parents' offers of support, guidance and explanation. Parents presented this picture even where they perceived themselves to be very liberal and approachable.

[Husband] is really laid back, he wouldn't have a problem discussing it with her, he would be very, very good and he would be very, very sensible, he wouldn't have a problem discussing it with her. But she would have to come to him and if she asked he would be very good, he is very good like that. He wouldn't have a problem explaining anything to her. But I don't think she would go to him, like I said she didn't think really of coming to me either, I brought it up to her. No, like she never really did ask questions. (Ann)

It was quite common for parents to reveal that they were reluctant to become strongly active even in merely imparting information (let alone expecting a discussion) about sex and sexuality because this would jeopardize the very culture of amicability that they were attempting to create. Parents' narratives were littered with accounts of how delicately they handled discussions about sex and sexuality.

I would imagine coming in too heavy you would get shyness and sort of scare them off coming to you. The idea is, as I have said, to leave the door open and let them, if there is something that they want to talk about, do. (Phillip)

He just wouldn't talk to you about anything like that, I think he [17-year-old] is at that stage where...I can't remember what he was reading, about something and he was telling me about it and I was quite surprised, but generally I wouldn't push. I feel if sometimes I ask a question they kind of get annoyed and whatever and you just don't push it. (Siobhán)

I am careful about what I say unless it is in a situation where I am invited in. (Jimmy)

Sometimes it is kind of, with girls especially, you don't want to be, 'Ah I told you so', you don't want to be like you are preaching and you are constantly at it and that if the situation comes up fair enough...So you kind of have to, when the

opportunity is there, go for it, but go for it very, very unknown to her that you are trying to get something across to her conversation wise, that is the best way to do it. (Sinead)

Thus, by and large, while a few parents admitted to having avoided any reference to sexuality with their children, participants largely believed themselves to be more willing than their teenager to be open about it. In a large number of cases, parents assumed that their child had acquired knowledge about the physical and emotional components of sex and sexuality through school-based sexuality education, and theirs was a supportive role. However, a recent survey of secondary school pupils in Ireland aged 14-19 years found that 68% of respondents did not know or incorrectly identified the point in the menstrual cycle when a pregnancy was most likely to occur (Drennan *et al.* 2009). This problematises parents' face-value acceptance of sexuality knowledge acquired from school.

The regulating impact of the young person's sensibilities

A few parents described instances that might have presented opportunities to discuss sexual matters, but were worried that introducing the topic would upset or embarrass the young person. In this way, from the vantage point of parents, the sensibilities of the young person had an impact on how sexuality education was conducted. The delicacy of the situation sometimes meant that, while parents had good intentions of engaging in sexuality education with their children, they sometimes did not follow through on these intentions (as the first quotation following suggests), or held off on providing aspects of sexuality education until an issue or opportunity arose (as indicated in the second quotation).

My eldest is very reserved and I thought that maybe he'd feel embarrassed if I spoke to him. Very often, you know the way, in your head you sort of say, 'Oh I'll tell him that, I'll tell him that', and then I never actually did. (Felicity)

Int: And how will you judge when is the right time do you think [to discuss contraception with her 15-year-old daughter]?

Sinead: Again I think it will just come out of nowhere, it will just come out of something totally unexpected and it will just be... like I am very much aware that these things have to be talked about and I put it to the back of my head and when something arises that is when I will go for it. (Sinead)

While in the above examples the mothers' approaches may be described as passive and haphazard with regard to sexuality education, in each of the above examples, they had nonetheless thought about the issue. In another situation, the mother reported that it was particularly important to carefully judge the appropriate moments to raise issues of sexuality with her son, given his reluctance to engage in discussions of that nature. Interestingly, engaging in discussion outside the house proved useful as this, she conveyed, alleviated her son's feeling of being "hemmed in". She believed that was important to be responsive to her son's moods. Consequently, she tried to take advantage of opportunities in everyday life as opposed to "pinning him down". Nonetheless, if he signalled that he was unwilling to discuss a particular topic at a particular time, she "back[ed] off".

In the following example, a mother had been discussing the need to change the sheets on her son's bed because of his wet dreams and indicates her reluctance to discuss the issue least it embarrass him.

Int: And you never mentioned anything about wet dreams?

Samantha: No.

Int: Would you be embarrassed talking to him about that?

Samantha: No, he'd be mortified if I talked to him about it, he is just that type of child. He'd be mortified if I brought it up to him. (Samantha)

With regard to parents' own emotional responses to discussing issues pertaining to sexuality with their children, data indicated that the parents perceived that the children would be more embarrassed than they (the parents) were.

Another mother noticed a love-bite on her 17-year-old-son's neck and sensed that he was 'upset and embarrassed' and therefore not open to a discussion. However, she reported that she did not want to let the episode pass without conveying her disapproval, which she did by stating to her son that she was 'not impressed' by what she had discovered. While this mother reported an awareness that the episode presented her with an opportunity to discuss sexual safety with the young man, she believed that he was already embarrassed, and did not wish to make him more uneasy. In this way, the sensibilities of the young person appeared to take precedence over the parent's own wish to educate. However, her own sense of disapproval may well have contributed to the young man's reluctance to discuss the issue. The example also indicates that parents may not have been as liberally open-minded as they presented themselves, and this may well have contributed to the lack of engagement of their teenagers in sexuality talk.

In an attempt to understand further participants' apparent sensitivity to their children's possible or actual responses, it is informative to consider some historical shifts in conceptualising parent-child relations. Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) advanced the notion of the 'pure relationship' when describing the way in which intimacy is constituted in the modern period of the past two hundred years approximately. What he means by this is that, rather than being based on authority by parents and deference on the part of children, modern family relations are ideally based on trust, mutual disclosure and equality. The concern that parents conveyed about their children's sensibilities – for example their eagerness not to embarrass or annoy the young

person by insisting on a discussion – appears to be rooted in the shifting power of children historically and the new cultural aspiration of maintaining harmonious and friendly relations with one's children. Many parents indicated that they were keen not to reproduce the more formal and deferential relationship that they had with their own parents. As Jamieson (1998) has noted, being a good mother in the contemporary world does not merely involve providing practical care but also having the capacity to respond to and understand the children's 'inner selves'. Similarly, the expectations of the father nowadays extend beyond the 'disciplinarian patriarchal father', and even 'a more indulgent father-provider' to 'a new sensitive father with a deep knowledge and understanding of his children' (Jamieson, 1998, 161). Parents' accounts suggest that tip-toeing around the young person's mood and responsiveness seems to be part of this revised approach to parenting.

From the accounts that participants offered, it appears that the culture of openness was problematic insofar it required careful negotiation on the part of parents and demanded that they tread sensitively, and carefully read the young person's responses; some parents described their fear that openly discussing sexuality could serve to bring down barriers to communication completely if their child did not wish to engage in the discussion. In this sense the culture of openness was more akin to a pseudo or a superficial openness. Sexuality did not appear to be perceived as something woven into the fabric of everyday life, but rather was constructed as a special subject of conversation that required delicate management (see Jackson and Scott 2004). Thus, in the parents narratives, sexuality already acquired the status of being distinct from everyday conversation.

The exercise of control in information management in parent/child discussions about sexuality

Parents often had good reason not to push discussions about relationships and sexuality as many reported first hand experience of communication barriers being pulled down if they tried to introduce a topic for discussion. From the perspective of parents, to a large degree, the young people controlled the amount and status of the information imparted when they communicated with their teenagers. Two strategies in particular were described by parents as being employed by young people: Claims to know all this information already and ridicule the parents' attempts to educate in order to close down any further communication; and a tendency to terminate the communication by indicating an unwillingness to discuss it and/or by physically absenting themselves from the immediate situation.

Claims to already have a full knowledge of sexual issues

A couple of parents described situations where their offspring challenged their own (the parents') knowledge about issues relating to sexuality or relationships by insinuating that the parents 'knew nothing' about the matter. In several other cases, the young person reportedly attempted to foreclose on any discussion about sexuality by claiming full knowledge of the topic already.

[Son] would say 'You don't need to talk to me about that. I know all about that'.
(Pat)

'Mummy, there is no need for this, we have done it at school'. (Joan)

The younger son of another participant reportedly returned the puberty book she had purchased for him stating that "I am not reading that. I know it all". Moreover, she and her

husband had each tried to address sexuality matters with him but, in the words of his mother, “He doesn’t want to know”.

One mother described how she attempted to engage in conversation about contraception with her older boy, relying on jokey, throw-away comments to offset embarrassment. For instance, coming up to Christmas, she reportedly told him “I’ll be throwing in a few condoms this year into your stocking, just in case you need them”. His response indicating that “everyone knows” they can be purchased from the Lidl (supermarket chain) beside the school effectively shut down the conversation – a response that did not surprise his mother as she knew “he hates talking about it”. Nevertheless, through this offhand comment, she reported that she was able to elicit from her son that he was aware of where he could obtain contraception.

Young people demonstrating an unwillingness to discuss the topic

Other strategies were also described by participants in their recounting of how young people foreclosed on discussions about sexuality. Non-verbal communication such as physically moving away was one such mechanism described.

Well he’d listen but he’d wander off when he decided he had enough. He was very capable of letting you know, ‘Okay, too much information now and I’m heading off’. Even like the famous sex talk they get at school and, ‘How did it go today?’ ‘Fine, I’m not talking to you about it’. (Irene)

Int: Were you hoping this [finding pornography in his room] would be a little opener for a chat?

Samantha: Well he'd just walk off kind of, he thinks I am a little bit mad sometimes...and he was like, 'Go away, what are you on?' So I was like, 'Okay', that was kind of the sex talk we had. (Samantha)

Becoming irritated or annoyed, or alternatively ridiculing the parents' attempts to raise the issue were other strategies depicted by participants to describe how teenagers apparently foreclosed discussions.

Int: And condoms, would that ever have come into it, do you remember?
No. 7: Do you know I can't. I wouldn't say it now to him because he'd...I mean we do get on very well in a way, but he is just very hormonal... I feel if sometimes I ask a question they kind of get annoyed and whatever and you just don't push it. (Siobhán)

Nobody ever asks me about anything, they just laugh if I try to say it. [No. 27, SEG 3, mother of 6 children. (Fiona)]

For one parent her children's comfort level with discussions was linked with the nature of the discussion; they were happy to talk about the biological aspects of sexuality, such as periods and puberty, but "not so much about sex and sex education". Indeed, period talk between mothers and daughters, and discussions about bodily changes in general were areas that appeared to result in least resistance in attempts to engage young people. From participants' vantage point, other topics such as contraception tended to be heavily impeded.

Another parent described his son reverting to a 'brooding silence' when something in his life was upsetting him, but to which his parents were not privy. One mother reported that her 17-year-old son would not discuss any of his life experiences at all with his parents, and her impression was that they (the parents) were an embarrassment to him and he did not want them interfering in his life. However, their 14-year-old son was more communicative.

As indicated earlier, Solomon *et al.*'s (2002) study found that teenagers recognised that withholding information about their private lives from their parents afforded them some level of control, as information could be used by parents to reassert their authority in ostensibly democratic circumstances. To an extent, there was some evidence in the present study that parents might indeed do this. In a few narratives, there were suggestions that parents analysed any snippet of information that they did get from their children and pondered what this might mean in terms of their child's behaviour, something that a fobbing-off by the young person might not have precipitated. Examples of how such information got parents thinking are as follows.

He [son] is 14 now and he got to his first disco about 6 months ago...And I said to him, 'I am going to say to you what I said to [daughter] ..if you are going to be kissing any girls just let it be the one'. And I was expecting the response, 'Don't be silly I am not going to be kissing any girls'. But the response I got was, 'Ok I'll remember that'. And I thought, emm, he has been thinking about it, he has taken it on board that there is going to be girls and this may happen. (Sinead)

Sometimes [daughter] won't actually say something, but she will kind of skirt around it where when you think about it, Why is she saying that? Get's you thinking. (Laura)

In Giddens' (1998) analysis of the increasing democracy in relations between parents and children (referred to earlier), he makes the point that parents will continue to claim authority over children but in the context of more open and negotiated relationships than previously pertained. While Solomon *et al.* (2002) challenge Giddens' equality assertion on the basis that parent-child relations are not equal but rather that financial and domestic arrangements concede greater power to parents this, our data indicated that, at least from parents' perspectives, when it comes to specific interactions involving sexuality education, the young people appear to successfully resist parental authority by foreclosing on openness and negotiations with their parents. Moreover, parents' accounts suggested that they (the parents)

tended to be careful not to reassert their authority and force a hearing, but rather succumbed to the agenda of the young person, which usually was a preference to foreclose. In this sense, from the position of the parents, the young people tend to exercise a greater degree of power than they themselves (the parents) in the interaction, a finding not hitherto elaborated on in existing literature. It should be noted that observations from our data about the lack of reciprocity in talking about sex and intimacy does not necessarily extend to dialogue between parents and children about other aspects of life that collectively determine the status of the child-parent relationship.

While young people's blocking techniques have featured in previous research into parent-child communication about sex, and other factors such as parental embarrassment cross-cut the interactions described by parents in our study, the reported reticence of young people to engage in sexuality education with parents appeared to be a far stronger feature of parents' narratives in our study – indeed the most dominant feature – compared to the reported findings of other studies. Just why this should be the case is less than clear. We did not approach the research with a particular emphasis on this possible lack of teenager engagement, but merely followed it up as it arose. Interestingly, in the course of data analysis for the present study, we revisited what young people imparted during focus groups in an earlier (entirely separate) Irish study completed in 2004 (Hyde and Howlett 2004); in that study the young people indicated that communication about sexuality was virtually always one-way (parent-driven), and that strong parental messages of disapproval resulted in dialogue between parent and teenager being foreclosed and prevented young people from being truthful with parents. This indicates a degree of consistency in the findings of the two studies.

While the delicate management of communication was a dominant feature of data, this does not imply that parents reported consistently one-way communication between themselves and their teenager(s). Some parents described circumstances where their children were more responsive to dialogue than others. One participant reported that her son did make comments to her after the fifth-class talk about how awful it was. She also felt that she could be more open with both her sons after they had had the school talk, because she was aware that they had been exposed to instruction on the biological aspects of sex. She mentioned, for example, her freedom to be candid with her sons about period pains if they enquired about her apparent discomfort. Other participants described specific children as non-responsive to sexuality education, while others were more challenging of their parents' opinion; however, challenging responses were far less common.

Conclusion

Before closing, it should be noted that descriptions of interactions about sexuality presented here are limited to the voices of parents. It may be the case that participants felt it socially desirable to assign weakness in their education role to factors associated with the child rather than admit to their own deficits. However, young people's own admission of their lack of engagement in dialoguing about sexuality with their parents identified in an earlier study (Hyde and Howlett 2004) coupled with parents' accounts presented here suggest that teenagers rather than their parents may be greater impediments to open dialogue about sexuality than has previously been acknowledged.

Acknowledgement.

The authors would like to thank the Crisis Pregnancy Agency for funding this research. The opinions expressed in this publication are of the authors and are not necessarily those of the sponsor.

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