



## Parents experience with the sexual education of their children: implications for nursing care\*

*A família e a educação sexual dos filhos: implicações para a enfermagem*

*La familia y la educación sexual de los hijos: implicaciones para la enfermería*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This paper aims to identify how parents experience the sexual education of their adolescent children. **Methods:** Qualitative descriptive and exploratory study, conducted in a private school in the municipal district of Toledo, Paraná state, Brazil. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed with content analysis. **Results:** The parents reported interesting points regarding the approaches they use to educate their adolescent children regarding sexuality. These points included the open and honest dialogue, difficulties in communication, difficulties related to their own sexual education, the teaching of values, and the importance of sharing the sexual education of their children with the school. **Conclusion:** There is a need for continuing support and education of parents regarding sexual education of their children since this is a complex issue to address.

**Keywords:** Sex education; Parent-child relations; Adolescence; Sexuality; Family relations

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Identificar como os pais vivenciam a educação sexual de seus filhos adolescentes. **Métodos:** Pesquisa qualitativa descritiva exploratória, realizada em uma escola privada do município de Toledo, Paraná. Participaram do estudo 10 pais de alunos da 7ª e 8ª séries. Os dados foram coletados através de entrevista semi-estruturada e analisados conforme o método do Discurso do Sujeito Coletivo. **Resultados:** Os pais fizeram algumas considerações sobre o modo como orientam os filhos sobre sexualidade, entre elas, a importância do diálogo e da conversa franca entre pais e filhos; a dificuldade na comunicação entre pais e filhos; dificuldades relacionadas à educação recebida; ensino de valores e a importância da educação compartilhada com a escola. **Conclusão:** Faz-se necessário um trabalho contínuo de orientação sobre sexualidade aos adolescentes e também às suas famílias visto a diversidade e complexidade deste tema.

**Descritores:** Educação sexual; Relações pais-filho; Adolescência; Sexualidade; Relações familiares

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Identificar cómo los padres vivencian la educación sexual de sus hijos adolescentes. **Métodos:** Se trata de una investigación cualitativa descriptiva exploratoria, realizada en una escuela privada del municipio de Toledo, Paraná. Participaron del estudio 10 padres de alumnos de la 7ª y 8ª series. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de una entrevista semi-estructurada y analizados conforme el método del Discurso del Sujeto Colectivo. **Resultados:** Los padres hicieron algunas consideraciones sobre el modo cómo orientan a sus hijos sobre sexualidad, entre ellas, la importancia del diálogo y de la conversación franca entre padres e hijos; la dificultad en la comunicación entre padres e hijos; dificultades relacionadas a la educación recibida; enseñanza de valores y la importancia de la educación compartida con la escuela. **Conclusión:** Se hace necesario un trabajo continuo de orientación sobre sexualidad a los adolescentes y también a sus familias dada la diversidad y complejidad del tema.

**Descriptores:** Educación sexual; Relaciones padres-hijo; Adolescencia; Sexualidad; Relaciones familiares

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is part of everyone's life and, although it is often veiled or not well resolved, we cannot forget to mention it or try to ignore it.

When sexuality is discussed with adolescents, it is observed that they have countless ideas, troubles, expectations, and doubts which they manifest in this stage of life. However, it is exactly at this moment in life that sexual education should take place, not superficially and full of confusion, but rather in a harmonic and healthy way<sup>(1)</sup>.

The awakening of sexuality is something that one builds and learns through life, because it is a part of human development. This is one reason why it can affect the whole process of personality development<sup>(2)</sup>.

Specifically during adolescence, the awakening of sexuality occurs in a very specific way, marked by particular characteristics.

Adolescence is a period full of great transformations and discoveries, it is a time of affirming one's personality and developing deeper relations with society, the school, and mainly with the family. It is understood as a transition phase between childhood and adult age. The adolescence period is fundamental due to its very particular characteristics, which lead the child towards becoming an adult capable of reproduction<sup>(2-4)</sup>. Adolescence is also accompanied by the search for one's own identity and for the awakening of eroticism, which makes it a delicate period in which there can be an increase in parent-child conflicts.

In this stage, there is a search to set values, ideologies and life styles and vulnerability towards certain illnesses related to drug and alcohol abuse, and having unsafe sex<sup>(5)</sup>.

It is in this stage that many families can feel unprepared to meet their child's needs, because they feel unable, both intellectually and emotionally, to counsel, encourage, inform and guide them about sexuality in its many dimensions<sup>(6)</sup>. In this sense, it is necessary for parents and their children to understand and experience this stage in life, valuing their knowledge, their history and beliefs, so they can become aware of the family being an essential place for their development<sup>(7)</sup>.

The family is considered an indispensable space to ensure survival, full protection of its members, regardless of the dynamics of its structure.

The family environment provides the foundation for affectivity and also plays a decisive role in the education of its members, because it is the place where ethical and humanitarian values are learnt, which are necessary in order to live in society<sup>(8)</sup>.

Parents often do not know how to act when facing the demonstrations of their children's sexuality, because it is a difficult task to accept and understand the youth's

way of thinking. It is necessary to review prejudice and stereotypes, understand the differences of ideas, since the children's growing up can cause conflicts and tension in the family<sup>(9)</sup>.

When parents realize their children have entered puberty, it is important for them to try to understand their children so as to facilitate the affective attachment between them. In this stage, it is essential to develop a trust environment so that, when parents realize that adolescence is beginning, parents and their children are close. This closeness will avoid that adolescents feel lonely or lost, and this will help them to understand and live this phase, valuing their knowledge and history, because it is within the family that they will find the support and safety they need to deal with the conflicts common to their age<sup>(10)</sup>.

It is important to talk about sexuality as early as possible, since it is a subject that usually causes much controversy and conflicting ideas. Discussing it, however, allows children and adolescents to have healthy habits and solve any doubts and talk about issues regarding their own health<sup>(11)</sup>.

At this moment of transition, nurses can help and deliver care to the adolescents and their families by counseling, exchanging ideas, providing clarifications and making actions that can avoid problems and make this stage of life healthier, safer and more harmonious.

Nurses are one professional category prepared to develop health education actions and, therefore, they can plan and implement actions that favor adolescents' health and also support their families, because it is in this period that parents face great difficulty to interact with their children, especially when it comes to addressing sexuality<sup>(12)</sup>.

By working out sexuality issues, the professional should consider the particularities of each family and act so as to support them, protect them, and build their strengths. The family and the nurse should share knowledge and actions to guide adolescents toward living their sexuality with responsibility, dignity, and pleasure.

## OBJECTIVE

To identify how parents experience their adolescent child's sexual education.

## METHODS

This is a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory study, performed at a private school in Toledo, a city in the state of Paraná, Brazil. Subjects were 10 family members of students enrolled in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, who were chosen through a draft done by the researcher.

The study was performed after approval by the Ethics

Committee at *Universidade Federal do Paraná* and was in accordance with Resolution number 196/96, Guidelines and Regulatory Standards for Research involving Human Beings<sup>(13)</sup>.

The decision to participate was respected and parents were included in the study only if they signed the Free and Informed Consent Form. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed by assigning them the denominations F1, F2, successively, to refer to family member one and family member two, respectively.

Data collection was performed through a semi-structured interview, consisting of five questions about the subject. The interview was recorded and fully transcribed, and thus permitted collecting the data regarding the parents' identification and the way they provide sexual education to their adolescent children.

The Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) method, proposed by Lefèvre e Lefèvre(14), was used to analyze the data obtained through the interview, which makes it possible to study "collective thinking", and to assemble some categories that originate from the key expressions extracted from the interviews.

## RESULTS

Of the ten parents participating in the study, seven were women and three were men, and most were of Italian descent. Ages ranged from 31 to 46 years. Most participants were married and catholic; had completed higher education, including some with specialization and master's degrees. A majority worked and gained between 11 and more than 20 minimum wages.

After interviewing the parents, who were asked about how they educated their children about sexuality, some ideas were extracted from the collected material, which are presented under topics.

### Open conversation between parents and children as a form of counseling

Some parents who participated in the study reported their easiness of talking to their children about sexuality. They think it is important to have an open conversation with their children because they believe this type of conversation helps them become closer, makes conversation and the family relationship easier, and provides the opportunity to educate them about appropriate sexuality, based on openness, naturalness and responsibility. These parents also believe that talking is a form to become closer with their children and improve the communication between them.

*We always talk, at home everything is open to everyone (F1, F3, F7). I want to prevent before he discovers new things (F2). I don't have any trouble, we're always together, we are close friends,*

*she is really open, we feel free to talk. I don't have any trouble with her (F4). "She tells me everything ... the other day she told me she has already had sex ... we try to explain and tell them that it's a lot more complicated than they think (F5). We are there, ... we don't hide anything... we don't cover things up, we answer frankly and naturally. There is no taboo. We don't worry about brightening up things. I always tell him that I'm there for him. Sexuality is a natural thing and if there are any doubts, he will come to us and we will explain things. I want to be available always, with tranquility and without any difficulties (F7). It is better to have information now than to be worse off later (F10).*

### Communication troubles between parents and children

Some parents reported they find it difficult to give sexual education to their children, because they are unable to communicate with their adolescents since they lack the courage to talk about some sexuality issues, especially because of their children's negative attitude and lack of interest in listening to them.

*They don't want to listen to us, they feel embarrassed (F1, F2, F3, F9). They prefer to talk to friends because they think we are making fun of them... I feel embarrassed to talk to her, but I have to gain courage and talk about sex (F1, F2, F8). My husband isn't much like this, of talking ..., he is more restricted to other things, he feels uneasy to get to her.*

When parents experience difficulties to approach this issue with their children, several memories come about and they are unable to hide that the way they were educated, especially regarding sexuality, left marks that are present until today, which makes sexuality more difficult, mainly due to their children's negative attitude and lack of interest in listening to them.

### Difficulties associated with the education that is received

Some parents reported feeling very constrained to talk about sexuality with their children. They state that they experience some difficulty to address this issue with their children. Several memories come about and they are unable to hide that the way they were brought up, especially in terms of sexuality, left marks, which are present until today, and this makes any communication and knowledge and value transmission associated with sexuality more difficult.

*We never received any sexual education. When I got my first period, I was scared, my mother didn't talk about anything, didn't kiss anyone, she was cold. My father and my mother would never sit and talk about sexuality, it runs in the family, this marked me (F1, F2). But today I have to act differently, it is hard to talk about sex, you feel shy, embarrassed. I want to build the courage and talk to*

them... It's difficult (F8). I remember that, when I was little, my dad would keep an eye on us, he was afraid because we lived in a small town. My mom is very rigid, she became a widow at the age of 36 and thinks a woman should have only one man ... she would say I should look after myself, that sex is only after marriage (F4, F5). That's how I was raised... it's complicated, I suffer ... (F4) In my generation, if I asked any questions, I would surely get spanked, we would always hear 'life teaches, you don't have to teach'. It was fear of encouraging (F7). We weren't raised that way, it will never be easy, we deal with it because we have to, I come from an Italian family, those though guys, humble people, with little education, there wasn't much time left to have a regular conversation, imagine to talk about sex (F10).

### Teaching values

Some parents showed their concern with teaching their children to respect themselves, and others responsibility when living their sexuality and behaving within society.

*We try to always show what is right, the truth, the consequences. (F3, F6). They should think more about studying... they should have their limits... Things have a right time, (F1, F2, F6)... just because your friends are going out you have to go out ... have sex. You have to be careful about boys... I tell her that girls should value themselves, they can't go out chasing boys, because people will talk about them. They can't go out with one...then another, they should be more reserved (F8). Women should belong to one man only...save herself. Many couples think that sex is just about intercourse but there has to be love, and happiness... family is the most important thing (F4). We try to teach about respect...respecting yourself and then respecting others (F6, F7). They have to be aware of the consequences, the responsibility involved in the choice they make (F9, F10). I try to show him that they have to be organized ...respect their sexuality, then life gets much easier, because an unwanted pregnancy makes things complicated for both sides (F3, F4, F6, F7). We know that, today, the tendency is to have sex earlier, this is shown on television, on soap operas...the different one is the one who doesn't have sex, but that's not really what it's like, it has to involve responsibility ... without making yourself vulgar, respecting yourself... (F10). We do this because we are afraid they will suffer ... (F9)"*

### Sexual education shared with the school

Parents recognize the role that the school has as an educator and ally in their children's sexual education and also state the importance that the school has in their children's sexual development, explaining that much of the information they have was given by the school.

*She receives good education at school (F8). They already had enough information because, very early, since kindergarten, they received information and evolved with time (F9). She received good education at the school she used to attend and here as well, it was great, we learned a lot (F10). A little at school, a little at home, she*

*will also discover herself with time, things flow smoother (F2, F6).*

## DISCUSSION

The communication between the family and its children, during the adolescence period, though often difficult and full of conflicts, should always be encouraged. It is in this phase that children want and most need information, and if their parents do not provide that information, they will gather it among friends or on the streets, because they need answers to their doubts.

An open dialogue with children can be considered a facilitating strategy to improve the communication process between adolescents and their families, besides being a moment to think about feelings as well as to confront and establish limits. It is important that the talk between parents and their children be permeated with feelings like honesty and trust, so children can feel there is no communication gap in the family sphere<sup>(10)</sup>.

Parents need to evaluate the type of communication they use with their children when talking about sexuality and to know that this type of subject needs to be approached according to the adolescent's level of maturity, besides being relevant to the events that occur in the life stage they are experiencing<sup>(10)</sup>.

It is important for parents, at these moments of open conversation with their children, to encourage them towards having a critical and reflexive attitude when facing sexuality-related issues. It is important to develop critical thinking in the youth, as well as the capacity to understand the changes brought about their age<sup>(15)</sup>.

The interpersonal relationship between parents and their adolescent children is a unique moment of which each minute should be valued, because it is exactly through this type of contact that the apprehension of values takes place, which usually last for life. We believe that one of the most arduous tasks for the parents is to maintain harmonious and effective communication with their children in the adolescence phase, but it is necessary, despite the difficulties that appear and the withdrawal that occurs between parents and their children in this stage of life. Parents should be aware that they continue being the main educators regarding sexuality issues and, therefore, they should be encouraged to continue talking to their children<sup>(16)</sup>.

It is known that, in view of a lack of education and absence of dialogue in the family, the adolescent tends to seek information with other adolescents, more or equally immature, which contributes to their having unsafe sex and acquiring wrong information<sup>(17)</sup>.

Much of what we learned and heard about sexuality in the family environment is reproduced in our children's education. We are often influenced by the family in terms of how we educate and it is rare for this model not to



be incorporated<sup>(18)</sup>.

Parents who had an extremely repressive and authoritarian education, where sex was seen as something sinful and with the single purpose of reproduction, face conflicts when talking to their adolescent children, because they often disagree to their ideas and this causes a tense atmosphere. It is important for parents to admit that, sometimes, their values and thoughts regarding sexuality issues do not meet their children's needs. This means that adolescents can sometimes get a negative message from their parents, through a repressive educational model, that is, also distant, authoritarian, and indifferent on their parents' behalf.

It is important for parents to review their attitude toward their children's questions about sexuality, leaving behind the prejudice and stereotypes that were constructed based on the education they received, because this difficulty to let go of taboos and old concepts can make it impossible for parents to maintain a frank and open conversation and understand the manifestations present in a blooming sexuality, particular of adolescence<sup>(20)</sup>.

The family environment is usually the place where values are strongly learnt and take roots, because it is in the family center that individuals initially experience, incorporate and adopt values, beliefs, rituals, myths and customs that are important and necessary to live in society<sup>(10)</sup>. These values generally last very long and can yield benefits or damages in their adult lives, because the family can be considered the first learning locus and, therefore, it should guide and see that the family values are passed on throughout their children's development, including values that interfere in their sexuality<sup>(7)</sup>.

Today, we are living a period of transition in terms of the construction of sexuality-related values, which often causes difficulty to the parents in terms of choosing the best way to educate their children about the topic<sup>(20)</sup>.

For Hoz<sup>(21)</sup>, sexuality education can be considered a rather broad subject, since it is related with several human manifestations, and should therefore involve both the family and the school.

It is based on this idea that we highlight the importance of approaching sexuality in the school environment together with the formal education. It is included in the National Curricular Parameters that are based on the principle that sexuality is a social issue and should, therefore, be addressed both within the family and at

school, but in a dynamic and global fashion, i.e., respecting the different beliefs, customs, and values particular of each culture<sup>(22)</sup>.

Due to the importance of sharing the adolescent's sex education between family and school, the education process can be defined as being communication and dialogue, and not merely passing on information, but the meeting between interlocutor subjects who seek the significance of the meanings<sup>(23)</sup>.

Therefore, it is necessary for schools to know about their importance as an institution that educates individuals and generates opinions and individuals.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that some parents believe that having an open conversation with their children can be a facilitating resource when educating their adolescent children about sexuality, and this conversation should be honest and fulfilling.

Some parents reported that, despite the difficulties they find, they are at their children's disposal to talk about sexuality.

Other parents stated that teaching values is the best form for their children to develop personality and increase their knowledge about themselves and about others; that school has a crucial role as an ally in their children's sex education, providing knowledge, not only about the biological aspect, but also about feelings.

Nurses, as professionals prepared to help individuals in every stage of life, need to be included in Sexual Education Programs at school, promoting health actions and programs for adolescents and their families, which should meet their real needs.

Every institution that provides services for adolescents, such as: basic health units, schools, associations, and others, should include the family in their actions so as to provide support, protection, and guidance in the sense of offering better conditions for parents to carry out the task of educating their children about sexuality.

It is essential that everyone, the government, health and education professionals, family, school, and society make all efforts towards adolescent education, not only with the purpose of their living their sexuality, but mainly so they can live their rights with responsibility, gaining respect and respecting others.

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