

Having 'The Talk': Parents' Decision Making Related to Communication with Children about  
Sex

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Abstract

Parent-child communication about sex is widely understood to be important to sexual health and wellness of adolescents and young adults. Though parents report wanting to communicate with their children comprehensively, adolescents often report this communication does not meet their needs. This study uses symbolic interactionism to explore how parents understand and make meaning of family communication about sex and how these meanings influence their decision making when it comes to family communication about sex. Eight couples participated in an observed development of plans to communicate with their children about sex and semi-structured dyadic interviews about their decision-making process. Transcriptions of the observational data and interviews were analyzed alongside the written plans developed during data collection using grounded theory methodology. Parents recognized communication with their children about sex to be an important opportunity to keep their children safe and prevent negative experiences while instilling values that will help children make healthy decisions. Rather than prescribing specific topics of conversation and times to communicate with them, parents focused on fostering strong relationships with their children and shared they would allow their kids to direct conversations. They identified clear goals for communication with their children about sex, but hoped to do things differently than their own parents by being open to questions their children bring up and addressing issues as they arise.

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General Audience Abstract

Parent-child communication about sex has been shown to help adolescents develop into sexually healthy adults. Parents report wanting to talk to their children about sex, but children often share that this communication does not meet their needs. This study explores how parents understand and make decisions with their partners about parent-child communication about sex. Eight couples with children in fourth grade or younger participated in an observation and interview during which they were asked to develop a plan for talking to their kids about sex and then explore some of the factors that influenced their decisions. Using a grounded theory methodology, the transcribed observations and interviews were coded alongside the actual plans parents developed to understand the process through which they understood parent-child communication about sex and how they made decisions. Parents considered parent-child communication about sex to be important in keeping their kids safe from harm and preventing potentially negative experiences. They considered this communication to be an opportunity to instill values that will help their children make their own decisions in the future. To make decisions, parents considered conversations they had with their own parents and explored how they would improve on those conversations by fostering open relationships with their children and allowing their children to bring up topics of conversation. Implications for research and clinical practice are provided.

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Dedication

To Grammie, who was not afraid of any conversation. You knew I could do this before I did,  
thank you for always believing in me.

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## Introduction

Adolescents and young adults rely on information communicated to them by a variety of sources to make decisions related to sex and sexuality including contraceptive use and negotiation, sexual boundaries, and choice of partners. Adolescents report learning information related to sex and sexuality from parents, other trusted adults, schools, online sources, peers, and research materials (Angera, Brookins-Fisher, & Inungu, 2008). Though adolescents learn about sex and sexuality from multiple sources, parents are often drivers for their children's sex education (Manning, 2017). Researchers have documented the association between parent-child communication about sex and increased safer sex behaviors in adolescents (Widman, et al., 2016; Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013). In addition to affecting behavioral outcomes related to sex, the family is an important context for children and adolescents' sexual socialization (Kaestle, et al., 2021; DiClemente et al., 2001), and parents take an active role in this socialization process by communicating with their children about sex and sexuality.

Prior to communicating with their children about sex, parents make decisions regarding this process and may take steps to prepare (Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000). Parents make decisions related to their children's upbringing using various factors including their personal experiences and beliefs, research, and guidance from others (Mergler & Walker, 2017; Queen, Berg, & Lowrance, 2015). The decisions parents make regarding how to talk to their children about sex and sexuality-related topics are impacted by the meaning parents attach to these conversations and affect how children are socialized.

Parents act as socializing agents for their children even before facilitating formal conversations about sex and sexuality by transmitting verbal and nonverbal messages revealing their values related to sexual behavior (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Adolescents glean messages

about parental beliefs and opinions regarding sexual behavior through communications with parents (Christopher, 2001). This communication is a method for parents to transmit the meanings they attribute to sex and sex-related topics and to develop shared meanings within the family, therefore impacting children's socialization and role-taking.

### **Rationale for Study**

Understood through a symbolic interactionist lens (Blumer, 1969), family communication about sex can be explored as a function of the meanings parents associate with sex and sexuality and the process of interaction between partners regarding sex. Symbolic interactionism explains that meanings are attributed to topics or ideas from interactions with others and the environment (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, parents understand sex and sexuality according to the meanings they attribute to these topics following interaction with their families of origin, their partners, and others in their community. These meanings and interactions are undoubtedly reproduced in parent-child communication about sex and will impact how parents choose to discuss sex and sexuality with their children.

Socialization and social scripts influence the way parents communicate about sex and sexuality with their children (Akers, Schwarz, Borrero, & Corbie-Smith, 2010); the sense of identity parents construct based on these scripts and the social roles they occupy influences this communication process even further. Symbolic interactionism asserts that individuals fill a role created by society, then use this role to contribute to an individual identity (Allen & Henderson, 2017). An extension of these social roles, roles within a family are created through interactions with family members and others in the environment (Doherty & Craft, 2011). The process of socialization assists with role-taking and internalization as individuals learn and adopt shared meanings of specific symbols (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). The development of shared

meanings within a family impact how parents communicate with one another and make joint decisions about communicating with their children about sex.

A symbolic interactionist approach will allow scholars to understand how parents make meaning of family communication about sex and how this meaning contributes to their decision-making regarding communication about sex with their children. Studying the meaning-making process parents participate in will allow researchers to gain knowledge about how parents' own experiences and interactions both with each other and in society help them understand and make decisions regarding family communication about sex. This, in turn, will aid scholars and clinicians in helping families navigate these shared meanings to improve the decision-making process and communication with each other and their children in research and practice.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Parent-child communication about sex is widely understood to be beneficial in increasing adolescents' safer sex practices and decreasing the effect of negative peer pressure (Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013; van de Bongardt, de Graaf, Reitz, Dekovic, 2014), but it does not occur as often or as comprehensively as adolescents want or need (Richardson, 2004; Wisnieski, Sieving, & Garwick, 2015). Few adolescents report having detailed and clear conversations with their parents about sex (Robert & Sonenstein, 2010; Richardson, 2004; Wisnieski, Sieving, & Garwick, 2015), and there is disagreement between parents and adolescents regarding whether such communication has occurred (Atienzo, Ortiz-Panozo, & Campero, 2015). Existing literature has noted a discrepancy between the frequency of parent-child communication about sex reported by parents and children (Richardson, 2004; Flores & Barroso, 2017). When parents do communicate with their children about sex and sexuality, conversations often center around discussion of risks associated with sexual behavior (Evans,

Widman, Kamke, & Stewart, 2020; Flores & Barroso, 2017). Parent-child communication about sex tends to cover more general information about topics such as HIV and STIs and is not often linked to personal topics such as intimacy and sexual orientation (Sneed, Somoza, Jones, & Alfaro, 2013). Certain topics such as arousal and romantic issues are discussed less often, possibly due to their intimate nature (Richardson, 2004).

Regarding the timing of parent-child communication about sex, there also seems to be some confusion around who is responsible for initiating conversations. Parents often assume that their children will approach them with questions while children wait for parents to address the topic (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Some parents worry that their children may not be old enough to discuss topics related to sexuality (Flores & Barroso, 2017) and others were concerned that discussing these topics openly may encourage sexual behavior (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). Conversely, adolescents may be hesitant to initiate conversations about sex and sexuality for fear of judgement or punishment (Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Goldberg, Casillas, & Bouris, 2006).

Previous research, though vital to understanding how parent-child communication about sex is beneficial and barriers to this process, fails to identify the dyadic process parents engage in when making decisions about how to communicate with their children about sex. Instead, the focus is primarily on the content of communication or on behavioral outcomes associated with parent-child communication such as condom use and delay of sexual debut (Harris, et al., 2013). Without identifying the decision-making processes and exploring the ways this communication occurs in families, the impact of this type of research is limited. The meanings parents associate with parent-child communication about sex and the meanings they attribute to sex and sex-related topics themselves certainly influence how parents decide to communicate with their

children about sex. Parents' perception of what family communication about sex means within the family context could either hinder or facilitate parent-child communication about sex and has yet to be explored.

Parents who associate negative meanings with sex or communication about sex could feel uncomfortable or could avoid such communication with their children. Alternatively, parents who associate positive meanings with family communication about sex may communicate more openly with their children about sex and sex-related topics. Exploring parents' decision-making processes to discover what meanings they attribute to family communication about sex will allow researchers and clinicians to discover potential facilitators and barriers to family communication about sex and to aid families in communicating more effectively about sex and sexuality.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the interactive meaning-making process parents engage in when considering family communication about sex and to determine how parents use their unique knowledge and understanding of sex and sexuality to decide how to communicate with their children about sex. Throughout this dissertation, the phrase parent-child communication about sex will be used to refer to conversations about sexual behavior, sexual interactions, sexuality, sexual orientation, puberty, and anatomy. Research will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do parents understand and make meaning of family communication about sex?
2. How do the meanings parents attribute to sex and sex-related topics influence their decisions regarding family communication about sex?

### **Outline of Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of five chapters, each describing a unique aspect of the study and findings. Chapter 1 introduced an overview of the study including the problem addressed and the rationale for the research. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework guiding the study, an overview of existing literature on parent communication, meaning making, and decision making, and an explanation of how this study will build upon previous research. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for the grounded theory study including descriptions of recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents findings from the completed study, discussing themes that emerged from the data. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in the context of existing research and presents implications of this study's findings, as well as suggestions for future research.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic interactionism describes how individuals are constantly adapting to their surroundings in response to changing contexts. This theoretical perspective posits that context, relationships, and social forces impact an individual's perception of reality and the meaning they associate with various issues (Allen & Henderson, 2017). It stresses the importance of meaning and interpretation and asserts that individuals' experiences are unique and important (Jeon, 2004). LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) detail seven assumptions of symbolic interactionism that could help to explain how parents make meaning of sex and sexuality-related communication and how parents may use these meanings to communicate with their children about these topics.

First, symbolic interactionism asserts that individuals act based on the meanings they assign to objects. Second, symbolic interactionism assumes that individuals derive meaning for objects and concepts through interactions with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In fact, this

theory suggests that individuals cannot experience interactions without making meaning of them, as this is the only way these interactions can be understood (Blumer, 1969). The meaning ascribed to objects or behaviors then shapes the way individuals behave in their interactions with others, which in turn helps individuals to refine the ascribed meaning (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This third assumption of symbolic interactionism conveys the iterative process of developing and making sense of objects and interactions, which explains how individuals develop meanings related to sex and sexuality.

Symbolic interactionism is vital to family research because individuals cannot be understood in isolation (Krause, 1985). Members of a family make meaning of objects and interactions both individually and as a group based on past experiences. Shared meaning among family members is based upon joint experiences and may change based on the individuals involved in an interaction (Christopher, 2001). For example, certain types of communication may only occur in private, while others are appropriate for more public settings. The way parents choose to discuss sex and sex-related topics with their children reflects the meaning parents attribute to these conversations (whether they should only be held with certain people or in certain circumstances) and thereby impacts how children begin to define these interactions for themselves.

The fourth assumption of symbolic interactionism explains that individuals develop their own self-concept through interacting with others. Children develop their own sense of self in relation to their interactions with family members and learn values, customs, and norms through interacting in this context (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Through this process individuals define who they are in relation to sex and sexuality, which contributes to how they interpret interactions.

The next assumption of symbolic interactionism posits that an individual's concept of themselves motivates their behavior. Individuals can predict how others will interpret their behavior and aim to act in a way that confirms their own sense of self (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In communicating with their children about sex, parents will act according to how they view themselves and how they believe their actions will be interpreted (Christopher, 2001). For example, parents are conscious of how their communication about sex with their children would be interpreted by their peers and would likely adjust the process and content of their communication about sex with their children based on what they believe would be acceptable.

The sixth assumption of symbolic interactionism touches on the tendency for both individuals and groups to be affected by society, and the final assumption states that individuals can make sense of social structures through interactions with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Parents will likely structure their communication with children based on social norms. Further, children will learn through interactions with their parents regarding sex and sexuality about the social structures governing sexual behavior and communication.

The socialization process allows parents to explore their identities, the social roles they occupy, and learn to adopt shared meanings of symbols (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Through the socialization process, parents adopt shared meanings of family communication about sex and transmit these meanings in their interactions with each other and their children (Christopher, 2001). The process of socialization assists with this role-taking and internalization as individuals learn and adopt shared meanings of specific symbols (White, et al., 2015) and is also influenced by an individual's perception of how others will understand their actions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Socialization processes occur both within the family context and in the larger societal context. Parents act as socializing agents for their children by rewarding behavior that aligns

with their values and beliefs (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), which in turn influences social roles within the family and family meanings. Socialization and social scripts influence the way parents communicate about sex and sexuality with their children (Akers, Schwarz, Borrero, & Corbie-Smith, 2010), and the sense of identity parents construct based on these scripts and the social roles they occupy may influence this communication process even further.

Parents act according to their interpretations and the meanings they ascribe to certain symbols. Parents' understanding of family communication about sex is developed through their own experiences and interactions with others. Parents will then communicate with their children about sex based on the meanings they ascribe to family communication about sex and with how they respond to their social context (Kaestle, et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, there are many factors that may influence the meanings parents attribute to family communication about sex and the topics involved in this communication. These factors may include parent gender, child gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and family of origin.

### **Factors Influencing Meanings**

#### ***Gender***

Parent gender plays a role in determining the information included in parent-child communication about sex (Ragsdale, Bersamin, Schwartz, Samboanga, Kerrick, & Grube, 2014; Keijsers & Poulin, 2013), and likely influences how parents make meaning of this communication. Throughout socialization, men and women learn to adopt shared meanings of objects based on their gender (Christopher, 2001). These shared meanings influence how parents make sense of the process of parent-child communication about sex. Mothers tend to be responsible for more communication about sex in many families, perhaps due to the social expectation of women as responsible for maintaining relationships (Heisler, 2005; Evans, et al.,

2020; Flores & Barroso, 2017). This expectation for mothers to maintain relationships gives parent-child communication about sex a new meaning for mothers: one that includes relationship quality. This meaning may not be shared with fathers, due to differing socialization processes for men and women. In one study, fathers reported feeling uncomfortable communicating with their daughters about sex and sexuality, often remarking that the communication felt incestual (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2001). Clearly, the meaning attributed to father-daughter communication about sex for the participants in this study was an inappropriate or taboo one. Due to differing meanings attributed to parent-child communication about sex, communication initiated by mothers and fathers tends to include different information (Ragsdale, et al., 2014), and mothers and fathers may disagree about how to best communicate with their children about sex and sexuality.

The timing and content of parent-child communication about sex may also differ based on the child's gender. In one study involving parents and adolescents from 53 Black families in Pennsylvania (Akers, et al., 2010), both mothers and fathers report providing information and/or access to condoms to sons. Only a small number of parents, all mothers, report providing information to daughters about contraception. Fathers and sons discussed condoms, but not other birth control methods. Daughters reported they rarely experienced direct discussions with their parents about sex or contraception (Akers, et al., 2010). As children, girls tend to receive discouraging messages about sexual expression from their parents (usually mothers) and from media sources (Grange, Brubaker, & Corneille, 2011). These messages typically involve an encouragement of abstinence and in some cases a push towards maintaining traditional, monogamous relationships (Trinh, Ward, Fay, Thomas, & Levin, 2014; Akers, et al., 2010). Parents discuss sex-positive topics with their children infrequently, and when they do it is more

likely to be with their sons, reinforcing the idea that sexual behavior is more acceptable for men than women (Evans, et al., 2020). The discrepancies in communication with girls and boys indicate differing shared meanings of this communication for parents.

### ***Race and Ethnicity***

Parents teach their children the meaning of their racial identity through the racial socialization process (Caldwell, Rafferty, Reischl, De Loney, & Brooks, 2010), which may encompass sexual discussions due to historical stereotypes about race and sexuality and findings related to sexual health across adolescents with different racial backgrounds. Parents ascribe meaning to sex or sex-related topics using not only their own experiences, but also the knowledge of racial stereotypes and labels (Caldwell, et al., 2010). In the United States, Black men and women have been seen as hyper-sexualized (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013), which could contribute to how parents socialize their children about sexuality. Racial socialization may be linked to sexual communication, as parents who actively engage their children in conversations about race may be more likely to engage children in conversations about sexuality, thereby building protective factors for children (Burns & Caldwell, 2015). Alternatively, lack of communication about sex and sexuality could indicate a shared racial or ethnic meaning about such communication. In one study, Asian American young adults reported few instances of family communication about sex, perhaps indicating a cultural taboo prohibiting sexual communication (Trinh, et al., 2014).

Rates of STIs tend to be higher for Black and Hispanic women than for White women, so parents of Black and Hispanic children may be especially aware of the importance of parent-child communication about sex (Vanderberg, et al., 2016). This shared experience could influence the way Black and Hispanic parents communicate with their children about sex, as well

as the messages communicated to children during this communication. Racial socialization occurs in tandem with other types of socialization. The gendered racial socialization process helps young people make sense of their identities within the context of their racial, ethnic, and gender identities through communication with their families (Brown, Blackmon, Rosnick, Griffin-Fennell, & White-Johnson, 2017).

### ***Religion***

Religious beliefs impact parents' meaning making process by ascribing values to sex and sex-related topics (Manning, 2017). Though religious teachings and their influences vary across denominations and religions, parents who attend religious services more frequently may discuss potential negative outcomes of sex with their children less than parents who attend religious services infrequently or not at all (Swain, Ackerman, & Ackerman, 2006; Regnerus, 2005). Parents who attend religious services frequently also exhibit greater discomfort discussing sex and sexuality with their children and tended to talk to their children less about birth control (Regnerus, 2005).

Religious parents tend to focus on morality rather than information about contraception (Regnerus, 2005). Parents may replicate religious messages in their communication with their children about sex due to their desire to adhere to their religious and/or moral code (Coakley, Randolph, Coard, & Ritchwood, 2019). Parents may also reach out to other members of religious organizations for support when considering how to communicate with their children about sex (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). When seeking advice and guidance from others within the religious community, parents will likely consider how their actions will be perceived by other parents with similar beliefs. In accordance with symbolic interactionism, parents will act

according to how they believe others will interpret their actions (Christopher, 2001), which may impact how they choose to communicate with their children about sex.

### ***Family of Origin***

Parents' experiences of family communication about sex in their families of origin influences how they perceive this communication and their decision-making process when they communicate with their own children. Participants in studies exploring parents' experiences communicating with their own parents about sex indicate parents found the education they received in their own families to be ineffective (El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009) and stated they intended to talk with their children about sex and sex-related topics earlier than their parents had chosen to communicate with them (Kenny & Wurtele, 2013). History of family communication about sex in the family of origin was associated with a higher likelihood that fathers would communicate with their own children about sex (Wright, 2009). Conversely, parents who did not discuss sex and sexuality with their own parents may feel unprepared to have these conversations with their own children (Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Goldberg, Casillas, & Bouris, 2006; Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010), and may blame their own parents' lack of communication for their discomfort (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Parents may see parent-child communication about sex as an opportunity to correct the perceived mistakes their parents made when communicating about sex and to improve upon the process with their own children (Flores & Barroso, 2017).

### **Shared Meaning Making**

Sexual communication involves creating shared meanings for sexual symbols within the family (Warren, 1995). Throughout their lives, parents have been interacting with others, developing their sense of self and their roles, and engaging in the socialization process (Blumer,

1969). When they enter a relationship with one another, parents each convey meanings developed through their own personal experiences and interactions. Parents construct their own realities through the process of interacting with their values and beliefs over time (Manning, 2017), and then must negotiate shared meanings for family communication about sex to make decisions regarding their children. This is done through interaction and communication. Parents' verbal and nonverbal communication about sex can make clear the family rules around these discussions and contribute to parents' continuous identity development (Christopher, 2001).

Studying coparent communication is vital due to its ability to influence other family members (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006), as the way parents interact with each other is likely mirrored in their interactions with children (Margolin et al., 2001). Some parents seem to have some discomfort discussing sex-related topics with one another (Miller-Ott & Linder, 2013), and we may assume that this discomfort is transferred to parent-child discussions about sex. One study supports this idea and claims that parents with higher levels of anxiety about discussing sex-related topics with one another tended to discuss fewer sex-related topics with their children and tended to have lower self-efficacy regarding this type of communication (Pop & Rusu, 2019). Any anxiety or discomfort parents may feel about communicating with each other or with their children about sex and sexuality likely reflects the nature of their roles related to this communication and the meaning it has in their family. These meanings in turn affect how parents make decisions about communicating about sex with their children.

### **Parental Decision-Making**

Because parents often rely on personal experience to make decisions for their children (Mergler & Walker, 2017), the meanings parents have created for communication about sex through interactions with each other and with others in society will impact how they decide to

communicate about sex with their children. Parents make decisions for their children over time, and as the result of repeated interactions (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl, & Meier, 2001) resulting in a continuous decision-making process.

Queen, Berg, and Lowrance (2015) asserted that dyadic decision-making depends on the quality of interactions and involves four stages: decision identification, information search, decision, and post-decision processes. Using a symbolic interactionist approach, the “information search” stage of this decision-making process would include an inventory of the meanings each parent ascribes to family communication about sex and the shared meanings they have created through interaction. Parents use their personal experiences and interactions to create meaning related to family communication about sex, which then inform their decision-making.

As they engage in a dyadic decision-making process, couples often gather information related to decision-making together (Maliski, Heilemann, & McCorkel, 2002). This information is gathered from a variety of sources including parents’ experiences in their families of origin, parents’ values and religious beliefs, and parents’ shared meanings related to communication about sex. Decisions can be made together, or one partner could drive the decision-making process. Queen, et al. (2015) propose that in many decisions, the partner with less knowledge or expertise may defer to the partner with more related experience. The partner who is most influential when making decisions tends to depend on the social roles of each partner (Eagly & Wood, 2012). As mothers tend to communicate about sex more often than fathers (Heisler, 2005), this indicates that mothers’ role of educator within the family may make them more influential in making decisions related to communication with children about sex. If one partner drives the decision, both parents can still affect the decision-making process, because even if

partners do not discuss decisions explicitly, they will often take into account the other's known or inferred preferences even when making decisions individually (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012).

To make decisions together, couples must be able to navigate emotions or issues they may experience during the decision-making process (Berg, Wiebe, & Butner, 2010). Parents' perception that they lack knowledge and their discomfort discussing sex and sex-related topics (Eisenberg, Bearinger, Sieving, Swain, & Resnick, 2004) could influence how they make decisions regarding communicating with their children about sex. Additionally, negative experiences or beliefs related to communication about sex may hinder parents' ability to communicate effectively with their children. A couple's relationship quality may also impact their ability to make decisions together (Queen, Berg, & Lowrance, 2015). Parents must be able to successfully navigate conversations about sex, a potentially difficult topic to discuss, to make decisions regarding their plans for communicating with these topics with their children.

To understand how parents make decisions about how to communicate with their children about sex, this dissertation explores how parents make meaning of this communication both individually and as a couple. This process will incorporate parents' interactions and experiences with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and family of origin, and will illuminate parents' dyadic decision-making process around communicating with children about sex and sex-related topics.

### **Methods**

A grounded theory design was used to explore how parents decide to communicate with their children about sex and what roles they fill during this communication process. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory has been used alongside dissenting epistemological views; positivist and postpositivist researchers have applied grounded theory concepts and methods. Upon its development, grounded theory challenges the assumption that

qualitative research can only provide descriptive information about a topic. Constructivist grounded theory assumes multiple realities and allows for flexibility in methods, as the research design evolves throughout data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Constructivist grounded theory, based in symbolic interactionism, aims to explain how a process occurs (Charmaz, 2014), and can be used to explore how partners make decisions about communication with their children. A constructivist framework will allow findings from this project to be interpreted as one of many possible realities and the resulting theory to be understood as situationally appropriate rather than objectively true. In accordance with grounded theory methodology, a theory was constructed based on the data collected rather than from a previously decided hypothesis (Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist grounded theory design is appropriate for exploring how parents make decisions about communicating with their children about sex because the research questions address a process, and the project's findings aim to explain how this process occurs (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Data were collected in the form of dyadic interviews, observations, and a document detailing parents' plan for communicating with their children. These three methods of data collection provided information on how couples make meaning of family communication about sex and how this meaning impacts their decision-making. Throughout data collection, participants were asked to consider how they decided independently and with their partners to discuss sex with their children.

### **Participants**

Eight couples participated in this study. Table 1 includes pseudonyms of each partner, their ages, and their children's ages and sexes. Each couple consisted of one male-identifying partner and one female-identifying partner. Because gender may influence how parents make

decisions about communicating with their children about sex (Ragsdale, et al., 2014; Akers, et al., 2010), participants with different genders allowed for discussion about the way parents will address their own differing genders and the gender of their children during conversations about sex and sexuality. Participants had between one and four children, ranging in age from 5 months to 11 years old. All participants had at least one child in fourth grade or younger. In the county where data were primarily collected, discussions about puberty, pregnancy, and reproductive anatomy occur in public schools beginning in fourth grade (Board of Education, 2018). Parents of children who had not yet had these discussions in school were recruited because school-based sex education may prompt sex- and sexuality-related discussions at home and parents of younger children are likely to be actively considering how to navigate these discussions while their children are young (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). Dyadic interviews provided information about partner decision-making and roles and were able to provide more information about the family context than individual interviews by inviting collaboration and conversation between partners. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 41, with a median age of 36. All participants were biological parents living together with their partners and children. The exclusion of recent step or adoptive parents aimed to make the sample more homogenous to develop a cohesive theory about how parents make decisions regarding communicating with their children about sex and to avoid additional relational factors that may complicate parent-child communication. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, working with a homogenous sample was warranted and uncovered valuable insights into this process that can guide further research with a more diverse sample.

Participants were recruited in local online spaces including parenting groups on social media, local informational social media groups, and neighborhood social media groups. Flyers

were shared with these groups and were posted in coffee shops, doctor's offices, and other local community spaces. The recruitment materials used can be found in Appendices A and B.

Theoretical sampling was used to recruit participants who will provide data that contribute to the emerging theory. After initial data collection based on the general research question, data was analyzed, and additional participants were recruited based on their possible contributions to the theory. Initial recruitment took place in Facebook groups for local mothers, and after initial data collection, additional couples were recruited from more general local online communities aimed at all local community members such as NextDoor and Facebook groups intended to share information about local activities. Theoretical saturation has been reached, meaning the theory is well developed and the data is no longer informing unique associations between categories (Charmaz, 2014).

### **Procedures**

The Virginia Tech Institutional Review board approved this study's procedures (IRB# 20-816). Prior to scheduling an interview, both members of each couple reviewed an informational document detailing the study's procedures and completed an online survey of demographic information. Each member of every couple consented to participate via this web survey. Once participants completed the online survey and consent documents, they were contacted via email to schedule an interview and observation. Participants were given a verbal explanation of the consent form before starting the interview and observation, including the risks and benefits of participation. All data were collected in the same meeting, held via Zoom to minimize risks associated with COVID-19, per IRB guidelines.

Participants received a \$15 gift card to Target as compensation for their participation. This incentive was not dependent upon the completion of the survey, and each participant received their own gift card to ensure each partner was compensated equally.

### **Measures**

Demographic information was collected from participants during the web survey. This information included participants' ages, sexual orientations, the age of their child or children, their religious affiliation, their educational history, their combined annual income, and each partner's occupation. Each partner responded to the same demographic questions online. The questions asked in this short online survey can be found in Appendix D.

### ***Observation***

Couples were asked to collaborate to create a plan for talking to their child or children about sex and sexuality. They were asked to consider how this communication will occur, when it will occur, and who will be involved in discussions about sex and sexuality. They did not receive further instruction or prompts, except clarification of the original instruction. These observations were video and audio recorded and timed, and participants were given 10 minutes to develop their plans. Transcripts of the observations and recordings are stored on a password-protected computer.

Observations of parents completing this task allowed for parents to have recent experience with decision making about how they will communicate with their children about sex. This method of data collection provided a more thorough glimpse into participants' dyadic decision-making processes than merely asking participants how they would make these decisions (Berthelsen, Lindhardt, & Frederiksen, 2017). Many parents never create a specific plan addressing how they will communicate with their children about sex and sexuality (Eisenberg, et

al, 2004; Richardson, 2004) and therefore, the interaction observed may not be one that would occur under other circumstances. As a result, the findings of this study may not truly reflect the meaning and decision-making processes that occur in most households. To offset the artificial nature of the task, the specific parameters of the plan were decided by the participants.

Participants included any information they considered important and were not prompted to any additional topics or considerations. The openness of the task allowed participants to exercise control over what they felt comfortable discussing and what they considered to be important for their families and increased the validity of the observation as a method of data collection. The interview questions related to the process of developing the plan also allowed parents to discuss how they may adjust the plan given more time and a more organic setting, which shed light on how parents may develop these plans on their own. Though the task of developing a plan for communicating with their children about sex is somewhat artificial due to the circumstances under which it was developed, the observation and subsequent interview questions prompted actual interactions between the participants and provided valuable data about the process each couple may engage in when developing such plans.

### *Plans*

The plan participants created during their observation was collected and analyzed to determine the aspects of parent-child communication about sex that participants found important. Participants were asked to record the plans they created during the observation portion of data collection. Participants' written plans were used to gain a greater understanding of the aspects of sexual communication that parents consider to be important and helped hone themes and categories as they emerge (Charmaz, 2014).

The plans created by participants were analyzed as part of a document review. Analyzing these documents allowed examination of which topics parents included in their plans, the timing of the conversations parents planned to have with their children, who is responsible for communicating with which children, and any other factors parents chose to include. As with many methods of data collection, the data included in participants' plans may be biased (Brito, 2017). Participants may have included what they believe they should be discussing with their children rather than what they actually plan to discuss. I attempted to minimize this bias by remaining as neutral as possible (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and encouraging participants to include any information they feel comfortable with. I also expressed to participants that there are no "right" answers when it comes to creating plans for their own families. I also used a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014) by expressing to participants that multiple perspectives and realities are constructed through interactions and experiences and that only they can know how to have effective conversations with their children about sex and sexuality.

### *Interviews*

During semi-structured dyadic interviews, participants were asked to provide reactions to the process of making decisions regarding communicating with their children about sex, including what aspects of the plan might need further discussion, how they will address unresolved issues, what aspects of the plan they had already discussed, and how they plan to continue this conversation and implement their plan. Participants also answered interview questions related to their understanding of parent-child communication about sex. The use of dyadic semi-structured interviews provided a more in-depth understanding of family processes and allowed data to be gathered from both partners simultaneously. Responsive interviewing

(Rubin & Rubin, 2012) was used to build and maintain a trusting relationship with participants, which resulted in more detailed data. The interview schedule explores how couples negotiate the process and content of parent-child communication about sex. This interview schedule is included in Appendix E. In these semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions were asked to clarify or build upon participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Consistent with grounded theory methods, this interview schedule evolved as data collection and analysis continued to identify gaps (Charmaz, 2014). All questions were asked to the couple, without specifying which partner should answer. If only one partner responded, the other was asked if they would like to add to the response. Total time for interviews and observations ranged from one to two hours. Interviews were recorded through Zoom. All recordings and notes are stored on a password protected computer.

Dyadic interviews have been utilized in many fields to aid researchers in collecting rich and meaningful data about couple interactions (Manning & Kunkel, 2015). This method of data collection allows observation of interactions rather than relying on one partner to describe typical interactions between partners. Dyadic interviewing also allows each partner to share their perspective on each of the questions asked and to explore the similarities and differences in each partner's perspective (Manning & Kunkel, 2015). For this study, dyadic interviews allowed partners to collaborate on decision making about parent-child communication about sex rather than merely discussing this hypothetically. Partners were able to describe experiences and interact with each other to develop shared understanding of parent-child communication about sex that they will use to inform current and future decisions about communicating with their children. Using dyadic interviews allowed for participants to begin making decisions with their

partners throughout data collection and provided data more closely resembling what this process may look like moving forward.

### **Analysis**

In line with constructivist grounded theory, all interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed immediately, rather than completing all data collection before beginning analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Transcripts were coded using MAXQDA 12.0 software housed on a password-protected computer. To that end, line-by-line, focused, and theoretical coding were used to analyze all data collected from the observations, interviews, and plans, and the constant comparative method was employed to explore discrepancies and patterns among the data. Each stage of coding is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Initial coding began with line-by-line coding to ensure codes were obtained from the data. During this process, transcriptions of interviews and observations were read several times alongside the written plans and each line of text was analyzed and assigned a code based on the emergent themes. These in-vivo codes included language directly from the transcripts to maintain consistency with the data, such as “preserving innocence” and “keeping kids safe” as goals for communication about sex and parents’ desire for these conversations to be “open and honest.”

Next, focused coding was used to identify the most common codes obtained during line-by-line coding and to categorize larger segments of data. This process helped to strengthen the initial codes created through line-by-line coding and evaluated these codes on their ability to explain the data. During this stage of data analysis, initial codes were grouped into larger themes to better describe how the data addresses the research questions. Initially seven main themes were identified through this process: defining sex, learning from experience, preserving

innocence, keeping kids safe, instilling values, fostering relationships, and allowing kids to direct conversations. Upon further examination, the category of preserving innocence was combined with keeping kids safe, as parents were mainly describing wanting to maintain their children's innocence to protect them from discomfort or challenging situations. During this process, patterns in the data began to emerge that contributed to the developing theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical coding revealed relationships among codes and illustrated the complexities in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout the theoretical coding process, codes were compared to add context to the emerging theory. The codes were interpreted and synthesized to create a theoretical understanding of how parents negotiate the process and content of communication with their children about sex (Charmaz, 2014). During this stage of data analysis, the codes of keeping kids safe and learning from experience were discovered to impact both the way participants understood parent-child communication about sex and how they made decisions about communicating with their own children. These codes were each separated into two distinct categories. Keeping kids safe remained a major theme to explain how parents understood the purpose of parent-child communication about sex, and maintaining safety was added as a theme to describe how parents decide which topics to bring up with their children even without being prompted. Similarly, learning from experience continued to explain how parents understood the importance of communicating openly with their children about sex, and the theme of learning from my parents was added to explain how participants thought about the timing and specific process of communicating with their children about sex.

In accordance with grounded theory methodology, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to compare data during the analysis process. Data and codes were compared to previously analyzed data and codes, as well as codes emerging across types of

data to determine what information was still needed to reach saturation. The identification of missing data and codes informed theoretical sampling. Through this process, the theory emerging from the data was compared to the data itself to ensure the analysis was consistent with the actual data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Memo writing was used throughout data collection and analysis to assist in the coding and theory development process. This process involves noting ideas, associations, and connections in the data throughout data collection and analysis. Field notes taken at the time of interviews and observations were incorporated into these memos. New ideas regarding the data and the emerging categories also developed during this process. Throughout data collection and analysis, field notes were used to revisit topics that came up during the observations. For example, some participants indicated during the observations that they would not want to bring up any topics without their children first asking a question and then later shared they would find it important to talk to their children about consent. Noting this discrepancy allowed for further discussion around how parents plan to continue the development of their plans as their children age.

Memos also contributed to the data analysis process by identifying patterns in the data and ensuring the emerging theory is grounded in the data rather than the data being made to fit into an existing theory (Charmaz, 2014). Keeping memos throughout data analysis allowed for the distinction between understanding parent-child communication about sex as a way to keep kids safe and structuring this conversation in a way that will maintain their safety. These categories, while closely intertwined, represent different aspects of decision making. Memos written throughout data analysis helped to make this distinction.

The understanding gained through data analysis is not meant to be an objective explanation of this process, but it contributes to the understanding of the context surrounding parent-child communication about sex (Charmaz, 2014). The resulting theory, grounded in the data, helps researchers understand how parents make decisions about the sexual communication process and negotiate their roles regarding communication about sex with their children.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of this study's findings was ensured through several methods. Memo writing and an audit trail helped to ensure trustworthiness by serving as a record of all procedures related to data collection and analysis. Memos were sustained throughout data collection and analysis and included the ideas related to the data (Charmaz, 2014). The audit trail is a record of decisions made related to the study and their justifications (Guba, 1981). Both documents are stored on a password-protected computer. Using these strategies helps to confirm that the categories and resulting theoretical explanations that emerge from the data are truly grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Methodological and data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used by utilizing multiple types of data collection and data: observations, document review, and interviews. Three different types of data collection help to add depth to this study's findings and ensure trustworthiness of the data by confirming the emerging themes and findings. Because findings from the observations, parent-created plans, and interviews are consistent, the analysis can be considered trustworthy.

The methods of coding used also ensure rigor and trustworthiness by ensuring the categories used during the coding process are truly grounded in the data. For example, line-by-line coding using action terms necessitates descriptive codes and leaves little room for

interpretation. This process, combined with the constant comparative method, allowed for the comparison of categories and the emerging theory to the original data (Charmaz, 2014). This ensures the resulting theory truly emerged from the data and is not based on assumptions.

Peer debriefing (Guba, 1981) was used throughout the data collection and analysis process to gain feedback on emerging categories from my chair and committee members. This feedback was recorded in memos and resulting decisions became part of the audit trail. The peer debriefing process assisted with reflexivity and allowed a scholar knowledgeable in grounded theory to question and critique the formation of the emerging categories (Guba, 1981).

I acknowledge the impact my own experiences and biases have on the data collection and analysis process and engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process to acknowledge and account for this bias. My own experience as a woman and the interactions I have had related to family communication about sex has undoubtedly impacted my interpretation of the data. While reading and analyzing transcripts, I encountered several interactions that I initially coded as “hesitating to communicate” but upon further reading of the data and reflection was able to realize that parents in these instances were not hesitating, but instead making an intentional choice to wait for their children to ask questions. I was able to return to coding to ensure I was using the participants’ own language and not making assumptions. This reflexive process occurred at each stage of analysis through systematic coding procedures, memoing, and peer debriefing to my biases are not impeding the development of a theory grounded in data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Findings**

### **Making Plans**

Participants spent ten minutes of the interview discussing with each other what their plans for talking with their children about sex should be. Parents largely agreed with their partners about how these conversations should take place; there was little disagreement during the observations. While developing plans, parents reflected on past experiences, both with their children and in their own families of origin. Parents then connected with their own values of honesty and openness and spoke about wanting any communication with their children to be comfortable and straightforward.

While discussing their plans for talking with their children about sex, participating parents with older children reflected on conversations they have already had or situations that have prompted questions for their children in the past. Those who did not reflect on past conversations had children under three years old. Parents discussed and reflected on how those conversations went and how they began. All the parents who discussed past conversations shared they were started by children asking a question. They then continued the conversation by stating they would want to continue discussions as they are brought up by children.

While making plans, only one couple decided to schedule a conversation with their child. Other couples elected to wait until their children asked a prompting question or started displaying interest in talking about sex or sexuality. All couples included some aspect of child direction in their plans, even the couple who scheduled a time to talk with their child. Plans developed largely depended on child prompting with questions or cues that they wanted information. All parents discussed some topics that would be important for them. Parents explored the topics of safe sex, relationships, anatomy, and pregnancy, but did not make concrete plans about how to discuss these topics. Instead, they discussed being open and honest with their children when topics arose. This suggests that participating parents did not feel as though their

parent-child communication about sex was best carried out by planning a structured conversation. During the observation period, parents explained how they wanted to prevent negative experiences for their children by talking to them about important topics to keep them safe. They discussed how they hoped their children would feel during and after the conversations and focused more on the relational aspects of parent-child communication about sex. It was important to all participating parents that their children felt comfortable talking to them and that they had the type of trusting relationship in which their children would come to them with questions. Parents explained that in order for children to feel comfortable they hoped their children would come to them with topics they want to discuss or questions they have. Major themes from each method of data collection are listed in Figure 1. Faye also described the importance of individualizing plans for each child rather than developing one plan: “I feel like it’s an individual basis because each kid has a different comprehension of things a different maturity so I definitely feel like it would be a kid to kid. Not every approach would be the same for each.”

### *The Plans*

When asked to record their plans for discussing sex with their children, most parents elected to write minimal notes about specific topics or timing. Instead, parents chose to keep their plans indefinite and open for flexibility. Faye described her rationale for keeping the plan as open as possible:

I don't feel like it's fair to put an age on it, to say like, well, this is when we're gonna have a sex talk because... which I think a lot of parents do that, like well when they're 14 that's when we'll talk about it, you know but I feel like it's more just individually based.

Delia echoed this sentiment, sharing “we're not going to predetermine” when to talk with her children and what to discuss.

Parents’ hesitance to record specific plans could be indicative of their viewing parent-child communication about sex as an unpredictable process driven by their children, rather than one or a series of conversations that can be planned. Participating parents shared they were preparing to talk to their children about sex by fostering an open relationship so that their children would feel comfortable talking to them when questions arise. Openness and honesty were major themes throughout the plans that were developed. While parents were discussing their plans, they demonstrated that preparing to communicate with their children about sex depends more on the parent-child relationship in general than any specific knowledge or preparation related to sex or sexuality.

### **Understanding Parent-Child Communication about Sex**

Parents used their own experiences and the experiences of others they knew to conceptualize the process of parent-child communication about sex. Largely, parents considered the negative past experiences of themselves and others and were acutely aware of the risks of not speaking with their children about sex openly. Participating parents experienced learning little information from their parents about sex and feeling uninformed and uncomfortable discussing the topic, which led to some negative experiences. Some parents also considered how their gender, religion, race, ethnicity, and geographic location influenced how they think about parent-child communication about sex by exploring their own experiences with sex as they relate to these factors. Through recalling these experiences, they reflected on the importance of parent-child communication about sex and discussed this communication as an opportunity to make things better for their children. Parents who participated in this study understood this process as

one in which they could inform their children about sexual activity and relationships for a variety of purposes. Parents largely viewed communication with their children about sex as an important opportunity and hoped to use the process to prevent negative experiences for their children, to keep their children safe through information and open conversation, and to instill values in their children that parents considered to be important.

### *Defining Sex*

I asked participants to explore what comes to mind about parent-child communication about sex to grasp how they conceptualized this question and thought about this process. When asked how they defined sex in the context of parent-child communication, at least one member of each couple referenced intercourse. Eugene described “I mean, the actual intercourse is sex to me everything else is not.”

Throughout the interviews, parents did acknowledge that there were other ways to define sex and that it may include more than intercourse. Delia stated “Yeah, I agree, not just like intercourse like it's, there's so much more than that.” Her partner added that “romanticism” plays a role as well. Jordan summarized by saying,

I mean maybe this is just social conditioning but when I hear sex I just think about sexual intercourse that's the immediate thing that comes into mind, but I know that there's so much more that goes to that. So it does tie into biological things, it ties into understanding, male and female bodies. And of course, as part of sexual intercourse it deals with how they interact with each other, kind of like what she said. Yeah, and so understanding relationships too.

Parents recognized some non-physical aspects of sex, but overall defined sex in this context using some sort of reference to sexual contact with a partner. When asked about what

communication about sex would look like in their families, all parents referenced conversations about sexual activity and relationships.

### *Learning from Experience*

Parents viewed parent-child communication about sex as an opportunity for them to prevent negative experiences for their children. Some parents connected this process directly to their own experiences and spoke about how they would want their children to have different ones. Annie shared, “I think that’s why I feel so strongly with the kids and that's why it's easier for me to talk to the kids because I don't want them to have the same issues that I have.” Delia spoke about a relationship she had and how she would want her daughter to have different experiences, “things are going to happen in high school, you're going to have crushes you're going to have heartbreaks but, you know, I don't want it to feel so serious the way it did with me.” The desire to prevent negative experiences was also brought up during observations, with some parents sharing with their partner how they believed negative experiences they had could have been prevented with more open communication.

Parents also discussed a desire to prevent negative experiences that they did not experience themselves but had witnessed. Ben shared that this sentiment also applies to stories heard from others, “we've known or had friends or people that have maybe been, you know that that's been a part of their life has caused a lot of pain or anguish.” Delia discussed a friend who was “sheltered most of their life,” and her desire to help her children avoid behaviors her friend engaged in because “it just built up so much curiosity in her and then she kind of just went a little crazy in college, and I don't want to do that.” Elaine shared that she has observed some adults who may now wish they had different experiences when they were younger and spoke about wanting to prevent that for her own children; “I think a lot of like adults are like undoing places in their

sexual lives where they have been disempowered right so I would like my children to have a different experience and relationship with it than that.”

Parents viewed this process as one that could prevent future negative experiences, but also counteract any negative exposures through the media or peers. Albert noted that a video game he played as a child now includes more explicit images including, “the women were all depicted like big breasts, super skinny and like cleavage is just like hanging out. And I was like, oh, this is definitely not the version that I played.” Elain shared her experience of being exposed to pornography and explicit material and noted “it probably shaped a little bit of the way that I understood the dynamic between male and female partners” and shared “I would like to make sure I’m talking about those things so that doesn’t happen for them too.” These parents recognized the potential for exposure to explicit material and sexual topics in the media and used that knowledge as motivation to have honest conversations with their children. In both observations and interviews, parents expressed that they considered these conversations to be vital for their children’s well-being and development. When each couple engaged in observation, there was no discussion about whether they should be having these conversations; parents instead discussed how they would do so. This was echoed in interview data, with parents expressing they plan to talk with their children as often as needed.

Parents, especially mothers, commented on how some negative experiences are gender-specific and how they would want to protect their daughters. Elain shared, “growing up, there was definitely- I definitely grew up feeling as a female as a woman, that or young woman, that like so much of our worth was placed in that.” Annie explained how gender and religion intersect when it comes to understanding sex,

I guess for me it's different because as a girl and Christian and I feel like in other religions, your value is in your sex, and I got devalued because of it. And I never want my kids to think that their value is wrapped up in whether they're a virgin or not.

Participating mothers with daughters were acutely aware of how their daughters' gender would impact how they learned about sex and were determined to prevent negative gender-based experiences as much as they could.

### ***Keeping Kids Safe***

All parents interviewed recognized safety as a major goal of parent-child communication about sex in an effort to keep their children safe in the future. They took responsibility for teaching their children to remain both emotionally and physically safe when they choose to engage in sexual activity or when they may be exposed to sexual content or experiences. During the observation portion of data collection, the few topics parents proposed talking to their children about were largely related to potential safety concerns like consent, boundaries, and exposure to explicit material. Annie summarized the importance of communication for the purpose of safety: "It's more of like a priority because I know of what can happen when you're ... naive. And so, I guess to me with them being so young, it's just about safety."

While participants repeatedly commented on the importance of safety and how it would be a major goal of their communication with their children, some parents questioned how to help children understand the importance of safety while still maintaining a sex-positive dialogue.

Elain described her struggle to talk to her children about safety while keeping them optimistic,

You know it's a delicate conversation because you don't want to put the thought in their mind and have them like looking at people thinking they're creepy or worrying actively

about something like that but it's important, obviously that they feel really prepared to handle a situation like that too, unfortunately.

Faye agreed that there is a balance between warning children of potential dangers and helping them understand sex as natural, sharing “Yes, sex is natural and your body changing is natural. But there's also things that can be dangerous about it, too, you know.” Ultimately, all participating parents agreed that safety, both physical and emotional, was their desired outcome for communication with their children about sex.

### *Instilling Values*

Parents viewed parent-child communication about sex as an opportunity to instill values in their children, though they acknowledged that their children would make their own decisions related to sexual activity. Eugene explored how he hopes he can instill enough of his knowledge in his children so they can make good decisions later in life, “Now, you're free to do whatever you want, but I don't think you should go on like, go on and learn the best ways on your own, without having heard at least this piece of wisdom.” Betty shared how she hopes her children will understand sex, “we're a religious family. And so like sex in general is something that's like, you should make it like something that's sacred because you're creating, you know, life, so for me it's like something that's special.” Her husband Ben later described how their children will interpret their values as they age,

As she gets older and a teenager, you know, it becomes a lot more- I think that's where the more difficult sex talks where our views of sex are might start diverging from our kids' views of sex are. And so, like, I would love to like write out my kids' lives ... but I think that's very unrealistic and not even a fair standard to hold for them.

Like Ben, most parents shared that they would understand if their children had different values or held different beliefs than they did and that they would want their children to feel comfortable asking questions or bringing up any topics. Annie summarized her goal of communicating openness to her children,

I want them to feel comfortable with who they are, when they get to that stage, whether it was a boy or girl that it's not a big deal to them, even though we're Christian, (husband) and I have our own viewpoints religiously and they know those, but I want them to feel comfortable coming into us if it's different than what we think.

She later specified how she would make sure her children felt comfortable asking questions,

...and like (husband) I have our own opinions on stuff like that. But (husband) and I will keep those opinions between us and as they get older, and they can understand because life is all gray, it's not black, white, as they can understand that- because I think kids right now things have to be black and white for them sometimes until their mind can understand more complex issues.

Parents shared they felt that by instilling important values in their children through parent-child communication about sex, they could counteract some difficulties their children may encounter. Delia shared about wanting to help her daughter build confidence and prevent her from being pressured into sexual activity; "I know that men have issues too but as a woman like she's going to be going through so much, and again instilling values and like confidence in her early, I hope will help kind of carry her through those hard years, hard teenage years that she's going to go through."

### **Making Decisions**

When it came to making decisions about how to talk to their children about sex, participating parents were determined to use the opportunity they had to do better than their own parents to prevent some of the negative experiences they either had themselves or knew that others had. Participating parents aimed to learn from and improve on what they had seen in their own families. When considering how they would do this, parents shared they would take a different approach than they had seen in their families of origin: they would foster close and trusting relationships with their children and allow their children to direct conversations about sex rather than developing a strict plan. Parents shared they would insist on covering certain topics related to safety but would otherwise allow their children to determine what is discussed by waiting for them to ask a question or prompt conversations. This openness was consistent across the observation and interview portions of data collection and was reflected in the plans parents completed. When making plans with their partners during the observation portion of data collection, parents presented vague ideas about what topics they might cover and a general timeline, but most parents did not make concrete decisions about these conversations. The plans recorded during this part of data collection were even more vague, indicating that parents truly did want to allow their children to drive these conversations rather than predetermine what was discussed ahead of time. During the interviews that immediately followed, parents explained their rationale that they wanted these conversations to be individualized and relevant to what their children are actually curious about.

### ***Learning From My Parents***

Parents reported wanting to talk with their children about sex more effectively than their parents talked to them. Overall, participating parents felt they did not get sufficient education about sex and sexuality from their parents and most parents felt uncomfortable discussing these

topics with their own parents. Johanna was the only parent who reported wanting to communicate with her child similarly to how her parents communicated with her and shared she felt she had a good experience because, “The conversation was open and free and it wasn't something to be ashamed about.” The other parents recalled noticing their parents’ discomfort or inexperience talking about sex and noted that they did not want that experience for their own children. Eugene shared,

Well, I remember my dad, trying to talk to me about these things at a very early age. However, he did it in a way that didn't make much sense. There were like, technical terms, you know like, you know, and I think he was just trying to like do the right way, do the right thing, but he didn't know how to do a better job.

Delia stated,

I've always felt like my mom especially would not tell me things ... not necessarily with sex but just, it's like a pet peeve I have now I want to be straightforward. Even if it makes her feel a little awkward, or whatever.

She also acknowledged how common her situation may be,

Yeah, and it's like a tale as old as time right like you want to do things different than your parents did. But then catch yourself doing things like your parents did. like it's a constant battle where I'm like, oh gosh I just sound like my mother, or I did this and I don't want necessarily to do everything the way she did it.

Ben reflected on communication in his family of origin and shared, “I love my parents and even though I have some critiques of how they may have taught me about sex like it is what it is.” He shared he wanted to move forward and learn from the past: “I'm gonna make it better than that.”

Albert reflected on why he believed his parents struggled to talk to him about sex, “I never felt shamed by my parents, I just don't think they had the tools and the know-how to talk.”

### *Maintaining Safety*

All parents discussed teaching their children about consent in an effort to keep them and others safe. Ben explained he would want his daughter to understand, “how important our bodies are, you know, her body is hers. Yeah, I think it also plays into like a peer pressure conversation too, a little bit, never feel pressured to someone to touch your body or vice versa.” Elaine discussed the importance of this topic to her,

Yeah, I would say for me consent is really important. So them understanding that like any kind of interest or interaction that they have that has to do with their body or sex would have to be consensual like either they would be asking for consent, or they would be giving consent and anything nonconsensual or that makes them feel uncomfortable would be an issue, so they should go tell someone. That would be like super important.

Many parents also shared they would be teaching the correct anatomical names for body parts to ensure their children know how to identify them. Betty shared, “We just want to make sure that we use the correct terminology, like a vagina is a vagina, penis is a penis and not give them nicknames and make sure that they know what makes them different.” Jordan agreed that he wanted his son to learn the correct terms for body parts and reflected on his own experience, “it’s interesting because I don't think I wasn't raised the same way. I mean, we had other names for body parts, but I mean, I knew what they were but those just weren't like names that you call out.” Parents commented that their children knowing how to describe their body parts was important both for their education and for their safety, so they would know which body parts were private and how to explain that to others.

Parents reported feeling as though it was important to discuss consent and anatomy with their children to prevent potential abuse or negative experiences. Faye commented on how her awareness of these risks has increased since having children, “There are predators out there. I didn't really know anything about that till now. I think about it all the time. I’m like man, they need to know that.” Elain agreed and reflected on the difficulty in explaining this risk to children,

You know it's a delicate conversation because you don't want to put the thought in their mind and have them like looking at people thinking they're creepy or worrying actively about something like that but it's important, obviously, that they feel really prepared to handle a situation like that too, unfortunately.

Some parents like Dan also commented on the “emotional risk and reward of being sexually active.” His partner Delia agreed, “Yeah, it’s not just like intercourse like it's, there's so much more than that. She needs to kind of be aware of that you're going to go through that she's gonna have to go through.” Eugene felt similarly, stating,

Sex is not just like the physical part it’s like an emotional thing too, so you have to also like share with them that there's, there are a lot of emotions involved, you know, and you have to be careful with that as well.

These parents recognized the need for emotional and physical safety and noted wanting to protect their children from emotional harm through open conversations.

### ***Fostering Relationships***

Participants overwhelmingly described their desire to be open with their children and wanting their children to trust them with questions. Parents explained they wanted their kids to come to them instead of others when they have questions or hear something they do not understand. Annie explained, “I hope that we have relationships with them that if their friends,

bring it up, then that's when we'll hear it instead of them keeping it to themselves.” While parents were discussing their plans for communicating with their children during the observation, at least one parent in each couple expressed their hope that their children would come to them with questions. Most couples agreed with each other that they believed their children would do so.

When exploring how they could encourage their children to come to them with questions, parents shared they would foster strong relationships with their children and take a non-judgmental approach to parenting. Elaine described, “I think also just having that non shame, so that like, if they do have a need there, they can come to us and feel like we're not going to either judge or be uncomfortable, make them feel uncomfortable.” Johanna shared how she has already started laying the groundwork for her child to come to her with questions early,

The way to control what he tells you is to keep the communication open, that you have to be honest with him, that when starting now when he does little things that it's not a huge blow up that it's like okay you've done this wrong this is the consequence for it and this is what you have to deal with right now. That will let him know he can, because he came to you in those small things, that when big things occur, you know, I'll tell my parents, I'm not going to flip out. they're not going to flip out. you know, also establishing rules as he gets older. Just safety and, you know, there's times where you might be embarrassed to say anything or you're not always going to want, he's not always going to want to talk to us.

The importance parents placed on fostering trusting and open relationships with their children explains their more flexible approach to communication about sex. Ben summarized how he believes fostering a strong relationship now will allow for open communication about sex in the future,

I think as she gets older and she becomes more her own individual we'll have to be proactive on certain aspects of it but least for the foreseeable future, I think we're both present enough in their lives and a strong enough bond with them that I think we'll be able to read when most issues come up."

Parent-child communication about sex could also work to strengthen parent-child relationships. Frank shared, "It would help the bond between you" when describing how effective and open conversations about sex could also work to maintain relationships.

### *Allowing Kids to Direct Conversations*

Parents shared they would prefer to have conversations with their children about sex after their children bring up the topic, rather than initiating those conversations themselves. Delia shared,

I don't see us, other than just kind of trying to pick up cues or just be aware, we're not really that type. We're not gonna. We're not gonna bring it up, like if we see some things or if we see her, watching something you know and feel like maybe it's time we'll say something.

Other parents echoed this sentiment and shared they would want their children to prompt conversations as they have questions or concerns.

Several parents shared their desire to keep conversations age appropriate and balance giving enough information to inform their children but not overwhelm them. Faye explained her reasoning for allowing her children to guide these conversations is related to how she believes her children will let her know when they are ready to talk about it. She shared,

If they're bringing it up or asking questions, something's out there that's getting in their head, and yeah, they're not too young. I think a lot of times I hear parents will be like,

well, they're too young for this or they're too young for that for that and I'm like if they're asking, or if they're wanting to do something, clearly they're not because you know they're informed about it somehow or another. they've heard the word something triggered them to ask about it.

Parents reported wanting to wait until they believed their children were becoming interested in sexual activity to start talking to them about sex. Eugene shared he would want to start discussing sex-related topics of safety and consent: "When we get to that point when it becomes, like when sex actually becomes, you know something like, you know, whenever that feels like imminent." Dan revealed how this desire would impact decisions about communicating with children. "I mean I would kind of wait until she there's some sort of cue that we need to talk about it, not bring it up ourselves. Keep her innocence as long as we can."

Faye described this desire to allow children to direct conversations about sex as an effort to talk about sex when the children are ready, as opposed to doing it when the parents feel ready: "I'd rather broach it while they're really comfortable talking to me about it as opposed to me avoiding it till I'm ready and be like, oh well, you're 13, now we can talk." When developing plans for talking to their children about sex, parents reiterated their desire to allow children to initiate these conversations by leaving plans open and not developing strict timelines or agendas for conversations.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore how parents work together to make meaning of parent-child communication about sex and how they use those meanings to make decisions about talking to their children about sex. Parents who participated in this study understood parent-child communication about sex through their own sexual experiences, the experiences of others, and

their communication about sex with their own parents. Parents started to understand how they would want to structure these conversations and imagined how they would want their children to feel based on their own feelings during conversations with their parents. Through their own sexual experiences and the experiences of others they knew, parents considered how to help their children avoid negative experiences and enter healthy relationships. As symbolic interactionism postulates, participants internalized meanings and used them to define their sense of self and roles within relationships (Larissa & Reitzes, 1993). They grasped the importance of communicating with their children about sex and sexuality and understood that how they viewed sex when they were children would impact their future interactions.

Parents recalled their own conversations with their parents about sex and sexuality and connected these interactions to how they defined their sexual experiences. Parents seemed to reflect on either their own negative experiences or the negative experiences of others and plan for how they may be able to prevent them for their children through communication. Parents understood communication with their children as a method for helping them develop the skills needed to keep themselves safe when they eventually enter sexual relationships.

Through reflecting on their own experiences, parents largely decided they did not want to prescribe conversations with their children. They would prefer these conversations to be prompted by their children and focused on questions their children had. This is likely in response to the conversations they had with their parents, which they described as uncomfortable and unhelpful. These parents are not alone in feeling as though they did not receive the education and communication they wanted from their parents, as this seems to be a common finding in literature on the topic (El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009; Flores & Barroso, 2017). While their disappointment in the way their parents communicated with them is not a new finding, their

response represents a shift in thinking about parent-child communication about sex. Instead of trying to make sure they cover every imaginable topic with their children, participants in this study looked outside just the topics of sex and sexuality and shared that they did not need careful planning of each conversation if their overall relationship quality was strong and if their children felt comfortable coming to them with questions. This expanded thinking may have been highlighted by the way parents engaged with each other to ascribe meaning to the term sex within the context of parent-child communication about sex.

Parents initially tended to define parent-child communication about sex in terms of sexual contact with partners, which may have contributed to their reluctance to make concrete plans, as many of the parents interviewed viewed their children as too young to make those types of decisions. This is consistent with previous literature, in which parents aim to talk to their children about sex and sex-related topics at a time they deem appropriate and are cautious about having these discussions too early (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). When asked to define sex, most parents indicated they interpreted this as sexual intercourse at first, but upon further thought discussed how sex is also related to relationships with others and a larger sense of self. This interpretation of the term sex impacted how parents considered the process and likely affected how they planned to communicate with their children. Because they worked together to define sex during the observation, they were able to develop a shared meaning for the concept of parent-child communication about sex in real time and conceptualize their plans accordingly. Parents were then able to collaborate on this meaning making in real-time during the observation and dyadic interview, demonstrating that the shared meaning-making process occurs through shared experiences (Christopher, 2001). The inclusion of ideas other than sexual contact in their

definition of sex may have allowed parents to think about communication with their children as a more in-depth process than simply an informational lecture.

Parents participating in this study understood parent-child communication about sex largely as a way to keep their children safe from physical and emotional harm. This finding echoes previous research in which parents have reported wanting their children to avoid negative consequences of sexual activity such as STIs and unplanned pregnancy (Widman, et al., 2016; Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013). Through this study's interviews, parents expanded on their concept of keeping their kids safe to include safety from more abstract types of harm such as heartbreak, manipulation, emotional abuse, and guilt about their own behaviors. These parents saw sex as impactful on their children's social and emotional development and aimed to protect them from all types of negative outcomes. Through parents' descriptions of negative perceptions of sex they once held and uncomfortable conversations with their parents, it is likely they defined themselves based on what they had learned about sex and sexuality early in life. The symbolic interactionist idea that individuals develop a sense of self through conversations and act accordingly (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) appears to ring true for these parents, as they described how some of their early relationships resulted in negative experiences that they believe could have been prevented.

When reflecting on their communication about sex with their own parents, most participants acknowledged that they would not want their children to have the experience they had in their families of origin. Some participants in this study connected the lack of sexual education in their own families to a lack of openness to talk about sex and sexuality, which led them to have uncomfortable or negative sexual experiences or to feel guilt or shame about their behaviors. Many of the female partners were first to bring up concerns about preventing

emotional harm and wanting their children to have more positive experiences than they had. This may contextualize some of the previous research indicating that mothers are more involved in communication about sex than fathers (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Evans, et al., 2020); mothers may be more aware of what is at stake when a person is not provided needed support to engage in sexual activity safely. Women are reported to experience sexual assault and harassment more often than men (Kearl, 2018), potentially increasing mothers' awareness of the risk of this type of violence. Women also report feeling guilt about sexual activity more often than men (Hackathorn & Malm, 2021), which could make it important for them to strive to prevent that same guilt for their children.

Though previous research indicates that mothers tend to take more responsibility for communicating with children about sex (Evans, et al., 2020), or are perhaps more comfortable talking to their children about sex (Flores & Barroso, 2017), most parents in this study indicated that they would share the responsibility for talking to their kids. This may indicate a shift in societal expectations, or it could highlight the unconscious nature of women's responsibility for maintaining relationships (Heisler, 2005; Evans, et al., 2020; Flores & Barroso, 2017). Because the parent-child communication discussed in this study was hypothetical, parents could have been unaware of the actual roles they may take in future conversations about sex or primed to consider it a shared responsibility given both fathers and mothers were asked to participate in this study.

When it came to making decisions about talking to their kids about sex, participating parents worked together and seemed to consider each other's opinions, even before those opinions were stated (Gorlin & Dhar, 2012). While parents who participated in this study largely reported they would approach communication together, they anticipated which topics their

partners would be comfortable or uncomfortable with and referenced one parent leading certain discussions. Consistent with Queen and colleagues (2015), participants did seem to defer to the partner with more experience on a certain topic when making decisions. This tended to occur along gender lines, with parents deciding that topics such as menstruation or ejaculation would be best tackled by a same-gendered parent.

The majority of the parents who participated in this study identified as straight, which likely impacted the topics they chose to focus on when thinking about talking to their children about sex. Parents did not consider talking to their children about sexual orientation or gender identity and did not mention wanting to talk to their children about identity development, inclusive safer sex practices, or other topics that could be beneficial for LGBTQ+ children. Previous research on parent-child communication about sex has found that parents of LGBTQ+ children often discuss heteronormative topics prior to disclosure of a child's sexual orientation and stereotypical topics following disclosure (McKay & Fontenot, 2020). These conversations often do not address all topics children would need in a comprehensive way (Flores, Docherty, Relf, McKinney, & Barroso, 2019; Bond, Mansour, Kershaw, & Flores, 2023). Parents who participated in this study were largely basing their decision making on their own experiences, which could explain why they did not consider sexual orientation. Though they reported not having all their needs met by communication with their own parents, sexual orientation was not one of the areas in which they reported it was lacking.

Discussions planned by parents in this study were theoretical and future-oriented, with parents considering their values and setting goals before making decisions about how they can achieve them. Parents conceptualized ideas about what they want for their children: safe and

healthy perspectives on sexuality and the ability to communicate openly. Parents aimed to ensure their children's safety while simultaneously striving to maintain their innocence.

Most parents reported communicating openly with their partners about sex, indicating they may also feel comfortable having conversations with their children (Pop & Rusu, 2019). Previous literature has described parents as being open, yet apprehensive about communicating with their children about sex (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). Parents who participated in this study reported being open to talking to their children about sex, though many participants had not yet initiated these conversations.

Decision-making seems to be abstract for parents of young children. They want to set the stage for having conversations about sex and sexuality by presenting themselves as open to having these conversations rather than initiating the conversations altogether. Parents hesitated to make concrete plans for what topics to discuss and when preferring to wait for children to bring up topics for discussion or external prompts. Though this seems to be a reactive approach, parents reported doing proactive work to maintain close relationships with their children so that children may come to them with questions as they arise. This approach seems to align with previous research that has emphasized the importance of overall relationship quality on the effectiveness of parent-child communication about sex (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013).

The consensus among participants was that they would want their children to prompt conversations or that they would wait until children begin asking questions. The lack of a clear plan has been interpreted in past research as apprehension (Busby, et al., 2022). At first glance, this may appear to remove responsibility for these conversations from parents and place the onus on children to broach the topics, potentially due to apprehension or discomfort on the part of the parents. However, an alternative that the findings from this study suggests is that it may instead

increase the level of responsibility parents feel for sharing information with their children because they are not able to dictate the topics or timing of these discussions. If parents are not planning specific conversations with their children, they lose some of the control previous generations may have felt over parent-child communication about sex. They likely need a higher level of preparation and more confidence in their relationship with their children and their communication skills because they cannot predict what their children may ask.

The findings in this study represent a shift in the way parents view communication about sex with their children. Parents participating in this study described talking with their parents about sex as one discussion that covered several topics. Parents may now be viewing this process as one that both depends on and builds their overall relationship with their children. Parents acknowledged that communication about sex would need to occur more than once and that it would be highly influential in shaping their children's self-image and relationships throughout life.

Parents' plans to maintain open and positive relationships with their children in order for children to feel comfortable bringing up questions is consistent with literature that claims adolescents are more likely to report positive communication about sex with their children if they have an open communication style and positive relationship (Isaksen, Musonda, & Sandøy, 2020). This finding supports this study's participants' belief that cultivating a strong relationship with their children will contribute to the ability to communicate positively about sex and sexuality. Parents seemed to echo this openness with each other as well, validating each other's experiences and collaborating on topics they find important.

Parents who participated in this study reported being open to talk about any topics their children brought up and hoped that their children would be as well. They discussed taking

preventative steps to build strong relationships with their children but did not consider how they would handle situations in which their children did not bring questions to them. This approach to parent-child communication about sex, though well meaning, is not without risk. Previous research has discovered that when parents expect their children will bring up topics they want to discuss, children are often unaware that parents are waiting for them to start conversations (Flores & Barrorso, 2017). Discrepancies in how parents and adolescents experience parent-child communication about sex have been well documented, with parents often believing conversations happen more frequently and that they were more impactful than adolescents perceive (Atienzo, Ortiz-Panozo, & Campero, 2015, Richardson, 2004; Flores & Barroso, 2017).

Parents reported wanting to have conversations with their children about sex and that they intended to present honest information to their children. They trusted their children to come to them with questions or to prompt conversations in some way and did not consider how they might respond if their children do not. Children experience barriers to talking to their parents about sex such as being embarrassed to do so, not believing their parents can provide reliable information, and fear of how parents will interpret questions about sex (Mullis, Kastrinos, Wallney, Taylor, and Bylund, 2021). Parents need to consider the possibility that barriers will keep their children from prompting conversations with them. The quality of relationships between parents and children is certainly important (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013), though it may not be enough to enable children to initiate conversations without fear.

Children may be more likely to initiate conversations with their parents when they believe their parents are well informed and knowledgeable (Afifi, Joseph, & Adelis, 2008), and the lack of knowledge of sexual health information, especially for LGBTQ children could prevent children from feeling comfortable talking to their parents about sex (Bond, Mansour,

Kershaw, & Flores, 2023). There are many ways parents can communicate confidence in their ability to discuss sex with their children, but initiating helpful conversations could help to prevent children from believing parents either do not want to or do not know how to have conversations with them about sex. Previous research indicating parents and children perceive their communication about sex differently suggests that parents may not be able to accurately predict how their children will interpret conversations they have about sex (Scull, Carl, Keefe, & Malik, 2022). If this is the case, clear communication initiated by parents may leave less room for disagreement.

Most parents who participated in the study identified with some sort of religious affiliation, and most did reference a desire for their children to have a moral code to guide their decisions (Coakley, Randolph, Coard, & Ritchwood, 2019). Parents shared they would make sure their children understood that they were able to have different views than their parents, but that they hope their children would use the moral code they have been taught to make decisions. Parents were largely optimistic that they would be able to handle situations in which their children did not agree with them on sexual behavior. Previous literature has stated that parents make decisions over time (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl, & Meier, 2001). While this appears to be true for parents in this study, they also seem to have made one overarching decision to address issues as they arise rather than planning ahead. They decided to focus on building a strong relationship with their children rather than merely providing information when they decided to.

### **Implications, Directions for Future Research, and Practical Recommendations**

Previous research has indicated that some parents wait for children to ask questions while children are unsure that they are expected to do so (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Because this is likely to be challenging for many families, parents will likely need to be especially thoughtful

about their other interactions with children to ensure they are perceived by their children as open to these discussions. Children are incredibly perceptive and often notice small interactions that parents themselves may not remember, such as offhand jokes about dating and sexuality (Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006).

In this study, parents shared they were preparing to communicate with their children about sex by developing strong and open relationships with their children. Future research should explore this process further, perhaps exploring how this process unfolds in real-time rather than asking parents to predict how they would want these conversations to happen. Understanding how the parents' plans were carried out would contribute to the body of literature about how parents communicate with their children about sex and sexuality. Follow-up studies asking adolescents about the quality of this communication and their comfort levels asking questions about sex and sexuality could also add value to the findings by pairing parents' efforts to develop and maintain open relationships with their children's perception of that openness.

Building a strong relationship with their child seemed to be a goal for all parents who participated in this study, and some may need support. Parents could benefit from programming or interventions that target relationship-building and overall effective communication. The development of effective communication and relationship-building skills should be included in any interventions targeting parent-child communication about sex so that conversations can be positive and helpful.

Because participants in this study indicated that they would wait for their children to ask questions before addressing topics, parents will need practice with responding to potentially unexpected questions non-judgmentally and openly. They will need to develop a process for talking to one another about the information shared and for resolving differences of opinion

when they arise. They will likely also need support with identifying signs that their children are experiencing issues related to sex or sexuality. Parents will need to educate themselves on current topics in sex and sexuality to be prepared for potential questions or issues. Parents will also need to be aware of new topics that could arise, such as issues with online sexual activity. Research has indicated that parents have expressed feeling responsible for monitoring and helping children interpret explicit material online (Dolev-Cohen, & Ricon, 2022), which suggests the need for parents to be aware of what their children are experiencing. Helpful programming could include information about how parents can become aware of common problems or questions that children are having and help parents plan to engage with local resources like schools or doctors to understand the potential needs of their children. Because parents are not necessarily planning specific conversations, they may need support with deciding how to initiate conversations if their children do not. Appendix F provides an example of a tip sheet for parents based on the findings from this study.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations that may impact its ability to represent all parents. First, only couples with one male partner and one female partner participated in this study. The process of making decisions about parent-child communication about sex may be different for parents in relationships with a same-gender partner or for parents who are trans or non-binary. Most participants identified as straight, which likely framed the way they thought about communicating with their children about sex. The topics parents stated they wanted to talk about did not include sexual orientation or gender identity and were largely heteronormative. As previous research suggests, parents who identify as straight may not be aware of how parent-

child communication about sex may not address all the needs of LGBTQ+ youth and this may have impacted their decision making (Bond, Mansour, Kershaw, & Flores, 2023).

Race and ethnicity were not assessed in the demographic survey of participants. This limits the ability to consider how race and ethnicity may impact the findings, as most participants did not share this information throughout the course of the observation and interview.

Parents who participated in this study were all living within the same state in the southeastern United States, which may have impacted their opinions about parent-child communication about sex. The state in which participants were recruited has experienced challenges with implementing comprehensive sex education in schools, which may have influenced how parents thought about and prepared to talk to their children about sex. Participating parents had similar education levels and income levels, further increasing the homogeneity of participants.

Some participating parents had very young children, which may have limited their ability to conceptualize how they would have conversations about sex and sexuality. Discussions and plans in this study were meant to be hypothetical, but parents may have developed more concrete plans for talking to their children about sex if their children had been slightly older.

Some individuals interviewed in the presence of their partners may not be as forthcoming about their own sexual histories and beliefs if they are not usually open about these facets of their lives with their partners (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). Participants may also be reluctant to share about the family's usual decision-making process if that process is not considered to be socially acceptable (i.e. if the process involves yelling, if one partner makes most decisions, etc.) Despite these potential drawbacks, dyadic interviewing provided invaluable insight into

participants' meaning-making and decision-making processes due to its ability to involve both partners and the ability to be present during partner interactions.

### **Conclusions**

Parents who participated in this study all reported being open to parent-child communication about sex. They did not report being nervous or apprehensive about having these conversations, and all had goals in mind related to keeping their children safe from harm and helping them navigate healthy development and relationships. This may be unique to the parents who chose to sign up for the study, knowing that it would discuss sex and sexuality. Despite this, the process through which parents make decisions about how they would talk to their children about sex may be transferable even to parents who do not have the same levels of comfort.

Parents consider their own experiences talking about sex and sexuality with their parents, they reflect on their own experiences with sex and relationships, and they develop a plan that reflects their current level of comfort with parent-child communication about sex. Parents who are more comfortable talking about sex and sexuality, like the ones participating in this study, declined to create detailed plans, relying instead on open communication and their ability to be prepared for any questions their children have. The views of the parents in this study represent a shift from viewing parent-child communication about sex as a stiff, one-sided, educational conversation to an interactive process where the children can help determine what is discussed and when. Parents who are less comfortable with this communication may develop more detailed plans to be prepared when they need to have conversations with their children.

Overall, parents considered their own experiences when conceptualizing talking to their children about sex. Parents learned from their conversations with their own parents and developed ideas about how to help their children have better ones. The parents were clear about

wanting to have open conversations about sex with their children and that they wanted them to occur more than once as different needs arose.

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**Appendix B**

## Recruitment Letter

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech and looking for couples to participate in my dissertation research, supervised by Dr. Erika Grafsky. My research will focus on how couples decide how to communicate with their children about sex and sexuality. Participants will be asked to discuss their thoughts about communicating with their children about sex and how they plan to work with their partners to lead these discussions.

I'm looking for couples who are a) over 18 years old b) living together with their child or children, c) have at least one child in fourth grade or younger. Couples will participate in a 10-minute observed discussion during which they will discuss their plan for talking to their child or children about sex and a 60–80-minute interview. Compensation and light refreshments will be provided.

If you or anyone you know meets the above criteria and is interested in participating, please email me at [sextalkstudy@gmail.com](mailto:sextalkstudy@gmail.com) or call 980-253-5048. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Michelle Murray

**Appendix C**

## Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Erika Grafsky

IRB# and Title of Study: Having 'The Talk': Parental Decision Making Related to Communication with Children about Sex (IRB # 20-816)

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this research as part of my course work.

### WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will first fill out a short survey to determine eligibility. If you and your partner meet the eligibility criteria and agree to participate, the principal investigator will contact you to arrange a time for an observation and interview. The researcher will meet with you via Zoom or other teleconferencing software.

Participating couples will be asked to complete a 10-minute observed discussion about their plan for communicating with their child or children about sex and sexuality. During this discussion, couples will record their plan and the researcher will take a copy of the plan developed. Immediately following this observation, couples will participate in a 60–70-minute interview about how the plan was developed and about participants' own understanding and experiences related to sexuality. Participants will each receive a \$15 gift card to Target.

The study should take approximately 80 minutes of your time.

If sexuality is a sensitive issue for you, you may experience minimal distress from answering these questions or disclosing personal information. If you feel uncomfortable, you may discontinue at any time. If discomfort occurs as a result of responding to questions as part of this study, the researcher can provide information on local mental health professionals and resources.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be video-recorded and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key will be destroyed immediately after the conclusion of the research and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

#### WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Michelle Murray at 980-253-5048 or [murraymm@vt.edu](mailto:murraymm@vt.edu). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 ([irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)).

**Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.**

**If you would like to participate in this study, click yes to begin or no to exit.**

**Appendix D**

Eligibility and Demographic Survey

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your sexual orientation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your education level? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your religious affiliation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your family's combined annual income? \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the ages of your children? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the genders of your children? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your children's grade levels? \_\_\_\_\_

How many children are currently living in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently living with your partner? Yes/No

**Appendix E**

## Interview Schedule

1. What conversations have you already had with your children about sex?
  - a. What topics did you discuss?
  - b. What prompted these conversations?
  - c. How did you decide on the topics and timing of these conversations?

---task and observation---

2. What does parent-child communication about sex mean to you?
  - a. How do you define sex in this context?
  - b. What implications does talking with your children about sex have for you and your family?
3. While creating your plan, how did you make decisions with your partner about communicating with your child(ren) about sex?
  - a. How did you decide what should be said when talking to your child/children about sex?
  - b. How did you decide who would talk to your child/children about sex?
  - c. If you choose to do so, how will you continue to develop this plan as your children age?
4. How does your own understanding of sex and sexuality influence your opinions about family communication about sex?

- a. What events in your own sexual history impacted your understanding of sex and sexuality?
  - b. How do you use your unique understanding of sex and sexuality to educate your children?
  - c. How do you think the responses on your demographic survey shape your perceptions of parent-child communication about sex?
  - d. How did your parents talk about sex with you?
  - e. How do you talk about sex with your partner?
5. How do you think your own experiences influenced your plan for talking to your children about sex?
- a. How might your own experiences have affected how you view your role in talking with your own child/children about sex?
  - b. How have your own experiences helped you decide which topics to talk about with your children?
  - c. How have your experiences influenced how you think about and define parent-child communication about sex?

## Appendix F

# Tips for “The Talk”



- Prepare for the conversation
- Be aware of potential safety concerns and how to talk about them
- Talk to your partner about values and goals for talking to your children about sex
- Communicate that you are open to talking about sex with your child
- Be aware of your reactions when talking about sex
- Provide honest and straightforward information when talking to your child
- Consider when your child may initiate particular questions
- Consider how you will help your child make healthy decisions in the future
- Your relationship with your child matters- take time to build a strong relationship
- Develop plans for initiating conversations if your children do not

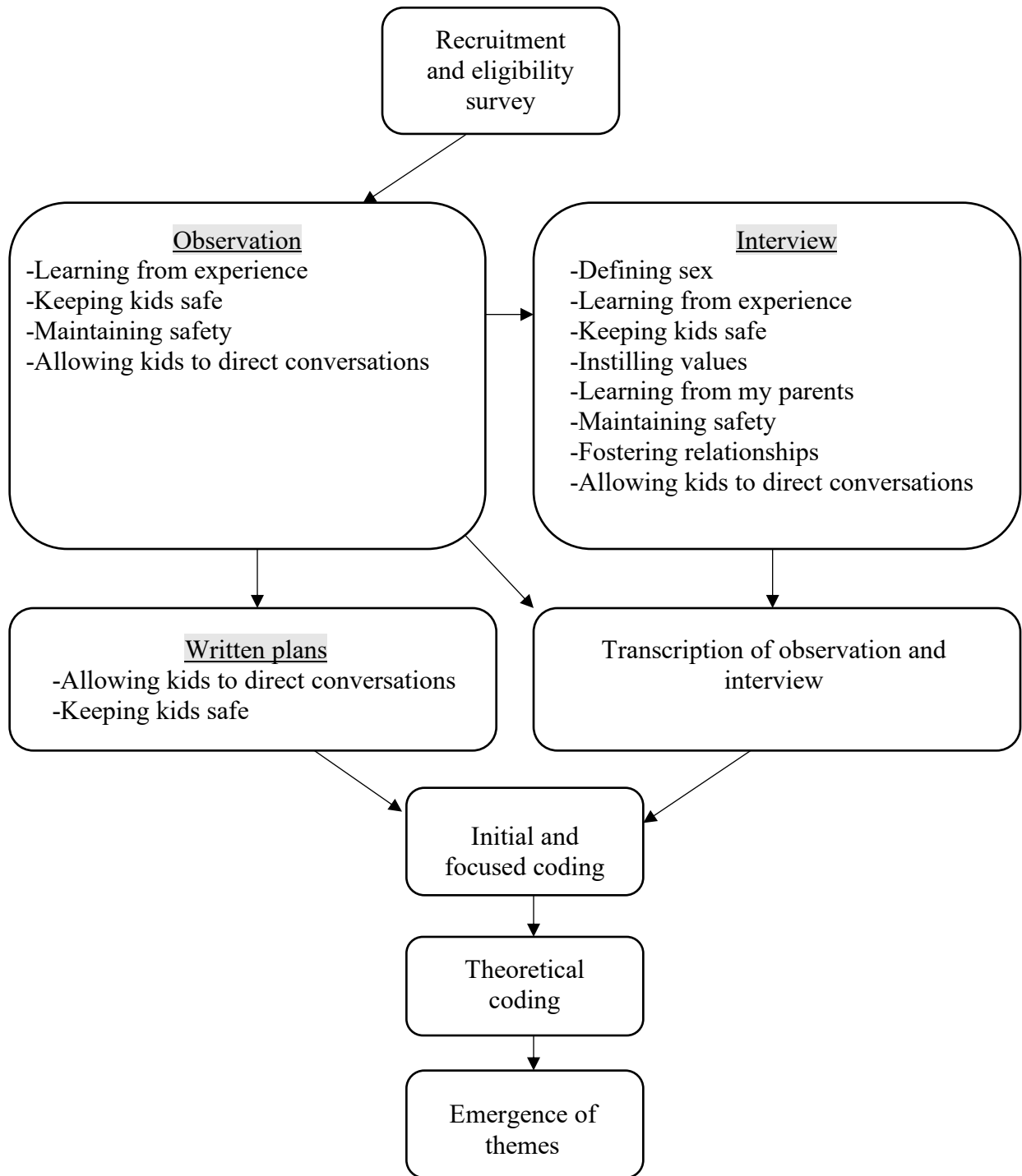
**Table 1***Participant information*

Pseudonyms	Ages	Number of children	Ages of children (years)	Sexes of children
Delia & Dan	35, 36	1	2	Female
Johanna & Jordan	40, 41	1	4	Male
Betty & Ben	35, 36	3	7, 4, 2	Female, male, male
Elain & Eugene	39, 41	2	11, 5	Male, female
Annie & Albert	32, 36	2	8, 6	Male, female
Marie & Michael	29, 34	2	3, 1	Female, male
Faye & Frank	35, 38	4	9, 5, 2, 0.5	Female, male, male, male
Talia & Timothy	34, 37	1	5	Male

*Note.* This table contains pseudonyms and ages of each participating couple. It also contains information about the ages and genders of their children.

**Figure 1**

*Research Procedures*



*Note.* A description of the procedures and data analysis with major themes from each method of data collection.