Parents, Esteem, and Restraint: Understanding the Associations between Discussions, Sexual Esteem, and Restraint

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Culminating Experience

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Self-regulation has been linked to numerous indices of positive youth adjustment (Bowers et al., 2011; Moilanen, Padilla-Walker, & Blaacker, 2018). When self-regulation is applied to sexual feelings, termed *sexual* *restraint* (Moilanen & Manuel, 2018), it has been shown to decrease sexual risk taking (Crandall, Magnusson, & Novilla, 2018). This is especially salient during adolescence: the American Center for Disease Control recently reported that half of all new STIs reported each year are among young people aged 15 to 24 and approximately 52% of high school students have engaged in some form of sexual intercourse (Kann et al., 2018).

However, past research has shown that when parents use scaffolding strategies, such as mutually-engaged discussions, to teach their adolescent children about sex, the youth engage in fewer risky sexual behaviors (Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013) possibly because the scaffolding helped the adolescent child develop sexual restraint (Moilanen, 2015). While the association between parental scaffolding/discussions and sexual restraint has been well-documented in past research, few studies have attempted to explain it. One possible explanation is that when parents help adolescents understand the risks of sexuality, adolescents develop corresponding sexual restraint (Grossman, Tracy, Richer, & Erkut, 2015) or possibly that parents encourage abstinence based on family or religious values (Abbott, Harris, & Mollen, 2016; Teitelman & Loveland-Cherry, 2005). However, few studies have examined what happens when adolescents feel comfortable with their sexual feelings and identity.

In other words, we do not know what happens when parents help their adolescents develop a healthy understanding and regulation of sexual feelings, which is referred to as *sexual esteem* (Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008). Previous research suggests that parents can help adolescents develop positive sexual attitudes (Peixoto, Amarelo-Pires, Biscaia, & Machado, 2018) and develop sexual restraint (Morawska, Walsh, Grabski, & Fletcher, 2015), but the author was unable to find any studies that examined sexual esteem as a moderator between parental discussions and sexual restraint. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to further explore the associations between sexual restraint and parent-adolescent conversations about sexuality. Specifically, I will examine how parental discussions about sexuality are associated with adolescents’ development of sexual esteem, which is correspondingly associated with sexual restraint.

# Review of Relevant Literature

## Associations between Parent-Child Discussions and Sexual Restraint

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt one’s emotions, attention, and behavior (Raffaelli, Crockett, & Shen, 2005) in order to accomplish one’s goals (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Moilanen, 2007), and has been associated with positive youth development (Bowers et al., 2011). Sexual restraint is often conceptualized as a form of self-regulation, applied specifically to sexual feelings and desires (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Moilanen & Manuel, 2018), and has been shown to be associated with later initiation of risky sexual behaviors (Moilanen, 2015), fewer sexual partners (Raffaelli & Crockett, 2003), and decreased likelihood of engaging in sexual risk taking overall (Crandall et al., 2018).

Of increasing importance during the adolescent years is intentional self-regulation, which is self-regulation with the intention of accomplishing specific goals (Bowers et al., 2011; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008). Young children are generally only able to regulate their impulses and behavior over short periods of time (Moilanen & DeLong, 2017), however, when cognitive gains during adolescence allow individuals to imagine future selves, adolescents should theoretically be able to delay gratification for longer in order to achieve more long-term goals than children (Harter, 2012, pp. 104–108; Moilanen et al., 2018). Previous work has identified that when adolescents set goals in romantic relationships, they engage in safer and more regulated sexual activity (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995). Past research has shown that intentional self-regulation is most effectively developed through scaffolding and practice (Harter, 2012, pp. 108–109; Kuhn & Franklin, 2007). Scaffolding is the educational process where parents give developmentally appropriate guidance to help the child develop competencies and reach goals (Vygotsky, 1980; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), and in adolescence, scaffolding often occurs in parent-child discussions (Manczak, McLean, McAdams, & Chen, 2015).

Previous work has found that parents play a role in helping children develop general self-regulation (Moilanen & Rambo-Hernandez, 2017). Specifically, that parent-child discussions are associated with less risky sexual practices (Hadley et al., 2009; Hutchinson & Montgomery, 2007) and fewer sexual partners (Harris et al., 2013). When these scaffolding discussions are specifically about sexuality, a few important themes are present. The first is that these conversations are more effective at limiting risky sexual behavior when relationship quality is high (Sneed, 2008; Usher-Seriki, Smith Bynum, & Callands, 2008). The second is that the communication needs to be of high caliber, meaning that both parent (Rogers, Ha, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2015) and adolescent (Karofsky, Zeng, & Kosorok, 2001) need to feel heard, respected, and understood.

Said in other words, when parents effectively connected with their adolescents, and taught them how to resist unwanted sexual advances, adolescents had later sexual debut, engaged in less risky sex, had fewer sexual partners and had more established ideas about what they wanted from sexual relationships (Aspy et al., 2007; Cheshire, Kaestle, & Miyazaki, 2019; Harris et al., 2013). Taken together, previous work suggests that there may be a relation between parent-child discussions about sexuality (i.e., scaffolding) and sexual restraint (i.e., sexual self-regulation).

## The Mediating Role of Sexual Esteem

Self-esteem is typically defined as the judgments that we make about our own self-worth (Berk, 2013, p. 455). Self-esteem has been discussed primarily from two different lenses: a performance domain lens and a global lens (Harter, 2012, pp. 79–81; James, 1961). In a performance domain lens, self-esteem is founded in performance and recognition in various domains such as physical appearance (Hannier, Baltus, & de Sutter, 2017; Harter, 2012, Chapter 5), academic competence (Zarei, Adib, Hashemi, & Zamini, 2010) and relationship status (Luciano & Orth, 2017). However, when adolescents use a global lens, self-esteem is more stable, and generally higher, because instead of engaging in relative comparisons to factors outside of one’s control, self-esteem is based on individual progress (Wilson & Ross, 2000). Crucial to the development of self-esteem is the quality of family processes (Burr & Christensen, 1992). Additionally, the relation between parenting practices and adjustment may be mediated by the development of self-esteem (Huey, 2019), possibly because when parents engage in scaffolding discussions, they help their children shift from a performance lens to a global lens of self-esteem. These findings have been replicated in studies focused on the portion of self-esteem devoted to sexual feelings, namely *sexual esteem*. Past research has found that parents have the potential to be the most effective sex educators (Krauss & Miller, 2012), because relationship quality and trust make it possible for parents to transmit their values and beliefs about sexuality to their children (Pluhar, Jennings, & DiIorio, 2006). Meaning that parents have the potential to help their adolescents develop a strong and more stable sexual esteem (Van de Bongardt, Reitz, & Deković, 2016).

Many parents express worries that talking to their children about sex will lead to more sexual activity, but empirical findings tell a different story. When parents share positive messages about sexuality with their children, those children tend to develop strong sexual esteem, which was associated with higher sexual satisfaction within committed relationships (Peixoto et al., 2018). Additionally, intentional communication (i.e., scaffolding) about sexual activity was associated with lower rates of sexual activity overall (i.e., sexual restraint; Morawska, Walsh, Grabski, & Fletcher, 2015).

# The Present Study

Taken together, the purpose of the present study is to explore the relations between parent-child discussions about sexuality and the development of adolescents’ sexual restraint. Additionally, past research has suggested that this relation might be partially explained by the adolescents’ sense of sexual esteem. The review of relevant literature accentuates several important research questions. Is there an association between sexual restraint and parent-adolescent discussions about sexuality? Further, if there is an association, why does that association exist? Is adolescents’ development of sexual self-esteem useful in explaining that association? In answer to these questions, I hypothesize that (1) greater frequency of mutual parent-child discussions will be associated with higher sexual restraint and (2) that sexual esteem will contribute to that relation because parent-child discussions will be associated with higher sexual esteem, which will also predict higher sexual restraint.

# Methods

## Procedures and Participants

The Healthy Sexuality Project (HSP) was initiated in 2018 with a pilot study focused on understanding both healthy sexuality and parent-child sex communication. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics. The final sample included 1906 adolescents (21.48% 13-14; 27.99% 15-16; 50.54% 17-18) with an equal representation of each gender (50.39% male, 49.61% female), with well-distributed income (31.26% low; 46.87% middle; 21.87% high) and fairly nationally representative race (53.18% white, 14.92% African American, 13.45% Latino).

## Measures

**Sexual restraint.**Adolescents’ healthy sexual restraint was assessed using a reduced version of a measure developed by Gailliot & Baumeister (2007). Three items described various behaviors reflective of sexual restraint. Participants reported how much these statements were like them using a Likert scale of 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*completely like me*). Negative items were reverse-scored such that higher scores were indicative of higher sexual restraint (*M =* 3.83, SD = 0.95, α = 0.53). A sample item includes “When I set a limit on my sexual behaviors, I stick to what I had planned.”

**Mutuality of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality.** Adolescents reported on the quality of their sex communication by responding to a measure adapted from both the Sex Communication Scale (O’Sullivan, Jaramillo, Moreau, & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1999) and items from Fasula & Miller (2006). Adolescents reported on their communication with both of their parents, respectively. Respondents rated their agreement with these six statements, using a Likert scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher values reflecting higher quality mutual communication (Mom: *M =* 2.68, SD = 0.89, α = 0.91; Dad: *M =* 2.49, SD = 0.84, α = 0.91). A sample item includes “My parent wants to know my questions about sexual topics”.

**Sexual esteem**. Adolescents’ sexual esteem was measured using three items developed by Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman (2008). Participants responded to three statements reflective of sexual esteem using a Likert scale of 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*completely like me*). Higher values reflected higher levels of sexual esteem (*M =* 3.59, SD = 1.08, α = 0.81). A sample item includes “I am pleased with how I handle my own sexual tendencies and behaviors”.

**Importance of religion.** Adolescents responded to one item with the stem “Please state how important religion is to you” on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Not at all important*) to 5 (*Very important*). Higher scores reflected a higher importance of religion (*M =* 3.02, SD = 1.38).

**Demographic Factors.** Demographic factors included household income measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*My family has much less money than other families*)to 5 (*My family has much more money than other families*; *M =* 2.89, SD = 0.86), Race (53.18% white =1, 46.82% non-white=0), child age (*M =* 16.19, SD = 1.71), and biological sex assigned at birth (49.61% female = 1, 50.39% male = 0).

## Analytic Strategy

I will explore this research question by running an OLS regression model with Sobel-Goodman Mediation tests. I chose this method because OLS regression is fairly robust to violations of assumptions. This is especially salient because I am using cross-sectional data. Additionally, it should be noted that this analysis is only meant to be preliminary because a full mediational analysis requires more advanced statistical methods such as a Structural Equation Modelling Framework.

# Results

## Maternal Communication Paths

In order to assess whether collinearity issues existed, initial correlations between analysis variables were run (see Table 2). Because these correlations did not highlight any major issues of collinearity between the independent variables, it was determined that assumptions were met and regressions could be run. A regression analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant association between mutual discussions with a mother figure and sexual restraint. The model had significant overall model fit (F (6, 1906) = 6.64, *p* < .001, R2 = .0205). After controlling for important demographic variables and importance of religion, discussions with a maternal figure significantly predicted sexual restraint (β = .088, *p* < .001), meaning that a greater frequency of discussions with a maternal figure predicted greater sexual restraint.

To assess hypothesis 2, another regression was conducted to determine if sexual esteem partially mediated the relation found between discussions and sexual restraint. This model also had significant model fit (F (7, 1905) = 12.63, *p* < .001, R2 = .0409). Sexual esteem significantly predicted sexual restraint (β = .142, *p* < .001), meaning that higher levels of sexual esteem were associated with greater sexual restraint. This model also showed a direct effect from maternal discussions with sexual restraint (β = .07, *p* = .004).

Follow-up analyses using Sobel-Goodman Mediation tests hypothesized the mediational model. The relation between maternal discussions and sexual esteem was β = .129 (*p* < .001). The relation between sexual esteem and sexual restraint was β = .142 (*p* < .001). There were also significant direct (β = .07, *p* = .004) and indirect (β = .018, *p* < .001) effects between maternal discussions and sexual restraint. See Figure 2 for a summarized model.

## Paternal Communication Paths

To assess hypothesis 1, a regression analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant association between mutual discussions with a father figure and sexual restraint. The model had significant overall model fit (F (6, 1835) = 7.05, *p* < .001, R2 = .0193). After controlling for important demographic variables and importance of religion, discussions with a paternal figure significantly predicted sexual restraint (β = .109, *p* < .001), meaning that a greater frequency of discussions with a paternal figure predicted greater sexual restraint.

To assess hypothesis 2, another regression was conducted to determine if sexual esteem partially mediated the relation found between discussions and sexual restrain. This model also had significant model fit (F (7, 1834) = 12.69, *p* < .001, R2 = .0426). Sexual esteem significantly predicted sexual restraint (β = .142, *p* < .001), meaning that higher levels of sexual esteem were associated with greater sexual restraint. This model also showed a direct effect from paternal discussions with sexual restraint (β = .09, *p* < .001).

Follow-up analyses using Sobel-Goodman Mediation tests hypothesized the mediational model. The relation between paternal discussions and sexual esteem was β = .106 (*p* < .001). The relation between sexual esteem and sexual restraint was β = .142 (*p* < .001). There were also significant direct (β = .09, *p* < .001) and indirect (β = .015, *p* = .001) effects between paternal discussions and sexual restraint. See Figure 2 for a summarized model.

# Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the associations between sexual restraint and mutual discussions between parents and adolescents about adolescent sexuality, and how that association might be explained by adolescents’ sexual esteem. Results suggest that when mothers and fathers engage their children in more frequent mutual discussions, adolescents have higher sexual restraint. The second hypothesis was also supported meaning that a greater frequency mutual discussions predicted higher sexual esteem, which in turn predicted higher levels of sexual restraint. These associations were significant for discussions with both mothers and fathers. Although statistical tests were not available to test the significance, the differences in models suggest that mothers had a greater impact in aiding the development of sexual esteem and fathers had a greater impact in aiding the development of sexual restraint. Future research should examine this finding and look for evidence about the differential impact of mothers and fathers.

However, limitations exist in this study which make it necessary to interpret the results with caution. The biggest limitation is the strength of the used statistical methodology to assess the research question. To more accurately analyze this research question, a more rigorous statistical methodology, possibly a structural equation-modelling framework, should be used. This is because an OLS regression, even when combined with the Sobel-Goodman tests, is not designed to assess mediational relations. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study suggests important principles that should be researched further and investigated for potential clinical and intervention applications.

# Conclusion

The present study adds to a growing body of work examining adolescent sexuality and the role of parents in helping adolescents develop healthy sexual attitudes and practices. Advancing previous work, I directly assessed the associations between sexual restrain, sexual esteem, and mutual discussions between parents and adolescents. My results suggest that when parents engage their children in discussions with the intention of helping children develop strong sexual esteem, their children will likely develop a corresponding sexual restraint.

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*Table 1. Showing descriptive statistics for analysis variables*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean | Standard Deviation |
| Sexual Restraint (i.e., When I set a limit on my sexual behaviors, I stick to what I had planned) | 3.83 | 0.95 |
| Mutual Communication with Dad | 2.49 | 0.84 |
| Mutual Communication with Mom | 2.68 | 0.89 |
| Sexual Esteem (i.e., I expect sexuality to be a positive part of my life) | 3.59 | 1.08 |
| Please state how important religion is to you | 3.02 | 1.38 |
| Compared to other families, how would you say yours compares? | 2.89 | 0.86 |
| How old are you in years? | 16.19 | 1.71 |

*Table 2. Correlations between analysis variables*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |  |
| 1. Sexual Restraint (i.e., When I set a limit on my sexual behaviors, I stick to what I had planned) | -- |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Mutual Communication with Dad | 0.11  \*\*\* | -- |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Mutual Communication with Mom | 0.10  \*\*\* | 0.73  \*\*\* | -- |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Sexual Esteem (i.e., I expect sexuality to be a positive part of my life) | 0.16  \*\*\* | 0.10  \*\*\* | 0.12  \*\*\* | -- |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Please state how important religion is to you | 0.03 | 0.07  \*\* | 0.07  \*\* | 0.03 | -- |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Compared to other families, how would you say yours compares? | 0.04 | 0.14  \*\*\* | 0.08  \*\*\* | 0.06  \*\* | 0.05  \* | -- |  |  |  |
| 7. Race (white = 1, non-white = 0) | 0.06  \*\* | 0.07  \*\* | 0.09  \*\*\* | 0.08  \*\*\* | -0.08  \*\*\* | 0.04 | -- |  |  |
| 8. Gender (female=1, male = 0) | 0 | -0.13  \*\*\* | 0 | 0.02 | 0 | -0.14  \*\*\* | -0.08  \*\*\* | -- |  |
| 9. How old are you in years? | -0.08  \*\*\* | -0.06  \* | -0.04 | 0.17  \*\*\* | 0 | -0.08  \*\*\* | 0.04 | 0.21  \*\*\* |  |

*Table 3. Regression model predicting sexual restraint from discussions with mom*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Beta | Standard Error |
| Mutual Communication with Mom | 0.070\*\* | 0.024 |
| Sexual Esteem (i.e., I expect sexuality to be a positive part of my life) | 0.143\*\*\* | 0.021 |
| Please state how important religion is to you | 0.018 | 0.016 |
| Income | 0.012 | 0.025 |
| Race (white = 1, non-white = 0) | 0.101\* | 0.043 |
| Gender (female=1, male = 0) | 0.050 | 0.044 |
| How old are you in years? | -0.060\*\*\* | 0.013 |
| Constant | 3.942 | 0.237 |
| R2 | .044 |  |
| F-test (10, 1895) | 12.63\*\*\* |  |
| Number of Observations | 1,913 |  |

\* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001

*Table 4. Regression model predicting sexual restraint from discussions with dad*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Beta | Standard Error |
| Mutual Communication with Dad | 0.094\*\*\* | 0.026 |
| Sexual Esteem (i.e., I expect sexuality to be a positive part of my life) | 0.142\*\*\* | 0.021 |
| Please state how important religion is to you | 0.023 | 0.016 |
| Income | -0.002 | 0.026 |
| Race (white = 1, non-white = 0) | 0.086 | 0.044 |
| Gender (female=1, male = 0) | 0.053 | 0.045 |
| How old are you in years? | -0.064\*\*\* | 0.013 |
| Constant | 4.005 | 0.241 |
| R2 | .046 |  |
| F-test (10, 1895) | 12.69\*\*\* |  |
| Number of Observations | 1,842 |  |

\* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001

*Figure 2. Final mediated model for maternal and paternal communication*

**

Note: \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001. Maternal coefficients are before the slash, paternal coefficients are after the slash.