



African Population & Health Research Center

Mother-daughter communication about growing up in an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya

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1. Background

➤ Constructive parenting approaches, including parent-child communication, are associated with better health and behavioral outcomes in adolescents.

➤ However, while parent-child communication about menstruation and sex may promote positive development and prevent risky sexual behavior, in Kenya as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, mothers often have inhibitions that make communication about menstrual and sexual issues with pre-adolescent or adolescent daughters difficult.

➤ Community-level factors such as urban poverty may also mediate the relationship between parenting practices and youth outcomes, in addition to their direct influences on youth outcomes in themselves.

2. Objectives

To explore mothers' and daughters' views about ideal kinds of communication about sexual maturation; their experiences with parent-child communication; and the challenges they face with communicating in practice.

3. Methods

Data for the study was collected as part of a broader research study on menstrual attitudes, practices and problems in Korogocho, an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya.

Study population: The participants consisted of post-menarchal in-school and out-of-school adolescents aged 12-17 and women aged 18-49 years.

Data collection

- Data collection was carried out in May and June 2008.
- Participants recruited using purposive quota sampling.
- 29 in-depth interviews and 18 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted.
- Texts analyzed using content and thematic analysis.

Research Ethics: Ethical approval granted by Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) ethics and review board and study also approved by the City Council of Nairobi (CCN).

4. Results

Women's and girls' views on ideal communication

Most of the girls interviewed mentioned their mothers as their preferred source of information about menstruation. Girls also expressed a desire to receive reliable information from a variety of sources, at an early age and repeated regularly. These perspectives are also shared by some of the mothers.

... [your mother] is the one who understands you best than anyone else and she can be of great help to you. (FGD, out-of-school girls aged 15-17)

Any time there is an opportunity a girl should be taught about periods... (FGD, in-school girls aged 12-14)

You start by bringing [your daughter] closer to you so that when you start the topic, it just flows and the earlier the better (FGD, women aged 35-49)

Women's and girls' experiences with communicating about sexual maturation

- Despite the widely held perceptions that mothers should communicate with their daughters about sexual maturation and early enough, in reality, many girls have limited discussion with their parents.
- There was variation about whether girls speak to their mothers or friends, other relatives or teachers about sexual maturation.
- Information that is communicated tends to be limited to the practicalities of managing menstruation and avoiding pregnancy by not "playing with boys". Almost none of the girls or women mentioned discussion about avoiding HIV and STIs, sexuality or safe sex, despite high rates of sexual activity among adolescent girls (27%) aged 10-19 years in the area.

My daughter's school uniform was wet. [...] She was afraid of telling me. I asked her how many days she had been through that, she told me three days. (FGD 5, women aged 35-49).

Our parents know there is something called periods and I don't know why they are afraid of talking about it. In her mind I am a child and she cannot talk to me about sex... (FGD, out-of-school girls aged 12-14)

It is embarrassing to tell your parents. They will start thinking of other things (all laugh) (FGD, in school girls aged 12-14).

... Results

Barriers to mother-daughter communication

- Participants described embarrassment about discussing menstruation and sex, and mothers' own lack of knowledge and uncertainty about the best way to communicate.
- For mothers, confusion about what menarche signifies for girls' transition to adulthood adds to their dilemma on how to treat their daughters before and after menstruation. Some participants suggested that concern about giving adult information to girls can mean mothers delay speaking to their daughters about menstruation for too long.
- Some mothers mentioned that many girls see the onset of menstruation as a sign that they are now adults and can have sexual relationships while some of the girls saw being treated as adults when they begin to menstruate as unwelcome.
- Another challenge mothers said they face is how to provide adolescent daughters with information and support without being seen as too hard on them or alienating them.
- Both mothers and daughters described how poverty, stress, and alcohol misuse make communication difficult in their community. A few girls also described their mothers as harsh, unsupportive or abusive.

... most girls get out of hand when they start menstruating [...] eventually the result is sex [...] you can easily fight with the girl just because you are advising her. (FGD, women aged 35-49)

If you talk to them too much they start feeling you are too hard on them (Focus group, women aged 18-34).

She is usually too busy. ... hassling on how the family will feed, provide for rent, ..., she has to wake up early and hassle till evening. (FGD, out of school girls aged 12-14)

5. Conclusion and recommendation

- The study shows that girls and women face barriers to discussing sexual maturation.
 - Gaps exist between perceptions about ideal mother-daughter communication and how this works in reality
 - Much of the information that girls did receive was partial and sometimes ambiguous
- There is need for interventions to be developed in urban informal settlements in Kenya and other similar contexts to build parents' knowledge, skills and awareness about discussing sexual maturation with their daughters and early enough.