# Talking relationships, babies and bodies with young children: The experiences of parents in England

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# Abstract

Parents often find themselves ill-prepared for when questions of a sexual nature arise, or when children display signs of playful behaviour that can be interpreted as sexual. How these behaviours and questions are dealt with establishes the foundations on which children begin to interpret relationships, their bodies, those of others, and the sexual world in which they live. In this study, the views and experiences of dealing with early childhood sexuality education, along with the ways in which communication had occurred, were collected from 110 parents in London and southern England during focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. Parents who had chosen to communicate with their children reported a range of justifications as to why childhood sexuality communication was considered necessary and had, indeed, occurred. Six key themes were identified: communication prompts, the need for truth, the threat of ignorance, exposure, healthy and positive relationships, and openness. Findings reveal that many parents are making strategic decisions on how to discuss relationships and sexuality with their young children. Through highlighting the central trigger points for early parent-child sexuality communication, findings could be used to aid the development of relevant practice responses to support less confident parents to communicate effectively.

# Background

Young children are inherently inquisitive about the world around them, they are investigators with a desire and passion to learn - after all, everything in the world is new to them. Playful ‘sexual’ exploration is known to be common during early childhood (Bancroft, 2003; Sandnabba, Santtila, Wannäs, and Krook, 2003). It has been reported that, around the age of two, young children often cuddle, kiss, climb on top of, and look at each other’s genitals. From around the age of three, many young children start observing and asking questions about family life and relationships, about babies and where they come from, about bodies (their own and those of other people, particularly when they are different) and growing-up (Reinisch and Beasley, 1990). How these, and other such questions, are dealt with by parents and primary carers is critically important; it establishes the foundations on which young children begin to interpret the relationships around them and the world in which they live (Campbell, Mallappa, Wisniewski, and Silovsky, 2013; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Martin, Luke, and Verduzco-Baker, 2007; Shtarkshall, Santelli, and Hirsch, 2007).

Parents of older children and teenagers are more conscious of the need to talk about relationships, bodies, puberty, sex, pregnancy and contraception. Growing international evidence suggests that promoting sexual communication and greater parent-child openness can protect young people from harm, enable them to make informed decisions, establish healthy relationships and empower them to manage their sexual health and wellbeing when they eventually become sexually active (Diiorio, Pluhar, and Belcher, 2003; Noar, Carlyle, and Cole, 2006; Pop and Rusu, 2015; Ryan, Franzetta, Manlove, and Holcombe, 2007; Stone and Ingham, 2002; Turnbull, van Wersch, and van Schaik, 2008). For parents of much younger children, however, the need and when to talk about sexual matters is less clear-cut. Despite the recent publication of a range of standards produced by educational bodies as guidance for policy and practice (see for example, WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZga, 2010) and the increase in web-based advice and support for parents, there remains little firm agreement among the UK (and almost certainly beyond the UK) parenting community as to what information should be given to young children, or what knowledge should be considered necessary or, conversely, potentially problematic (Fields, 2005). In many cases, children’s access to sexual knowledge continues to be perceived as ‘risky’ and dangerous; that such knowledge will destroy their innocence and non-sexual state, that it will lead to early sexual maturity, and that it will give children ideas which may result in early sexual experimentation (Bhana, 2008; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2012a, 2012b; Scott, Jackson, and Backett-Milburn, 1998; Taylor, 2010). Consequently, parents are left to rely on their own views and judgements (and/or those of their relatives and friends) on what their child should (or should not) know - this has the potential to vary greatly.

Some parents believe that sexuality knowledge and childhood are two incompatible entities; research has highlighted how concerns regarding the harm that could be done to an idealised childhood consequently places restrictions on how parents communicate about sexual matters (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Mitchell, Walsh, and Larkin, 2004). Research has also shown parents to be fearful of criticism, of being regarded as a ‘bad parent’ by fellow parents, teachers or other professionals if they say something that is deemed to cross a virtual line between appropriate knowledge and inappropriate learning for children of a certain age or, even worse, that signs of childhood sexual knowledge may be interpreted as a sign of sexual contact and abuse (Elliott, Browne, and Kilcoyne, 1995; McGinn, Stone, Ingham, and Bengry-Howell, 2016; Robinson, 2012a). Other parents feel constrained by embarrassment or their lack of confidence and skills to communicate effectively and so choose to stay silent rather than risk saying the wrong thing or allowing a conversation to go too far (Dyson and Smith, 2011; Geasler, Dannison, and Edlund, 1995). Concerns regarding timing and the ability to discern the developmental appropriateness of sexuality information hinders others (Ballard and Gross, 2009; Geasler et al., 1995; Walker, 2001). For yet others, the decision is far less complex, believing that their children are simply just too young to need to know the truth, or they are unaware of, or possibly trivialise, the positive impact and influence that early sexual communication could have on a child’s actions and beliefs (Frankham, 2006; Stone, Ingham, and Gibbins, 2013).

In contrast, other parents regard sexual knowledge, inquisitive questioning and body exploration as part of normal childhood development. Such parents then choose whether to take a passive role, and not discuss issues or actively intervene, or to actively engage, recognising that they have an important role to play as the primary sexuality educators (and/or protectors) of their children (Ballard and Gross, 2009; Dyson and Smith, 2011; Frankham, 2006; Geasler et al., 1995; McGinn et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2013).

Whichever position parents lean towards, many are united in their desire to remain in control, in so far as possible, of the sexuality learning that their children receive during the early years (and, indeed, beyond) despite facing numerous challenges; from song lyrics, music videos, advertising, the Internet, clothing manufactures, and peers, to name but a few.

To date, much research on early childhood sexuality education has focused attention on the opposition and barriers to its provision, understandably so given the very public concerns about early sexualisation of children (Bragg and Buckingham, 2012; Irvine, 2004; Walker 2004). The purpose of this paper, however, is to highlight the views and experiences of parents in England who have discussed matters of sexuality with their young children, and their justifications for why such communication has occurred and was deemed to be important and/or necessary. The data presented come from an exploratory study investigating parental views regarding early childhood sexual socialisation and sexuality education, and which examined parents’ fears, concerns and justifications regarding early childhood sexual socialisation and development, along with their personal experiences of sexuality communication, and reacting and responding to their child’s emerging sexuality, and sexual curiosity.

# Method

# *Procedure*

To ensure that the research explored the views of a diverse range of parents across London and southern England, random sampling of geographical areas stratified by ethnicity and social deprivation was employed to select six recruitment sites[[1]](#footnote-1). State funded primary schools located within the sites were contacted and invited to support the facilitation of the research by distributing project recruitment flyers to parents of pupils in the primary years (ages 4-7). Thirty schools agreed to support the project in this manner. Parents and carers who responded to the adverts by completing and returning a response slip or by e-mailing the research team directly were invited to join a discussion group being hosted in their local area (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Targeted recruitment of two key groups, namely fathers and young parents who remained under-represented following the implementation of the initial sampling strategy, was also employed via flyers placed at community support groups. Twenty seven groups were organised at various times and locations to accommodate as many participants as possible; five all male groups, five mixed gender groups and 17 female groups were hosted. All groups, expect one organised for a young parent community support group, did not exceed six participants to prevent censoring of less vocal participants. The group sessions lasted for up to two hours, refreshments were provided and participants received a modest payment to cover expenses and time. All groups were facilitated by the same male researcher, who was also a father, and all discussions were digitally-recorded with full consent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of Southampton ethics and governance procedures. Further detail of the recruitment approach is provided by Bengry-Howell (forthcoming).

Following the completion of a short demographic survey, each discussion began with an ‘icebreaker’ question asking parents to recall memories of their own sex and relationships education. This stimulated much light-hearted discussion and quickly put participants at ease; in some cases it triggered conversations about how badly informed participants were as children and how they felt their lack of knowledge had put them at risk when growing up. Discussion was then steered by the facilitator to examine general attitudes towards sexuality education in the home and wider society, notions of childhood innocence, reactions and responses to childhood sexual curiosity, concerns and justifications regarding childhood sexualisation and sexuality education, and their understanding of the impact their actions and reactions are having (or likely to have) on their children both now and in the future.

# *Data Analysis*

Discussions were transcribed verbatim for analysis, participants were given pseudonyms and all references to names and places removed. The data set was subjected to a thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Following the reading and re-reading by the research team of a sub-sample of the manuscripts for meaning, context and content, individual comments and statements within each transcript were coded using NVivo with codes across the data set being categorised to identify themes. This analysis framework allowed the research team to explore and scrutinise thematic patterns and the relationships between individual themes and the links between the data as a whole.

***Participants***

One hundred and ten parents and primary carers[[2]](#footnote-2) were involved in the discussion groups; 82 women and 28 men. Two thirds (67%) were of White British ethnicity (see Table 1) and 82% of participants identified themselves as British nationals. A third reported not to have any particular faith. Participants ranged in age (mean of 36 years), and the sample covered a broad family formation spectrum including two natural-parent families, single parent households, step, adoptive and foster parents. Seventy-one percent of those who took part were cohabiting with a partner or spouse. Just under half (44%) of participants lived in areas of high or very high deprivation and 41% in low or very low deprivation areas[[3]](#footnote-3).

# Results

A number of themes emerged as to why parents thought that communicating with young children was important and how it can occur; these have been categorised into six areas (communication prompts; the need for truth; the threat of ignorance in the context of the need for ensuring safety; exposure; healthy and positive relationships; and openness) and each is briefly outlined below.

***Communication Prompts***

The majority of parents involved in this study were keenly aware of their responsibilities as sexuality educators of their children. Regardless of whether parents had actually taken steps to discuss matters or not, there was an overwhelming feeling within the groups that they needed to be *open* and *honest* with their children regarding matters of sexuality. Many, however, reported not having carefully considered – either as individuals or as a couple – about what exactly *openness* and *honesty* involves, precisely when it should occur, and how best to achieve it (in a few cases amongst those couples who had discussed these issues, some disagreements had emerged). As such, much of what parents reportedly told their children had been delivered *ad hoc*, and without significant forethought and planning.

Last week my son came up to me and just asked the question out of the blue, “Daddy, how did I get into mummy?” I never thought that kind of conversation was going to start when he was five. (David; 37; m5f2)[[4]](#footnote-4)

Many parents reported the supposition that if a child does not ask, they must not be ready for, or be in need of, information. As a consequence of parental desire to regulate knowledge and safeguard their children from *difficult* learning, any sexuality communication occurring is therefore generally a reactive process led by children’s inquisitive questioning. By way of illustration, comments by Adele and Mary below illustrate many parents’ views and approaches to open communication, in that it tends to be open albeit only to a certain point.

My policy, and people might not agree with it, is to tell the truth. But, only tell as much as they need to know. So I listen to the question she’s asking, and I’ll answer it, but I won’t go any further unless she asks another question. (Adele; 40; f5m2)

I’m very happy to answer his questions actually. But I think it has to be led by him. And as he asks, I just answer. And I’d made the decision very early on… I thought well I either, you know, I embellish this or we just go down an honest route. (Mary; 42; m6m4m2)

The comments made by both Adele and Mary also highlight the inconsistency between the open environment that parents desire and what actually parental openness means in practice. The act of waiting for a child to ask questions (child-led, rather than parent-led education) is evidently enmeshed with parental hesitancy to openness.

Typically, parents reported initiating conversations only once a child reveals knowledge that they have previously gained through other sources, such as at school, older siblings, or on television, be it accurate or not.

I remember when I was pregnant with [son], my niece, she must have been about five, and I was looking after her, and she said to me, she said Auntie, she said, “[male classmate] told me that your baby’s going to come out of your tuppence”, which is what she calls her {silence}…, “but you can’t, your tuppence won’t do that.” Because I was quite heavily pregnant then, she said, “how does it come out your tuppence?” So I phoned my sister and I said “do you mind if I…?” because obviously she kept asking, I said, “oh because, you know, something happens to it and it does.” So I just got a rubber band, and I was like you know how it stretches, I said, “Well when ladies are pregnant and they’re going to have a baby, your tuppence is just magic and stretches, so the baby comes out.” But I was like, “oh my god” obviously she said that I was pregnant and some, a five-year old boy in her class knew all about it [how a baby is born]. (Theresa; 41; m13f4)

Parents who reported being open to discussing matters of sexuality felt strongly that young children are in need of information and guidance, and should be provided with answers to their (frequently repetitive) questions. Yet the level of detail that parents felt confident and comfortable going into appeared to hamper the extent of, and opportunity for, learning. It is of interest, in Theresa’s description of how a baby comes out of the body, that, although they went to great lengths to provide an open and honest answer to her niece’s question (following permission from the mother), the explanation was curtailed by the continued use of the word *tuppence*. Even in the adult group discussion, Theresa felt unable to use the word vagina, highlighting the social taboo regarding its usage.

Other parents in the groups described feeling compelled to engage in discussions earlier than they had intended in order to counter misunderstandings and distortions.

[Son] must have been about seven, probably a bit older, when the ultimate words came out, “mummy when you have a baby, you have to use my willy don’t you? Or you’ll use daddy’s willy and you… and then you have an egg or something don’t you?” And he was a bit confused. So he’d obviously been talking in the playground and was a bit like confused… he knew so much, but he only knew bits of so much and he hadn’t connected it all together. I sort of stood there for like, well probably it was only seconds, but it felt like hours, and was like, “what am I supposed to say to that?” And his dad sort of looked at me and went, “right, come on [son], come with me.” And off they went…well all he said was that, “I explained to him, basically what boys have and girls have and how it works.” Exactly what he said I don’t know to this day. (Cath; 40; m18m16f7m3)

In the extract above it is apparent that neither the mother nor the father had previously considered how they were going to approach the difficult conversation of ‘the act of intercourse’ with their son, so were forced to react on the spot. It is interesting to note that Cath reported that there was no follow-up discussion or sharing with her husband about what had been said, despite the fact that there were other younger children in the household who would almost certainly be asking similar questions in the future.

***The Need for Truth***

Parents who had engaged in conversations with their children about sexual matters appeared to recognise that evasion of questions could actually lead to further confusion and possible anxiety for children, as illustrated by the two quotes from fathers below. Repudiation and denial, in their view, was therefore not deemed a protective or effective strategy.

By the time they come and eventually talk to us about it, they’ll already be confused. Do you know what I’m saying? So there’s certain things they need to know like about the body, like what this part of your body does and stuff like that. (Dave; 27; m7f4)

I said daddies put babies in mummies, and mummies look after babies in the womb for like nine months. And I could tell from his body language and from the way he was looking at me like, [he’s thinking] that’s not logical, that doesn’t make sense… then he said “okay daddy, but where did I come from you?” And so I said, “Well daddy planted the seed, a special seed in mummy and that seed grew and became you.” (David; 37; m5f2)

A handful of parents were keenly aware (sometimes from personal experience) that the same teaching needed to come from all key adults to ensure consistency in messaging and to retain credibility. This was seen as particularly challenging but highly significant when parents were separated and/or children where spending time in different households, as highlighted by the quote from Clinton who is separated from his daughter’s mother.

Actually if you tell your child one way and the other parent tells them another way, it’ll just confuse your child. “Oh, someone’s lying to me here, you know!” “Aren’t you the two people that told me I shouldn’t lie!” It’s like the last thing you want to do is be a blatant hypocrite. Saying to your son, or your daughter, this, this, that, that, that and then the mum tells the complete opposite and they’re like, “oh ok then, who do I believe? Like one of you two is lying to me!” (Clinton; 23; f3)

***The Threat of Ignorance***

There was universal agreement among parents (with some basing this on their personal experiences) that, from a young age, children need to know that not all adults are ‘good’ people and that not everyone can be trusted – the concept of ‘stranger danger’ was reported, despite the general acknowledgement among parents that children are at more risk from people they know than from people who are strangers to them. In almost all groups, parents cited fears and concerns regarding various high-profile child abductions, grooming and abuse cases reported in the media.

How do you translate what’s happening in the press to your children without scaring them, but making them also aware? I’ve had to cover a couple of stories where I thought no, I think it’s important for my daughter to be aware of this. I am keen to not scare her, but make her aware that horrible things do happen. There are horrible people out there. I hope I am surrounded by nice people, but I don’t know and I just want her to be aware. (Tessa; 39; f9m6)

A handful of the parents involved in the discussion groups reported that they had actively initiated conversations on topics that they felt were particularly important, in an attempt to prevent communication barriers and taboos becoming established. As highlighted below, Emily and Hannah were eager for their children to be aware of the issues surrounding ‘good touch/bad touch’ to reduce the possibility of abuse and for their own protection. For these parents, the strong belief that keeping bodies and sexual matters a closed subject could result in an abuser’s crimes going undetected was concern enough to promote action. Proactive communication from this sample of parents was not, however, reported as the norm.

We very much talk about our bodies, you know, belonging to us and being private, and that we choose who sees our bodies… I think those sorts of things are important. You know, that your body’s nothing to be ashamed of, that it’s yours and no-one else has the right to touch it or see it if you don’t want them to, because those things I think can be really important. (Emily; 33; m7f4)

I had a deliberate conversation about touching. Not letting people touch. But it kind of grew out of, I mean it was sort of a conversation when she was in the bath so it was in that kind of context. But it wasn’t something she asked. I thought…I want to make sure she understands. (Hannah; 37; f5m3)

***Exposure***

She’s already come back from school dancing around and going “I’m so sexy, I’m so sexy.” And it’s kind of like well alright we’re already getting to that place, and we’re going to have to start talking about this. (Nigel; 33; f6m2)

The concept of early sexualisation has become a major public and political concern in recent years. As such, the potential harm that early sexualisation may have on the sexual and social development of children has been the focus of various high-profile reports (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Pheonix, 2011). Unfortunately, there is no clear, shared agreed definition of ‘sexualisation’; consequently, the word has been used to create emotive responses, particularly among the parenting community, with claims that sexualisation has produced a rise in risky or undesirable sexual behaviours. It has also been argued that sexualised media outlets (i.e. music videos, celebrity magazines, the Internet, clothing and accessories) are leading children to become ‘sexualised too early’ placing them at increased risk of sexual abuse (Bragg and Buckingham, 2012; Lumby and Albury, 2010; Scott et al., 1998). As expected, the parents in this study expressed concerns about the potential impact exposure to sexual imagery and messaging could be having on their children, and how these could affect their understanding of mutuality, love, and respect in relationships.

I think the world has got so advanced now that it’s very difficult to say, don’t show it on the media, don’t put it on the billboards, well it’s just how it is, it’s a big job for us to deal with what they are seeing. If you’re saying “we’re not going to teach it because they are too young”, it’s too late. (George; 20; m2)

Everywhere you look, even on billboards, you know, there are women in bras and everything. And that’s not necessarily wrong, but it can give an inappropriate impression of what’s right, you know, for how girls appear to boys, and in what context they appear and what their role is. (Mary; 42; m6m4m2)

Parents of much younger children felt they could effectively utilise strategies to minimise exposure and exert control, for example, by making appropriate choices as to where to shop for clothes, keeping certain magazines out of sight, and controlling what children watch. As children grow-up and become more independent, however, parents realise that avoidance and evasion are less realistic options and new approaches need to be developed. For some, this meant actively providing a balance to the often misleading and inappropriate messages given out by other sources.

You know if you listen to the words of some of the songs and watch the videos, they are absolutely obscene, and, you know, and kids are being exposed to this. And they’re seeing it and they’re being sexualised without understand what it’s all about. You know, they’re doing the kind of the dance moves and all of that… and of course kids don’t understand it… what’s appropriate or not appropriate or when it might be appropriate, because it’s there in front of them… I will only let them watch something if I can sit down and watch it with them, to be absolutely sure what it is they’re watching. I can then have a conversation with them about it, if there is something inappropriate I can talk to them about it. (Louise; 41; f11m9m6)

Of particular concern to parents was the apparent ease at which explicit sexual imagery was found and displayed on the Internet. Across all of the groups, there were reports from parents of having to tackle and deal with occasions of accidental exposure they were somewhat unprepared for, or dealing with inappropriate results from googling. Indeed, many parents had applied parental control filters to their Internet to try and minimise risk of exposure or insisted that their children could only use the Internet when they were in the same room.

Our PC is in the kitchen, so that I can more or less see what they’re doing, and, you know, they look at all different things on there, but my daughter typed into YouTube I think, ‘pictures of horses’, to try and look at some pictures of horses. And down this side came up, *hung like a horse*, and *having sex with a horse,* and, you think “oh, this is the problem nowadays…” you really do, and I think I wouldn’t like them to find that by accident and see something…because some of the images on there…you know some of them are fine, but some things that you can accidentally come across are really quite disturbing I think for a little child. And the fact that you can put something so innocent into the search engine to get that. (Lorraine; 44; f13f7)

I mean I didn’t have anything [parental controls] on my computer and my little girl, she wanted to get a hamster and unbeknown to me there’s a really good porn site called Hamster something or the other. And she just put Hamster into her Google and it brought up this porn site. She’s going mummy, mummy! And I’m thinking “oh my God.” I didn’t think, that at her age I’d have to put that lock on the computer. I didn’t think that that was going to happen. (Hayley; 30; f5f1)

[daughter] was looking for something and we had virtual stripteases. You know, “why is she dancing round a pole with no clothes on?”… it’s not the fact that they come across sex; it’s the context of the sex that they come across. (Isabel; 34; f8m4)

***Healthy and Positive Relationships***

Parents expressed concern that talking openly about sexual matters could potentially harm the ‘innocence of childhood’ (McGinn et al., 2016; Robinson, 2012b) yet, conversely, they were particularly keen that interpersonal and emotional aspects of sexuality (positive relationships, love, intimacy, emotions) are nurtured from an early age. In juxtaposition, some parents reported wishing to embrace specific aspects of sexuality learning whilst guarding against others. The comments shown below from Mary, Carol, Vanessa and Deborah clearly illustrate the eagerness of parents for their children to grow up respecting both themselves and others, and to develop understanding and empathy for other people’s feelings from an early age.

It’s very important for me to get across to my boys that they must respect people. Actually, you know, in all, across the board, but particularly in their relationships with girls. It’s important for them to understand, when we get to that stage, that, you know, she’s maybe an object to desire, but she’s also a person in her own right and how you put that across I don’t know. But I know I will be, going on and on and on about it. (Mary; 42; m6m4m2)

I think we’re putting the cart before the horse. We’re talking a great deal about the anatomy of sex. But we’re actually, for me, we should be talking about the relationships and the feelings that should produce the sexual act. (Carol; 63; f17m7f5m4f3)

We have a lot of issues around sexist violence in our house and stuff like that, so I think that actually teaching children about sex and, more to the point, relationships and consent ideas and respect for both genders, is absolutely key. And the sooner we start doing that to very young children, the better. (Vanessa; 44; f5)

*(Facilitator) What impact do you think your approach and teaching will have on your child’s sexual development and behaviour in later life?* Well hopefully, hopefully, a positive self-image. That you know sex is healthy, it’s natural, and that it’s consensual. So hopefully yeah, basically a positive body image. And, and the confidence I think, yeah, confidence is very important. I suppose self-esteem actually. (Deborah; 49; F6)

***Openness***

Parents in all of the focus groups conveyed a desire to form strong, open relationships with their children, often in contrast to their own childhood experience. Despite some degree of concern regarding their ability to relate, and therefore deal with questions and queries arising from children of the opposite sex (as illustrated by the quote from Gemma below), parents wanted their children to feel able to speak to them about anything.

Something, it made me think, I thought well I’m not prepared for that… he got his first erection… he was going get down, get down, why won’t he get down… I just sort of said to him don’t worry about it, it was nothing to be embarrassed about and it happens to all men and we’ll get daddy to talk to you about it. But I think that side of it dad should explain, because it’s something that I don’t experience, you know I don’t know how it works, how it feels, when it happens. And so I think that’s a definitely a dad one. I mean I would really like my children to feel they can always talk to me about any subject. (Gemma; 39; m7f3)

I said well the day I have kids, I want to be open. And they need to come and talk to me… and especially because I’ve got a daughter…You know I want her to be able to feel that she can talk to me about anything. Likewise my son as well… I had to change a lot of things as well, because my upbringing was very closed. (Maddy; 36; f7m4)

Below, Lucy acknowledges that there is a limited period of time in which she can openly discuss matters of a sexual nature without the impediment of embarrassment or discomfort – either her own or her child’s. She also recognises that her actions now will provide the foundations and underpin any personal or sensitive conversations she will have with her child/ren in the future.

You have a very small window of opportunity to talk to your children about this, with them feeling comfortable and you feeling comfortable… So I guess what I would be very aware of is not to miss the window of opportunity. Because I think it does, lay really important foundations for how they perceive sex and who they can talk to about it, and how they gain your views about it, and I think also then it might impact on other things and other areas of life that they may or may not confide in you. If you can’t be open and accepting of questions and things you might have to answer about the most intimate things with them, then there may be other things that they might not come to you about. (Lucy; 39; f12m11m10m8f5)

# Discussion

In keeping with earlier research (for example, Ballard and Gross, 2009; Walsh, Parker, and Cushing, 1999), parents in this study understood the importance of their role in early sexuality education, and the findings demonstrate that they are – to greater or lesser degrees – making strategic decisions on how to discuss matters of relationships and sexuality with their young children.

Parents who reported open communication can be readily divided into two distinct groups -reactive and proactive. Firstly, there are those parents who have been prompted to communicate, either as a result of direct questioning, in response to a comment made by a child or fearing that a child had obtained incorrect information or been exposed to a potentially harmful situation. The second, much smaller grouping, comprises parents who have taken a more proactive strategy and have personally instigated conversations about particular issues in advance of any questions or situations arising; before misinformation is gained and taboos and embarrassment prohibit open and honest communication. Among these proactive communication parents, there was a distinct (although minority) subgroup of parents who reported actively choosing to communicate both fully and openly about a whole range of sexual matters from an early age. A cautionary note should be made, however, on parental interpretations of openness and honesty. As has been recognised by Jackson and Scott (2004) and Frankham (2006), parents who report being open about sexuality are, in fact, ‘defining openness in rather narrow terms’ (Jackson and Scott, 2004, p235) and that many of the ‘openings’, in the form of questions that children provide to parents are not fully exploited, resulting in possible educational curtailment. Similarly, parents who believe they are being honest, sometimes alter facts or make things up, but report honesty because they are engaging with children’s questions to some degree at least. Findings from this study appear to support this observation.

Parents in this study who had chosen to communicate about sexual matters provided a range of justifications as to why they felt childhood sexuality communication was appropriate and necessary. For some parents, a belief that not having an answer to, or an explanation for, something they have seen or heard could be worrying and confusing to a child, prompted communication. By talking openly and truthfully about sexual matters, parents hoped to support their children develop into confident communicators who are more skilled at asking for help and support. Furthermore, parents who actively communicated felt that listening carefully to young children, and taking their questions and queries seriously, helps to build self-confidence and self-esteem and a future independence and ability to speak up and assert themselves.

Other parents chose to communicate openly because they felt a strong desire to protect their children from sexual ignorance and enable them to identify or avoid occasions when they could be at risk. Most importantly, they wanted to safeguard their children from others who could exploit sexual ignorance and may cause harm. High-profile child abduction, grooming and sexual abuse cases in the media serve to strengthen some parents’ resolve to be open; this is compatible with work in Australia by Walsh and Brandon (2011), who considered the importance of parental involvement in child sexual abuse prevention education.

It is evident that parents, and society more widely, are concerned that young children appear to be increasingly exposed to sexual messages, attitudes and values (either actively or passively) through media and marketing; a number of reports on early sexualisation in the UK are clear examples of this (Bailey, 2011; Bragg and Buckingham, 2012; Bragg, Buckingham, Russell, and Willett, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010). Some parents in this study who reported talking openly with their children say they do it in order to counteract the misleading and inappropriate messages about sexuality frequently given out by other sources, driven by the belief that such misinformation could have a detrimental effect on their understanding and instil dangerous myths. Furthermore, a recent Ofcom report has highlighted that children are increasingly going online at younger and younger ages; 41% of 3-4 years olds in the UK and 67% of 5-7 year olds use the internet for the purposes of game playing, watching TV or videos, social networking or information seeking (Ofcom, 2016). Parents reported the increasing need to communicate about sexual matters in order to retain some control over on-line content exposure, help their children recognise potential harmful content and ensure online safety.

Conversely, other parents talked openly about relationships, babies and bodies, in order to support their children to develop an awareness and understanding of positive, healthy relationships and prepare them for later learning and life experiences. Such communication is seen as laying the early ground for the establishment of mutuality and respect. Children learn early on how to establish relationships and bond and how to behave around others (Carlson, Sampson, and Sroufe, 2003). What a child learns in their early years about relationships and affection is likely to set the stage for bonding and intimacy in later years; others positioned open communication as the basis of a strong parent-child relationship.

This variation in reasoning concurs with other studies, and highlights that there is no single accepted strategy for communication in relation to educating children about sexual matters (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Walker, 2001).

The findings of this study showed little evidence of communication occurring as a one-off ‘big-talk’, as was also reported by Walker (2001) in her research with parents in the north of England. Rather, parents were mindful of their child/ren’s ability to comprehend and process what they were being told and to provide information in a more gradual ’drip-feed’ manner; providing partial truths that they felt they could elaborate on at a later stage. However, it could be argued that this gradual approach could also be linked with growing parental confidence, both in their ability to communicate effectively, and to do so without negative consequences. There was also evidence that parents used every-day routine practices, such as bath time and getting dressed and undressed, as trigger moments for discussions to occur.

Given the relatively localised nature of the data collection, caution should be taken in extrapolating these findings to other areas of the UK or other countries. The data presented were derived from an exploratory study involving a socio-economically diverse group of over 100 parents in London and the south of England. The study, moreover, was based on a sample of self-selected parents (predominately mothers) and, given the recruitment techniques used, it is possible that they represent parents who are more favourable towards talking openly to young children about sexual matters, and/or are potentially more comfortable talking about the issues with other adults. Finally, data were gathered using focus group discussions, so there is a risk that parental responses were affected by social pressure and norms.

That said, given the importance of positive open communication between parents and children for healthy sexual and emotional development, the results and justifications parents give for opening dialogue are likely to be of keen interest to health educators. They help advance current understanding of parenting strategies and, as such, could aid the development of relevant and supportive material to assist less confident parents. This could include, for instance, the introduction of early years parenting courses or discussion groups on sex and relationships education, and the introduction of media literacy programmes in schools to enable children to critically analyse media messages from a young age. Resources to assist with scripting or narratives, and story books which open up opportunities for parents to discuss some of the more challenging topics (including issues around child protection and safeguarding), might also be found to be useful. Ballard and Gross (2009) concluded that parents do not necessarily need information about sexuality per se but information and advice about how to be effective sexuality educators and communicators. Indeed, a recent study examining the readability of educational materials to support and motivate parent sexual communication with their children found that the majority of online materials did not meet the needs of many or most parents (Ballonoff Suleiman, Lin, and Constantine, 2016).

The study also highlighted the apparent lack of communication occurring between some parenting partners. There is need for parents to acknowledge and discuss their respective beliefs and ideas regarding sexuality education, and to establish collaborative strategies for the development of a home environment conducive to positive and consistent sexual communication. Creating awareness of the importance of a unified approach might be a crucially important element in the development of parental programs. Furthermore, the more ‘open’ parents may value support in how to deal with the negative reactions they could receive from others, whilst consideration also needs to be given regarding the reported suspicions that appear to arise when young children are thought to ‘know too much’. As well as developing these helpful resources, an important next step for future research is to consider the importance of family structure (including family dissolution and reconstitution) and the effect of gender (of both parent and child) in positive early sexuality communication.

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Table 1: Participants by selected demographic characteristics

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | No. participants | % participants |
| Gender |  |  |
| Male | 28 | 25 |
| Female | 82 | 75 |
| Age (years) |  |  |
| Under 25 | 15 | 14 |
| 25-29 | 15 | 14 |
| 30-34 | 14 | 13 |
| 35-39 | 24 | 22 |
| 40-44 | 27 | 25 |
| 45 and over | 15 | 14 |
| Ethnicity |  |  |
| White British | 74 | 67 |
| Asian | 7 | 6 |
| Black Caribbean | 7 | 6 |
| Black African | 9 | 8 |
| Other (incl. Mixed) | 13 | 12 |
| Faith |  |  |
| Christian | 61 | 55 |
| Muslim | 10 | 9 |
| Hindu | 2 | 2 |
| Jewish | 1 | 1 |
| Of no faith | 36 | 33 |
| Parental/caring responsibility^ |  |  |
| Natural parent | 108 | 98 |
| Step parent | 4 | 4 |
| Foster/Adoptive parent | 4 | 4 |
| Grandparent | 1 | 1 |
| Relationship status |  |  |
| Living with partner/spouse | 78 | 71 |
| Single | 24 | 22 |
| Non-cohabiting relationship | 8 | 7 |
| National Index of multiple deprivation ^^ |  |  |
| Very low | 27 | 25 |
| Low | 17 | 16 |
| Average | 17 | 16 |
| High | 24 | 22 |
| Very high | 24 | 22 |

^ Numbers will not add to 110 as multiple responses allowed.

^^ One participant did not provide a valid postcode.

1. Sites were local authority areas within the former Government Offices of London and the South East. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From now on referred to as “parents”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Based on the participants’ postcode. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Participant coding – (Alias; age; gender/age of each children) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)