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Talking about sex with teenagers: not an open and shut case

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Parents with teenage children believe in "open communication" when talking about sex, but there is confusion about what this means in reality with some adults finding it difficult to balance openness with teenagers' need for privacy.

These are some of the findings of a study published in the journal *Sex Education* by researchers from the University of Melbourne's Key Centre for Women's Health in Society.

As part of a larger study on parent-adolescent communication about sex, Dr Maggie Kirkman and Professor Doreen Rosenthal together with US academic Shirley Feldman analysed in-depth, open-ended interviews with 51 mothers, fathers and children from 19 Melbourne families. In three families, stepfathers lived with children.

"Openness" was the most commonly described criterion of good communication by parents in the study. Only one married couple from the same family said there was too much openness about sex. Mothers "should be as open as possible. If they don't know, they should make the effort to learn. You are responsible for that child's education," one participant said.

Discussions about sex tended to be constrained by gender, with sons preferring, on the whole, to talk to their fathers, and daughters preferring to talk to mothers.

"Our research has found that parents are trying hard not to overwhelm their children with information and at the same time they want to overcome their own embarrassment," said Dr Kirkman.

Adolescents said they were sometimes uncomfortable with too much talk about sex from parents. "I reckon if children want to know, they'll definitely ask. Don't go just talking about it any old time." Another said his father was very open about sex, but added: 'he says that if there's anything I want to know about...he will

explain. But usually I'm a bit embarrassed...I'd rather not."

But the complexity of the topic was revealed in a comment from one stepfather who said:

"We're pretty open. I sort of try to keep my mouth shut."

Dr Kirkman said the comment reflected the view from adolescents and parents that openness was a "slippery" term. "Openness includes the willingness to answer questions, but not keeping a spotlight on the topic; having an open minded attitude; balancing openness with privacy and being responsive to the characteristics of the child. It is not enough to say you are willing to answer questions, you have to demonstrate openness in other ways," she said.

This study expands on earlier research findings: that having an open communication style will influence the way sex and other sensitive topics are discussed in families.

Kirkman, M. Rosenthal D.A, Feldman, S.S "Being open with your mouth shut: The meaning of openness in family communication about sexuality," Sex Education, 5:1 2005, pp.49-66.

Dr Maggie Kirkman is available for interview

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