

Safe Sex: A Study of the Influences on Safe Sexual Decision Making

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Abstract

Two questionnaires and a survey conducted by Dr. Corey Gilbert in his Human Sexuality course taught at two private, Christian universities provided the data for this research. Research was conducted using statistical correlation between sexual experiences against social and environmental factors, including but not limited to: parental influence, sexual education in school, comfort talking with peers, and age of sexual exposure. The quantitative cross correlation revealed many statistically significant correlations including student conservativeness with sexual behaviors, parental influence on the child's sexual behavior, and a correlation between the main source of sexual information and number of risky sexual experiences. The qualitative data was derived from questions about the Human Sexuality course itself, and revealed students in these courses, not dependent on their sexual experiences or self-labeled conservativeness, are eager to discuss their feelings and experiences in the effort to better understand healthy sexuality. There appears to be something missing in our present day system of teaching sexuality, and it is evident in the mentality and behaviors of our current college generation.

Sexual Influences, Psychology, Sexual Behavior

1. Introduction

There appears to be something missing in the present day system of teaching sexuality, and it is evident in the mentality and behaviors of the current college generation. 46% of all high school students, and 62% of all high school seniors have had sexual intercourse¹. Almost 14% of all United States high school students have had sexual intercourse with four or more partners². A 2009 survey by the Center for Disease Control found that 19.8% of middle schoolers have had sexual intercourse³. Students of all ages are engaging in sexual activity, whether or not they are being adequately prepared for it. The age of first sexual experience continues to be low, and the lowering age of puberty, especially for girls, may cause increased sexual curiosity at younger ages⁴. The information students are receiving in schools with the effort of preparing them for sexual intercourse and communicating the importance and seriousness of it is not persuading many students to abstain. Over half the students in high school are engaging in sexual intercourse, increasing their risk of health and emotional complications. Sexual education which persuades students to abstain from sexual activity until adulthood would be more effective at preventing teen pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections in the younger generations.

2. Data

Dr. Corey Gilbert collected written data in his "Human Sexuality" courses between 2008 and 2015. The data was taken from Toccoa Falls College in Georgia as well as Corban University in Oregon. The data was collected at two

occasions each semester, through a pre-class assessment and a post-class assessment. The pre-class assessment was in the form of two questionnaires stapled together, one titled Pre-Class Assessment and the other titled Sexual Experience Questionnaire. The Pre-Class Assessment included ten questions which investigated the history of sexual information, comfort, and preference of each student. Some sample questions include “where did you learn the most about sex?”, “did sexual education in school prepare you for sex?”, and “on a scale of 1 to 5, how comfortable did you feel talking with your parents about sex?”. The Sexual Experience Questionnaire included twelve questions regarding the sexual encounters and morality of the student, with questions like “if you have had oral sex, how often did you use condom protection?”, “what are your qualifications before entering into a sexual relationship?”, and “have you had sexual intercourse?”.

The post-class assessment was derived of two qualitative questionnaires. The first was in the form of an advertisement written for a potential student outlining the highlights or realistic expectations of the “Human Sexuality” course. The second document was a short answer questionnaire asking for suggestions for improvements, highlights of the course, as well as comfort in the course. The total sample of complete responses was 192 students. Though there were additional incomplete responses, for the sake of correlation analysis, only fully completed surveys were used in this study.

3. Methodology

Data was collected in the beginning and end of the each semester of the Human Sexuality course by Dr. Corey Gilbert. The Pre-Class Assessment and Sexual Experience survey were distributed, completed, and collected anonymously at the beginning of the semester. Likewise, the Post-Class Assessment and Advertisement were distributed, completed, and collected anonymously at the end of the semester. The Pre-Class Assessment and Sexual Experience surveys were stapled together before distribution, allowing correlation between the two surveys. All the data was entered into Microsoft Excel using a “zero,” “one” format, with a “one” meaning a participant bubbled in that answer and a “zero” meaning that answer was left blank (Fig. 1). This was necessary because over 20% of participants filled in more than one answer for single questions, and there is no way to ethically decide which answer they meant more than the other.

Number	Gender	Age	Year	Where did you learn the most about sex?				
				School	Parents	Siblings	Friends	Internet
1	0	19	2009	0	0	1	1	1
2	0	20	2009	0	0	0	1	0
3	0	19	2009	0	0	0	1	0
4	0	22	2009	0	0	0	0	1
5	0	20	2009	1	0	0	0	1

Figure 1. Example of “zero,” “one” format in Excel. Each row represents the data of the same participant.

After the data was entered and organized in Excel, the information was uploaded to SPSS. A linear correlation test was ran in SPSS to determine if there was a correlation between sexual experiences and sources of sexual education. Factors that were determined to be correlated were further investigated. Specifically, a 2-way ANOVA was performed to compare how comfort talking to parents affected whether a student chose their parents or the internet as their primary provider of information about sex. In addition, a second 2-way ANOVA was performed to determine if students who went to their parents as their primary source of sexual education were more likely to have sex than those who went to their friends. Graphs were made in Excel and GraphPad.

The qualitative data collected at the end of each semester was analyzed using the methods described in *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* by J.W. Creswell⁵. All the data was evaluated for themes by a single researcher, then quantified into a numeric code to show frequency and recurrence of each theme. These findings were not included in this study.

4. Results

The first place investigated to assess the influences of sexual decision making was the public schools. In the United States, 24 states and the District of Columbia require public schools to teach sex education⁶. In addition, 33 states are required to teach HIV/AIDS prevention⁷. Sex education in school is designed to teach students about sex, and as a result, some parents may be tempted to decrease their involvement in their children's sexual lives. The issue with this is that most students do not feel that sexual education in school is adequately preparing them for sexual intercourse.

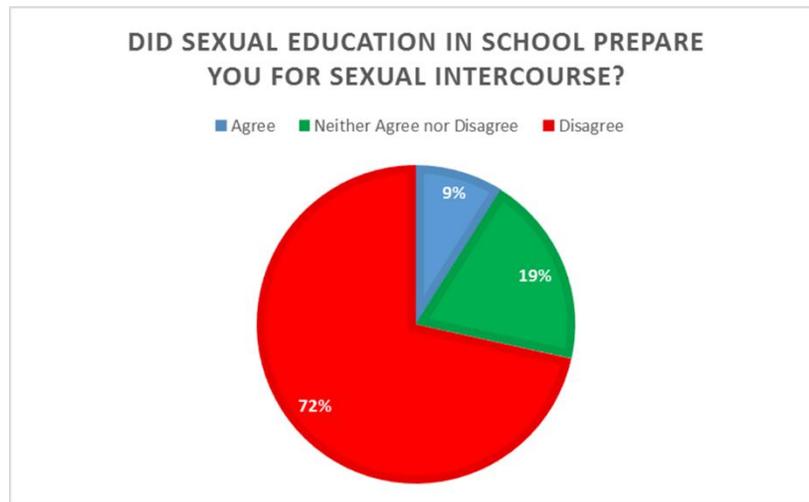


Figure 2. Participants (n=150) described if sexual education in school prepared them for sexual intercourse.

Of the students who had sex education in school (n=150), only 14 (9%) agreed that sex education prepared them for sexual intercourse. Of the students who labeled one primary source of information about sex, only 8% chose school. Of the 33 students who labeled more than one primary source of their primary source of information about sex, only 4 included school.

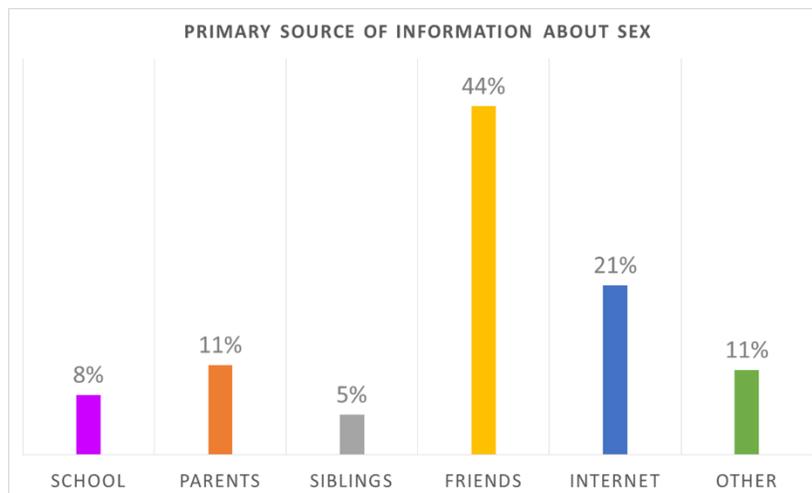


Figure 3. The participants (n=159) chose a single primary source of information about sex.

In their desire to learn more about sex, participants were looking to various alternative sources. Students mainly turned to either their friends, the internet, or their parents for information about sex. Nearly half the students labeled

their friends as their primary source of information about sex. Additionally, 21% labeled the internet as their primary source, leaving the parents with only 11%.

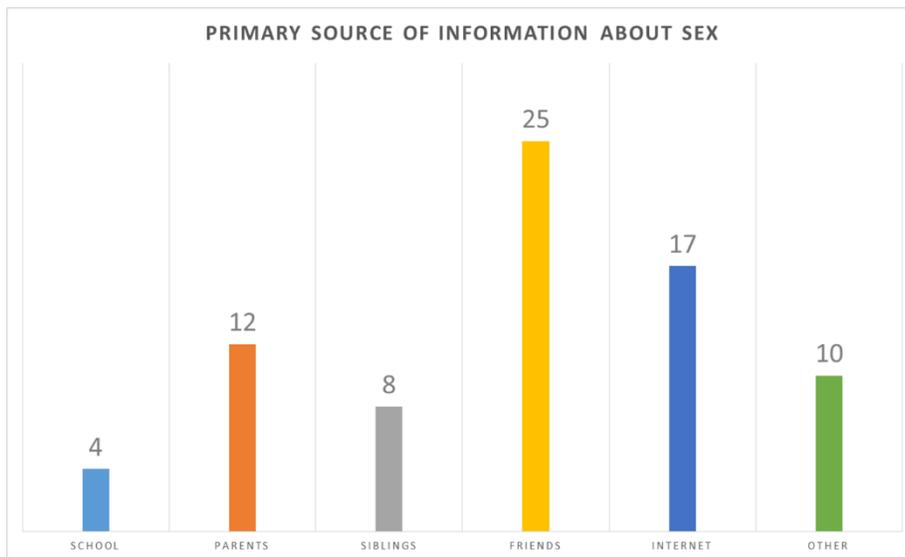


Figure 4. The participants (n=33) chose multiple primary sources. Each bar represents the number of responses for that category, with each student making up two or three responses total in various combinations.

The participants (n=33) who labeled multiple primary sources had the same trends as those who only labeled one primary source. Figure 3 shows the number of responses in each category, with each individual participant making up two or three responses total. These trends and statistics show a stark contrast to what is intended and conceived about the sources of sex education in the youth.

After observing the general patterns of where students turn to find their information about sex, the question of potential influences rose to the surface. Scouring through the data, only one influence showed any statistical influence on where a student turns with their questions: comfort talking with parents. Students who are comfortable talking to their parents about sex go to their parents for information about sex more often than those who are uncomfortable with their parents.

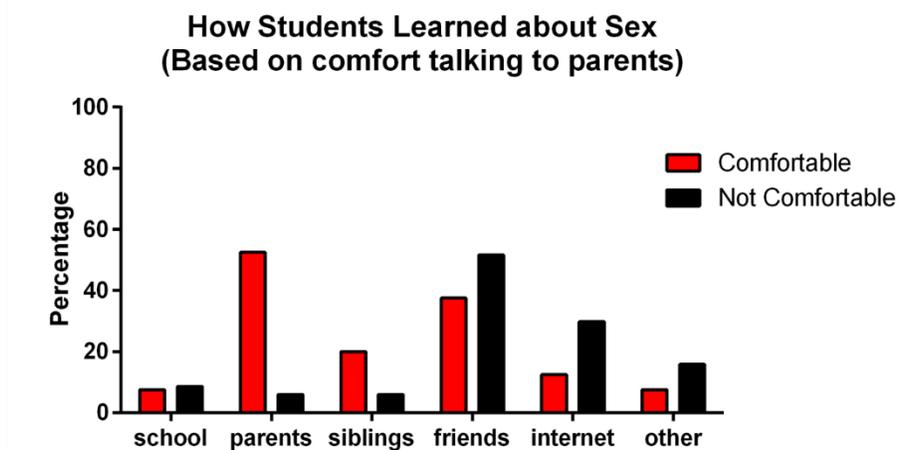


Figure 5. Source of primary information about sex (n=186) based on comfort talking to parents about sex or not.

Looking at this graph (fig. 5), it is clear to see that some categories remain relatively unchanged, such as school, friends, and other; however, there appears to be a significant trend in both the parents and the internet category. Upon deeper inspection, those who feel comfortable talking with their parents about sex (n=39) are statistically more likely to go to their parents for information about sex. Figure 6 shows the significance of comfort talking with parents and primary source of information about sex. Those who are not comfortable talking with parents are statistically significantly more likely to go to the internet for information about sex, while those who are more comfortable talking with their parents about sex are statistically significantly more likely to go to their parents about sex.

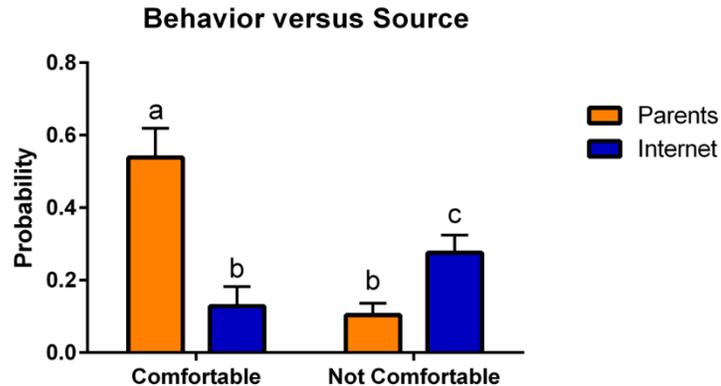


Figure 6. Behavior versus Source. The comfort of talking with parents significantly impacts the primary source. 2-way ANOVA yielded a p-value less than 0.05, supporting the correlation as significant and not due to chance. A, B, and C are all statistically different from each other.

Because the highest competitor for parental influence is peer influence, sexual activities were compared between the two groups. Figure 7 shows there was no statistical difference influencing the frequency of students turning to their friends for information about sex. Those who turn to their parents for information about sex are statistically significantly more likely to be abstinent than those who turn to their friends for information about sex ($p < 0.05$).

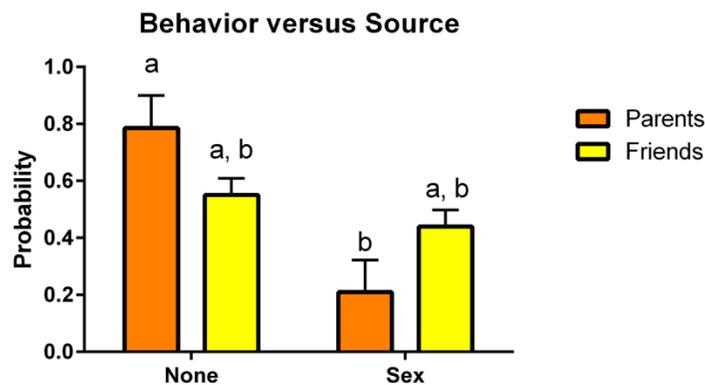


Figure 7. Behavior versus Source. The comfort of talking with parents significantly impacts the sexual activities of the student. 2way ANOVA yielded a p-value of less than 0.05. A and B are statistically different from each other.

The issue with this statistic comes to light when looking at the number of students who feel comfortable talking with their parents about sex. Only 39 students out of the 188 students who responded to this question answered that they were in any way comfortable talking with their parents about sex. This translates to only 21% of the total participants

comfortable talking with their parents. 79% of the participants do not feel comfortable talking with their parents about sex, and the majority of these students are turning to their friends and the internet for their information (Fig. 3, 4).

5. Discussion

5.1 Application Of Sample To General Public

Some may argue that because students at both Toccoa Falls College as well as Corban University would be labeled as conservative by the general population, their data would not be an accurate representation to apply to the general population. Both colleges require a statement of faith for admittance, allegedly holding to the core foundational teachings of the Christian faith. Based on self-reported data, only 52% of students labeled themselves as conservative, 30% as in the middle, and 18% as liberal.

Though it may be speculated that the data collected from these conservative Christians may not properly represent the population and therefore can only be used for similar sub populations like conservative Christian circles or private schools, this is a misplaced concern. In 2008 the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy conducted a research project showing 80% of the unmarried Christian population between the ages of 18 to 29 had had sexual intercourse⁸. This was similar to the 88% of non-Christian population. When Grey Matter Research, an independent research company, saw these statistics, they looked into the numbers on their own⁹. They applied a filter to what the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy had called “Christian.” They found that to be labeled as Christian in that research, a participant only needed to mark “yes” if they labeled themselves as “Christian, fundamentalist, or born-again,” leaving a lot of room for error and interpretation. Grey Matter Research therefore applied an additional filter, labeling “Christians” as those who attend church as least once a month, read the Bible and pray at least once a week, and hold to the core values of the Christian faith. Of those that responded, 44% of unmarried Christians between the ages of 18 and 20 answered they had had sex¹⁰. Therefore, the information collected in this study aligns with the national averages, and therefore can represent the general public.

5.2 Need For Comfortable Environment For Discussion About Sex

The Center for Disease Control defines risky sexual behaviors as those which increase the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and experiencing unintended pregnancies¹¹. They include having sex at an early age, having multiple sexual partners, having sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and engaging in unprotected sexual encounters. Based on the data available through these collected surveys, only the condom usage, age of first sexual experience, and number of partners was able to be assessed. Upon further inspection, there was no significant data that showed any influence on condom usage or any trends in the age of first sexual experience; however, there was an influence on the number of sexual partners as seen through the trends of the primary source of information about sex.

A study in Chile showed that the primary sources for information about sexual health came from parents, teachers, and friends; however, there was revealed a large gaps between adolescent needs and information provided through these mediums¹². The information commonly reported from these sources mainly focused on providing biological information, not addressing the emotional impact and significance of sexual activity. Those who are comfortable talking with their parents about sex and who go to them as their primary source of information about sex are statistically significantly less likely to have sex than those who are not comfortable talking with their parents about sex and go to other sources for information. The implications of this, especially in conservative families, is crucial. In 2013, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy conducted a survey to teens and parents about communication, prevention, and activity. When asked if it would be easier for teens to postpone sexual activity and teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversation about these topics with their parents, 87% of teens between 12-19 and 90% of adults agreed. In contrast, 90% of teens and 88% of adults believe parents don’t know what to say or how to start these conversations¹³.

The first step to positively influencing a child’s sexual behavior comes from the parents making a safe and comfortable environment for which to talk about sex. Some parents may fear talking about sex with their children for fear of putting the idea of having sex in their head¹⁴. According to a 2002 study by Seventeen Magazine, children between the ages of 15 and 17 may not talk to their parents due to several reasons¹⁵. First, 83% of teens report they are worried about their parents’ reactions if they bring up the topic of sex and that they think their parents will assume they have had sex or are going to have sex. Over 75% of those surveyed were embarrassed to talk to their parents about sex, and that they simply didn’t know how to bring it up.

When parents fail to create an environment in which their children feel comfortable coming to them with their questions and curiosities about sex, it sets children up to seek knowledge from elsewhere. Students are mainly turning to one another and the internet, which has the potential to provide false information and minimize the emotional ramifications of sexual experiences. Going to friends or the internet are not reliable sources in many cases, and therefore children may be educated and influenced by inexperienced or unemotional means. One way to create the environment necessary for this kind of conversation is to start at a young age. According to one survey conducted by the Keizer Family Foundation, 77% of parent participants agree that parents generally wait too long to being talking with their children about relationships and becoming sexually active¹⁶. There are several guides for age-appropriate conversations about sex, but each adheres to the same general guidelines¹⁷. By age three, children should understand the terminology for their sexual organs. As that foundation is made, children's questions about sex should be encouraged and answered honestly in terms they are able to understand, so that they do not feel embarrassed or guilty for asking certain types of questions. As they age, it is likely they will continue to see their parents as a good source for information about sex, allowing that comfort to be maintained through puberty and beyond.

In conclusion, the current system of teaching sexual education to students is failing to meet their needs. If students are turning to their friends and the internet before their parents or their public education, a change should be made. If parents want to decrease their child's likelihood of contracting a sexually transmitted infection, developing pregnancy, or experiencing the emotional and mental struggles that can come with being prematurely sexually active, they must work to create an environment in which their children feel comfortable coming to them with their questions.

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7. Endnotes

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