



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parent-Child Communication about Sexuality : a Theory of Planned Behaviour Approach

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to know the intentions of Indian parents in conversations about sex subjects with their children. The theory of planned behaviour formed the theoretical framework of the study. A total of 85 parents who were between the age group of 30 to 50 years and the age of at least one of their children between 8 to 18 years participated in the study. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the parents do have intentions to have communication about sexuality with their children. The actual indulgence of the parents in sexual communication with their children was seen to be moderate. The intentions of the parents were seen to be significantly associated with their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

support, and autonomy encouragement with their children play a vital role in adding to the healthy sexual behaviour of their children (Klein *et al.*, 2018). Adolescents who do not get sex education from their parents are more likely to have negative sexual health consequences (Crosby *et al.*, 2009). Proper communication about sexuality equips children with the right information to make informed decisions, it prevents early sexual debut, increases the probability of engaging in safer sexual practices, helps in the development of acceptable sexual behaviour, helps in maintaining good sexual health, and avoids risky sexual behaviours, it also helps one to know themselves better.

Although there are various positive outcomes of having communication about sexuality with children, many parents face multiple problems that hinder them from engaging in communication with their children (Pariera, 2016). Some of the barriers to parent-child sexual communication in India include the conservative mindset of parents, some parents feel they would or their children would be embarrassed or uncomfortable engaging in communication about sexuality, and some parents think that their children are already aware of various information related to sexual health through other sources, some parents feel it would be problematic for them to explain things related to sexuality to their children, sometimes parents themselves lack adequate information to aware their children, particularly of topics like HIV/AIDS (Jain & Singhal, 2017; Sandra Byers *et al.*, 2020; Guilamo-Ramos *et al.*, 2012).

A study done by Jain & Singhal (2017) revealed that

Introduction:

Parent-child conversation on sex subjects builds a strong foundation for sexual health for children through acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships, and intimacy. Conversation on sexuality involves not only focusing on sexual intercourse and reproduction but also involves various other aspects of life related to sexuality. With the help of proper parent-child communication, children can have a positive and healthy attitude and behaviour towards various aspects of sexuality.

Parents are among one the least sources of sex-related information in a conservative country like India (Deshmukh & Chaniana, 2020; Manjula & Dutt, 2017). Many Indian adolescents get information related to sex from various informal sources (Jaya & Hindin, 2009). Internet, friends, movies, newspapers, magazines, and books are the major sources of information for adolescents and when they are in doubt about topics related to sexuality they prefer to get their answers by having discussions with their friends than with their parents (Manjula & Dutt, 2017) which can be very problematic as the friends themselves are figuring out these topics for themselves and not have adequate information on them.

Evidence from different researches points toward the various benefits parent-child communication about sexuality yields (Widman *et al.*, 2016; Parkes *et al.*, 2011; Troth & Peterson, 2000). Those parents who work effectively in aspects like communication, emotional

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though there was mutual acknowledgement between parents and adolescents about how important it is to have an open discussion about topics related to sexual health still communication about these topics was relatively low. Similar findings were revealed in the study done by Sandra Byers *et al.* (2020). It was also revealed in the study that the parents whose own parents had communicated with them about sexuality had a higher probability to engage in communication about sexuality with their children. In a study done by Guilamo-Ramos *et al.* (2012) in a rural community in Maharashtra, it was revealed that parents believed that it is inappropriate to talk to children about sexual topics before their marriage as it can affect their child's sexual behaviour negatively. Parents believed if they engaged in such communications with their children then they would look bad in front of their communities. Mothers reported that they would talk about these topics with their daughters only when their daughters are married. Joshi (2010) conducted research in Mumbai to assess the knowledge of adolescents about important topics related to sexuality. The participants scored low on items such as conception and pregnancy symptoms, but higher on items such as masturbation, orgasms, contraception. There was no gender difference in terms of awareness of adolescents. Respondents also revealed that the major source of their knowledge about these topics were peers and books. The family was seen not to play any significant role in imparting knowledge regarding sexuality. The study concluded the lack of sexual knowledge among adolescents.

Many parents believe that sex education should be an effort by both parents and the school system (Weaver *et al.*, 2002). Many Indian parents have a positive attitude toward sex education in schools (Nagpal & Fernandes, 2015; Vashistha, 2012; Halder, 2021; Toor, 2012). But in India, in teacher education programs teachers are not educated or trained in the field of sexuality education (Ollis *et al.*, 2013) and thus many teachers lack the skills to provide adequate sex education. In the study done by Debnath & Shahani (2018), it was revealed that out of the 32 teachers who participated in the study only 7 teachers teach the sex education chapter, 14 teachers skip the chapter, and 11 ask students to read the chapter by themselves. In the study, it was further revealed that the information provided through the school curriculum regarding sexual health was very limited and inadequate. The students were taught only about the anatomy of the human body, reproductive organs, and their functions. Topics related to sexual health were not being discussed at all. The study clearly shows that Indian school systems are not doing much in providing sexual health education to children.

Theory of planned behaviour:

The theory of planned behaviour forms the theoretical framework of this study. It has been applied in the area of parent-child communication about sexuality to examine

the intentions of the parents to engage in the communication about sexuality with their children. According to Ajzen (1991), the central focus of the theory of planned behaviour is the individual's intention to perform a particular behaviour. As per the theory, the intentions of a person are an important determinant of a person's actual behaviour. The higher the intention of the individual the higher would be the likelihood of the performance of the behaviour. The three conceptually independent factors that determine the intentions of the individual are as follows:

1. Attitude
2. Subjective Norm
3. Perceived Behavioral Control

Attitudes: the attitude of the individual towards the behaviour plays an important role in the determination of behavioural intention. It refers to the level of favorability or un-favorability towards the behaviour to be performed. Expectations regarding the potential benefits and disadvantages of a particular behaviour form the basis for attitude formation.

Subjective norms: this is a social factor. According to this factor, the behavioural intention of the individual to perform a behavior is influenced by their social system. The acceptance or rejection of a particular behaviour by the social system of the individual as evaluated by them affects their intention to perform the behaviour in question.

Perceived behavioral control: the degree of perceived behavioural control also plays an important role. It refers to a person's perception of how easy or difficult it would be to carry out a specific behaviour. Past experiences and anticipated hurdles are also considered in the evaluation of the degree of perceived behavioural control.

The higher the favorability of attitudes and subjective norms regarding the behaviour along with a higher level of perceived behavioural control, the greater would be the individual's intention to perform the particular behaviour in question (Fig.-1: Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)). The relative contribution of these three factors varies across different behaviours and contexts. Thus, in some cases, only one factor or two of the three factors can have enough significant impact in determining the intention. But still, all these three determinants make independent contributions.

The theory of planned behaviour has been successfully applied in various areas, such as, in health areas like substance abuse treatment completion (Zemore & Ajzen, 2014) in the area of nutrition-related interventions (Sweitzer *et al.*, 2011), in the study of preventing weight regain of individuals (McConnon *et al.*, 2012), in pro-environmental behaviours such as recycling (Steg & Vlek, 2009). In the Indian context also it has been applied in numerous areas, such as in understanding farmers' intentions to accept water policy options (Mahdavi, 2021),

to predict young Indian consumers' green hotel visit intention (Verma & Chandra, 2018), to understand the purchasing behaviour for environmentally sustainable products (Kumar, 2012), helmet use among health-care providers in urban India (Shruthi *et al.*, 2019). The theory of planned behaviour hasn't been applied in examining the intentions of the parents in engaging in communication about sexuality with their children in the Indian context. But the application of the theory to similar areas outside India has been seen to be successful (Astle, 2020).

Current research: parent-child communication about sexuality depends upon the intentions of the parents to engage in the communication. The higher the intentions higher would be the likability of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children. And this intention depends upon three factors, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Hence, the objective of the study was to investigate the intentions of parents to communicate about sexuality with their children. (Table-1).

Methodology:

The following hypotheses were made based on the objective of the study:

- H1: Subjective norms will have a significant influence on the intention to have communication about sexuality with children;
H2: Attitudes will have a significant influence on the intention to have communication about sexuality with children;
H3: PBC will have a significant influence on the intention to have communication about sexuality with children;
H4: Intention will have a significant influence on the actual communication about sexuality with children.

The sample consisted of 85 Indian parents (N= 85). The inclusion criteria were that the Indian parents must be between the age group 30-50 years and the age of at least one of their children should be between 8-18 years.

Survey was created on Google Forms to collect the data. The online survey was circulated through social networking platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp) and mail. Prior to the participation, the respondents read the cover letter which informed them about the purpose of the research, and informed consent was implied through their completion of the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Demographics: participants were asked certain questions to gain personal information about themselves. They were asked to provide information about their age, sex, educational background, occupational status, domicile, number of children, age of the oldest child in the age group 8-18 years, sex of the oldest child in the age group 8-18 years, marital status and an item asking whether all family members of the participant lived together or not.

Theory of planned behaviour: the survey instrument

was developed for the study after conducting a comprehensive literature review. The instrument consisted of 30 items. Items for each variable of the theory of planned behaviour i.e. attitudes (6 items), subjective norms (6 items), perceived behavioural control (7 items), intentions (4 items) as well as the actual behaviour (7 items) were framed. The responses to all of the items were given on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Table 1: Construct Description

#	Construct	Description
1	Attitudes (AT)	It refers to the attitude of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children.
2	Subjective Norms (SN)	It refers to the subjective norms of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children.
3	Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	It refers to the perceived behavioral control of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children.
4	Intentions (IN)	It is the intention of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children.
5	Actual Behavior (AB)	It refers to the actual behavior of parents to engage in communication about sexuality with their children.

Results:

The following tables summarized the overall results:

Table-2: Sample Characteristics (N= 85)

Parameter	Sub-category	N= 85	Percentage
Sex	Female	47	55.29%
	Male	38	44.70%
Education	Under Graduate	28	32.94%
	Graduate	42	49.41%
	Post Graduate ≥	15	17.64%

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N= 85)

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
AT	18.47	5.17	—	.170	.570**	.618**	.434*
SN	14.22	4.55		—	.509**	.509**	.511**
PBC	18.55	4.27			—	.752**	.710**
IN	14.65	2.7				—	.794**
AB	18.8182	4.38218					—

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

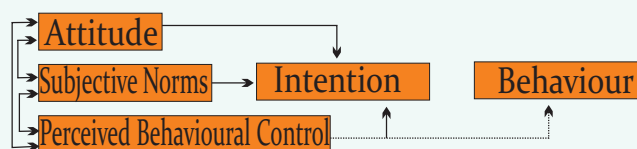


Figure-1: Theory of Planned Behaviour (Aizen, 1991)

Table 4: Regression analysis

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	PBC, SN, AT	.734	.539	.462	3.21533	.539	7.003	3
2	PBC, SN, AT, IN	.821	.675	.598	2.77759	.136	7.120	1

1-Step; 2-Predictor; 3-R; 4-R Square; 5-Adjusted R Square; 6-Std. Error of the Estimate; 7-R Square Change; 8-F Change; 9-df

Table 5: Responses of parents on whether they discuss certain topics related to sexuality with their children or not (N=85)

Questions	Yes	No
Discussed safe sex with my child.	18	67
Discussed homosexuality with my child.	22	63
Discussed pubertal changes with my child.	57	28
Discussed pornography with my child.	64	21
Discussed sexual attraction with my child.	58	27
Discussed with child on their engagement in sex.	36	49
Discussed handling sexual advances with my child.	68	17

Discussion:

The results revealed that the majority of parents had a higher intention to have communication about sexuality. The results of this study support the theory of planned behaviour as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control was significantly associated with the intentions of the parents to have communication about sex education with their children (Ajzen, 1991). A significant association between intentions and actual behaviour was also seen.

Subjective norms had a moderate level of association with the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children which is not consistent with the study done by Astle (2020) which found subjective norms to be having the least significant association with many of the outcome variables. Whereas in another study done by Gaiosio *et al.* (2015) subjective norms were seen to be the only significant predictor of intentions of having parent-child sexual communication. The variations in findings can be due to different cultural backgrounds among the participants in different studies.

Attitudes were also seen to have a moderate level of association with the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children. The majority of the participants had a high positive attitude toward the importance of parent-child sexual communication.

Perceived behavioural control had the most significant association with the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children which is consistent with various studies where perceived self-efficacy, a concept very similar to perceived behaviour control, was seen to be significantly linked with the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children (Guilamo-Ramos *et al.*, 2008; Byers & Sears, 2012). Perceived behavioural control was also

seen to be significantly associated with the actual behaviour.

The responses on items of actual behaviour also revealed that among the topics that were part of the instrument the topics that were discussed by most of the parents with their children included handling sexual advances, pornography, sexual attraction, pubertal changes and the least discussed topics included safe sex, homosexuality, and engagement of children in sexual behaviour.

All the hypotheses of the study, H₁, H₂, H₃, and H₄ were proven by the results of the study. The study has added to the limited knowledge about parent-child communication about sexuality in India.

The results of the study reveal perceived behavioural control to be the most significant variable in increasing the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children. So efforts should be made to increase the perceived behavioural control of the parents with the help of various programs, training, and parent education. These programs should focus not only on increasing the knowledge and awareness of the parents they should also increase the confidence and motivation of the parents to engage in the conversations.

Attitudes and subjective norms too have a significant impact on the intentions of the parents to have communication about sexuality with their children. Subjective norms can be increased among parents by organizing community programs where community members can help each other in a variety of ways like helping parents who are not sure how to engage in conversation with their children, increasing awareness and importance of communication about sexuality among community members, sharing some stories and experiences, encouraging each other, *etc.*

In conclusion, Indian parents do have intentions to have communication about sexuality with their children. The actual indulgence of the parents in sexual communications was seen to be moderate. These intentions are significantly associated with attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Among these variables, perceived behaviour control is the most significantly related to intentions and actual behaviour. The entities working towards increasing parents' communication about sexuality with their children and related areas should work towards increasing the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control of the parents to make them aware and motivate them to indulge in sexual communication with their children.

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