

Parents' Religion and Talking to Teens about Sex

Religiously active parents are not as likely to talk to their teenage children about sex and birth control as they are to talk about the morality of adolescent sex, according to an article recently published by National Study of Youth and Religion Co-Investigator Mark D. Regnerus, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Regnerus' article, "Talking about Sex: Religion and Patterns of Parent-Child Communications about Sex and Contraception," was published in a recent issue of *The Sociological Quarterly* (Volume 46, pages 79-105). Using both the National Study of Youth and Religion telephone survey data and the first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health survey data, Dr. Regnerus examines the effects of parental religiosity on the frequency of parent-child discussions about sex, sexual morality, and birth control.

The most prominent finding in the article is that parents' public religiosity is negatively associated with talking to their teenage children about sex and birth control. In other words, parents who attend religious services on a regular basis are less likely than parents who rarely or never attend religious services to talk to their children about sex and birth control. Religiously active parents are also more likely to report difficulties in talking to their children about sex. In addition to the effects of religious service attendance, Dr. Regnerus notes differences in parent-child communication about sex among the various religious traditions. Specifically, there are more parent-child discussions about sex and birth control in families affiliated with traditionally black Protestant denominations than in families affiliated with other Christian denominations and Jewish families.

The relationship between parental religiosity and discussions about sex and birth control are often in the opposite direction of the relationship between parental religiosity and discussions about the morality of sex. While parents who regularly attend religious services are less likely than other parents to talk to their teenage children about sex and birth control, they are more likely than other parents to talk to their children about the morality of adolescent sexual involvement. While a cursory examination suggests that parents who say that religion is very important to them are more likely than those who say that religion is not very important to talk about sex and birth control with their adolescent children, it appears that they are in fact more likely to talk to their children about the morality of sexual intercourse rather than sexual practices and teens' sexuality. In fact, once discussions about sexual morality are taken into account, parents who say that religion is important are less likely than other parents to talk to their children about birth control. According to Dr. Regnerus, "When religious parents say they are talking to their children about sex and birth control...the results suggest that this primarily refers to conversations about the

morality of adolescent sexual involvement.” There are also variations among religious traditions in parent-child discussions of the morality of adolescent sexual activity. Specifically, parents who are affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations, black Protestant denominations and the Church of Latter-Day Saints are particularly likely to talk to their children about the morality of premarital sex while Jewish parents and, to a lesser extent, Catholic parents are particularly unlikely to talk to their children about the morality of premarital sex.

The effects of parental religiosity on parent-child communications about sex and birth control are outweighed by the effects of certain family characteristics. For instance, parents talk to their adolescent children about sex and birth control more often when they believe their children have had sex and when their children report having had sex. Parents also talk about sex and birth control with girls and older teens more often than with boys and younger teens. Moreover, there is less parent-child communication about birth control in families where the parents disapprove of adolescent sexual activity and/or the child has pledged to not be sexually active before marriage. The racial composition of the family is one of the strongest predictors of parent-child communications about sex. In general, African-American parents discuss sex, birth control and sexual morality with their adolescent children more frequently than do white, Asian and Hispanic parents. Single-parents are also more likely than two-parent families to talk to discuss sex and birth control with their teenage children, perhaps in keeping with an elevated risk of earlier sexual activity.

Dr. Regnerus concludes that religious parents are not discussing sex and birth control with their children in a very productive manner. He says, “Religious parents have a lot of tools available to them to talk to their children about sex, both the morality of sex and the details of sex and birth control, but they are not drawing on them. They can present information about contraception and sex that also conveys morality.”

The National Study of Youth and Religion is funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. More than 3,350 teens along with one of their parents participated in the random-digit-dial telephone study of U.S. parent-teen pairs. The purpose of the project is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of U.S. adolescents; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent to which youth participate in and benefit from the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.