ENGAGING PARENTS IN SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH EDUCATION: “AWARENESS STARTS FROM HOME”

Research from Jordan

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WHY WORK WITH PARENTS?

Youth throughout the world face considerable challenges related to their sexual and reproductive health (SRH). They may approach adulthood faced with conflicting and negative messages pertaining to their SRH. Social and cultural norms often create barriers that prohibit youth from obtaining specific and timely SRH information and services. This situation that is often exacerbated by embarrassment and silence from adults, including parents.

The parent-child relationship is fundamental to shaping children’s trajectories through adolescence. Communication between parents and their children is one of the most important ways in which parents influence their children’s SRH attitudes and behaviors by using it as a means to educate while also transmitting values, beliefs, information and expectations. Youth who have open communication with their parents on SRH have been found to have better reproductive health outcomes.

Voices from Jordan

WHAT DO PARENTS THINK?

“The best way is to start from the family”
– Jordanian Father from Zarqa.

“Awareness starts from home.”
– Jordanian Father from Irbid

“Parents are the foundation for anything”
– Syrian Father from Irbid

WHAT DO YOUTH THINK?

“Some mothers do not have the confidence to discuss these matters with their daughter, fearing that it might open up further issues” – Syrian Girl from Irbid

“I always think of what a mother thinks because mothers always think the right way and [they have] an instinct for her daughter.” – Jordanian Girl from Amman
WHAT CONCERNS DO PARENTS HAVE? 
BREAKING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

The results indicate that Jordanian and Syrian parents acknowledged the need for parent-child communication on reproductive health topics; however, the majority of parents did not feel confident or comfortable in engaging with their children on such topics, partially due to what they described as a culture of shame surrounding SRH issues. Parent-child communication was a tool that parents of adolescents could use to break the silence about reproductive health issues.

“[Parents should] break the obstacle of shame [in order to] make youth feel like they are able to tell their parents anything that they face.” – Jordanian Father from Zarqa

“Most parents shy away from telling their sons or daughters what they have to teach them,” – Jordanian Mother from Amman

WHAT STRATEGIES DO PARENTS USE? 
KEY RESEARCH RESULTS

Gender Match
Fathers indicated that they primarily discuss SRH topics with their sons and mothers most often discuss such issues with their daughters. One Jordanian father from Amman said, “I discuss things with my son, but I think my daughter would be ashamed to talk to me about [these issues, so] her mother talks to her.” A Syrian mother from Zarqa confirmed “it is easier to talk to a female because she is close to you, for males it has to be their father who discusses such topics.”

Mothers are a Safe Space
As a Syrian mother from Irbid explained, “sometimes kids go to their mother more than their father because their father yells at them as soon as they start talking.” A Syrian mother from Zarqa expressed that “fathers can’t connect well with their children on such topics because the child is a teenager, and they are not easy to talk to. Fathers don’t accept that.” She continued by adding that “mothers tend to attend sessions and such things more [often than fathers], so when there is an awareness-raising activity [in the community] about sexual maturity, she asks [questions] and learns to be able to talk to her children”

Research in Action: What did this study do?
We conducted focus group discussions with 90 mothers and fathers of either Jordanian or Syrian origin who had children aged between 15-19 years to understand their concerns and how they could be better supported in talking to their children. Participants were recruited from Amman, Irbid, Mafraq and Zarqa.

Recommendations

Break the Intergenerational Cycle of Silence and Embarrassment

Engage community and religious leaders to open up discussions: We found that parents generally seem supportive of introducing SRH topics in public or religious schools, which could be designed in a way to better support parents in order to foster increased parent-child communication.

Introduce school-based reproductive health education programs: Using school-based sexual education as a launching pad to open up discussions with parents about reproductive health issues may be a particularly salient. Our results suggest that many parents may welcome the introduction of important, age-appropriate topics related to SRH in a school-based setting.

Conduct training programs with parents:
Interventions designed to coach parents in order to improve their knowledge about SRH issues and equip them with clear and practical tools could improve parental capacity for parent-child communication. Such interventions could even take place through religious institutions, as suggested by the participants, as a way to destigmatize such topics, and to ensure that they are discussed in a way that is in line with religious teachings.

Engage health professionals: Physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals who interact with parents and youth are in a unique position to encourage beneficial communication about reproductive health topics, and to support parents in developing improved SRH knowledge and proficient communication skills.