

# Mothers' and Girls' Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality

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**SUMMARY.** A study of communication between mothers and daughters about mothers' sexual experience discloses mothers' and daughters' fears, concerns, and judgments about each other. In this study, 15 women, all mothers of girls, were interviewed about the history of their own sexual experience. Some of these women had chosen to share their personal experience with their daughters and some had not, although some were now willing. These stories were then shared with a group of girls, and then the girls were asked whether they would want to know about their own mothers' experience had they been similar. Like the mothers, some girls wanted to know and others did not. Reasons for

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sharing include helping protect daughters from mothers' own victimizing experience and opening up communication. Reasons for not sharing included violating boundaries between mothers and daughters and embarrassment. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### ***A Mother's Perspective***

It was 1965 and I remember the "cruise" with my girlfriends in one of their father's cars down to the A & W Drive-in to get coney fries and a root beer, hoping to see my newest crush as we hopped around from car to car. We were comfortably safe, yet naive in our budding sexuality. We didn't have sex education in high school. Neither my mother nor any of my friends' mothers told us about intercourse or birth control. My best friend told me that her mother's sex advice was "Keep your skirt down and your legs crossed!" It was assumed that we wouldn't have sex until we were married. My mother never told me about menstruation; however, when she found the pads in the garbage she seemed hurt that I didn't tell her. I told her that I knew about it from my older sisters, but in truth it was my girlfriend who told me what it was and how to deal with it. This was the era in North America before HIV and AIDS. My girlfriends and I did not discuss the intimate details of our relationships; however, most of us were kissing and petting. I knew of only one girl who had intercourse, because she got pregnant in grade 12. If girls were having sex, it was a big secret.

### ***A Daughter's Perspective***

I turned 16 on the brink of the new millennium. I don't really remember learning about sex although my mother's story is that we went for a walk along the ocean and she told me about menstruation and sexual intercourse. She used clinical terms to describe the body parts and gave me a book to read, saying, "If you

have any questions just ask me.” She also told me that I could get birth control anytime that I felt I needed it. She said that she could come with me to the doctor or that I could make my own appointment. She never asked me directly if I was thinking about having sex or not and she never told me about STDs. We got that talk in school during co-ed life planning classes. We also had to practice putting a condom on plastic penises. It was hysterically funny. Most of my views about sex came from listening to a feminist rock star whose powerful lyrics helped to shape my ideas. Her lyrics expanded my ideas about sexual choices and sexual oppression. This was reinforced when, in grade ten, I started driving a girlfriend of mine to an all-girl Catholic school so that she could make out with another girl in the back of my car. The teachers and nuns restricted boys from the campus, but other girls were always welcome to visit or sleep over in the dorms on the weekends. I pondered during her coming out if I might be “bi.” It was in grade eleven when I began what has now turned out to be a six-year relationship. I can see how I and my peers have more sexual freedom, more resources, and more sexual knowledge than our mothers. Although we have more access to sexual information, it hasn’t freed us.

In these two stories from a 50-year-old mother and her 20-year-old daughter, the mother’s and the daughter’s descriptions of the roles their mothers played in their sex education miss personal aspects related to sexuality. Although they experienced their adolescence in different historical periods with different norms and expectations about women and sexuality, both women gleaned the majority of their sexual education from their peers. These two stories prompt the questions of how mothers and daughters perceive the generational differences regarding sexual experiences in adolescence and what mothers and daughters want to know or not know about each other’s sexuality.

### ***RESEARCHING MOTHER-DAUGHTER SEXUAL DISCOURSE***

The literature is missing research about mothers telling their daughters about adolescent experiences of sexuality. We were curious about what mothers might be willing to share—or not share—with their adolescent daughters. We also wondered how their daughters would respond.

Feminist scholars researching women’s identity issues (Daniluk, 1998; Flaake, 1994; Friedman, 1998; Hales, 1999; Kitzinger, 1995;

Martin, 1987; Northrup, 1998; Pipher, 1995; Rothman, 1989; Simanski, 1998; Walters, 1992; Wolf, 1997) noted that discourses on mothering and discourses on women's sexual identity development seem to be staged as competing discourses. These scholars argue that popular culture and cultural myths and norms regarding family values continue to censure the integration of women as both mothers and sexual beings. As Walters (1992) notes, there continues to be a struggle with this "double-bind discourse:" The mother-child relationship must have boundaries around sexuality and yet women are encouraged to claim their own sexual identity, an identity that is set outside of the maternal realm. Friedman (1998), for example, found that women perceive sexuality and mothering as mutually exclusive, emphasizing a nonsexual standard: the more sexual a woman is, the less she is seen as a good mother. She also found that participants' views on maintaining the separation between sexuality and motherhood were stronger among men than women and among younger parents versus older parents.

Although tensions between sexuality and maternity may be present in the communication between mothers and daughters in Western culture, culturally specific contexts also show mother-daughter communication as present but not always positive (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001; Raffaelli & Green, 2003). There appears to be rising tensions as daughters develop towards their own sexual awareness. Other research demonstrates that both mothers and daughters may show specific styles or ways of approaching the topic of sexuality to compensate for these rising tensions (Rosenthal, Feldman, & Edwards, 1998; Yowell, 1997). For example, Rosenthal, Feldman, and Edwards (1998) constructed five types of styles (avoidant, reactive, opportunistic, child-initiated, and mutually interactive) in mothers' approaches to communicating about sexuality with their daughters. These styles appeared to affect how the conversations took place and what kinds of information were shared.

Several authors have reported that this division in women's identity between sexuality and maternity may impact communication about sexuality between mothers and daughters (Daniluk, 1998; DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Rosenthal, Feldman, & Edwards, 1998; Taris & Semin, 1997; Walters, 1992). However, research findings have been contradictory. For instance, Hutchinson and Cooney (1998), in their review of the literature, state, "Several studies have found no relationship between levels of parent-teen sexual communication and teen sexual activity . . . while other

studies have found that teens with higher reported levels of communication with parents are less sexually active than others (p. 186).

In Rosenthal and Feldman's (1999) study, adolescents rated parental communication about sexuality as unimportant, and there was an overall perception that there was insufficient rather than excessive parental communication about sexuality. DiIorio, Kelly, and Hockenberry-Eaton (1999), in their predominantly African-American sample of 405 adolescents and 382 mothers, found that both male and female adolescents were more likely to discuss sex with their mothers than their fathers. They claim that adolescents who reported openly communicating with their mothers were more likely to have initiated sexual intercourse and to have conservative values. However, in O'Sullivan, Jaramillo, Moreau, and Meyer-Bahlburg's (1999) study with a sample of 110 Hispanic adolescent girls, communication with mothers about sexuality was not related to the adolescents' reported sexual behaviour. It appears that research findings regarding parental communication about sexuality and adolescent sexual behaviour are inconclusive. Further, few studies have investigated what mothers might or might not be willing to share with their daughters about their own adolescent sexual experiences and how daughters might respond to their mother's stories. In terms of mother-daughter relationships and communication about sexuality, what might this type of conversation reveal?

### ***METHODOLOGY***

This is a narrative study on mother/daughter communication regarding sexuality and sexual identity development from the perspective of a group of mothers and a group of adolescent females. Our aim was to explore conversations about adolescent sexuality from the viewpoints of mothers and daughters to further our understandings of generational differences. In our original research design, we anticipated interviewing 12 to 15 mothers and then hoped to have follow-up interviews with their adolescent daughters. However, not all the mothers in this study consented to have their daughters interviewed. Therefore, in the second stage of this study we interviewed 12 adolescent females who were not related to the mothers in the first part of the study. Each of the 12 adolescents read and responded to one of the mothers' narratives describing their adolescent sexuality experiences. This meant that each mother had their story responded to by an adolescent. The participants were reading and commenting on an unknown mother's story.

The study consisted of two distinct phases. Phase one focused on collecting and creating narratives of mothers' descriptions of their adolescent sexual experiences. Phase two focused on adolescent girls' reactions to the narratives. All participants in both phases were given pseudonyms to provide anonymity and protect confidentiality.

### ***Participants in Phase One***

Our group of mothers included a sample of 15 women between the ages of 38 and 57 (mean age of 50 years) who had adolescent daughters. Two mothers were First Nations, ten were white and grew up in Canada, and three women lived in other countries during their adolescent years: two from South Africa and one from Scotland. All participants were recruited through advertisements posted at two community centers, the local university, and through word-of-mouth.

### ***Data Collection: The Interviews in Phase One***

We interviewed the mothers in order to understand their perspectives on telling or not telling their sexual development stories to their own daughters, seeking to know what elements needed to exist for mothers to talk freely with their daughters about both personal and interpersonal issues. The women were invited to talk about their own adolescent sexual experiences in individual audiotaped, semi-structured interviews that ranged from 90 to 180 minutes in length. All of the women were interviewed in their homes.

After each mother described her sexual experiences during adolescence, she was asked if she had shared or had not shared this story with her adolescent daughter(s). If she had shared, she was asked how telling about her own adolescent sexual experiences had been received by her daughter(s). If she had not shared, we asked her to tell us more about her reasons for not sharing. Three participants stated that they had already shared some parts of their story with their daughters; the remaining 12 participants had not.

### ***Analysis of the Data in Phase One***

The transcripts were analyzed using a collaborative narrative method (Arvay, 2003) that included four separate readings of the transcripts: (a) reading for the content of the story (e.g., What is the story line? Is the story clear? What is the sequence of events in this story? Is further clari-

fictionation needed?); (b) reading for the identity construction of the narrator (e.g., Who is telling this story? What is revealed about the protagonist in this story? How does she position herself in this text? What does she want us to know about her? What metaphors and other tropes does she use to narrate herself in this text?); (c) reading for the research questions and, finally, (d) a discursive reading for relations of power (e.g., Where does she use her voice and with what result? Where is she silenced or silencing herself? What is not said but implied? What discourses does she take up that either enhance or restrict her expression of her own sexuality? How does culture speak through this tale? What is at stake in this story?)

After the four readings of each interview were completed, we created a narrative account for each mother's transcript. We returned the narrative account to each mother requesting that they review their own account in order to make any desired changes to the content. Only three words were changed after the member check procedures were completed. These word replacements did not change the content or meaning of the story being told.

After the narratives were returned, we asked the mothers if they would be willing to share this written account with their own adolescent daughter(s). Of the 12 who had not yet shared their stories with their own daughter(s), only 4 stated that they would be willing to share the researchers' narrative account. At this point, 3 participants decided to drop out of the study for the following reasons: "I am not comfortable with people reading my story." "The story is too raw—I am embarrassed if others read it." "I don't want anyone to read it because it is too exposing—I am not ready to show this to anyone." This left us with 12 remaining mothers: Three who stated they had shared their narratives already, 4 who stated that they would be willing to share their stories, and 5 who were unwilling to share their stories with their own daughters.

## FINDINGS

We present two prototype stories that reflect both sides of the mothers' debate—whether to share or not. The first participant, Betty, stated that she would *not be willing to share* this narrative with her daughter. Marley, the second participant, stated that she *would openly share* her story with her adolescent daughters without reservation. We present their stories first, followed by a discussion of key elements of all the mothers' stories. Finally, we will present the adolescent females' re-



sponses to the mothers' stories and a discussion of the implications of the findings for mother-daughter communication and female sexual identity development.

***Betty's Narrative Account (Would Not Tell)***

I grew up in a small village in Scotland with my older sister. Being raised in a rural environment, I was very present in my body and in the earth; I was part sheep. I specifically remember my dad coming home from the Second World War—a blonde, blue-eyed god. I experienced the magic of manhood—the magic thing of male power as he and his friends gathered in our home to sing and play the bagpipes. At the age of 7, my dad started his own business—a service station. It was a big thing to own land, moving away from the feudal system and, at that time, we moved into our own place above the service station. On moving day, my mother gave me this very important task—a dish of macaroni and cheese to carry to the new house. At 7, I discovered that I could grow up and be a woman. I could carry the food.

By the age of 9 my relationship with my father started to change. He told me I was too old for hugging and kissing. That was the end of the evening hug and kiss from my dad. I remember crying in my bedroom, knowing my dad heard me. I knew that he was sitting in the next room hardening his heart.

It was not until I was about 11 that I experienced anything sexual. My first great sexual experience was swinging on a rope swing in a tree. I had this great orgasmic experience. It was a big mystery. No one had ever told me anything and no one could possibly have experienced anything like this. Not knowing what it was that had happened, I tried to find ways to make it happen again. I did not make any sense of it nor did I speak to anyone about it. I just felt it.

About the same time that I had the experience in the tree, I started my first period and it was quite traumatic. Nobody had said anything about it to me. I was riding home on my bike and I saw blood on my green and white checkered dress. I did not know what it was. When I saw my mom, she said she should have told me about it since she was a nurse. She showed me how to use the belts and pads. They were awful things. At school there was one toilet and it was stone cold and dirty. I had to share it with hundreds of other children. There was no privacy to change your pad nor could



you carry a pad to school. No one told me it was important to wash. In Scotland you were lucky to get a bath once a week. It was awful, awful, and grim. It was just so grim.

When I was 13, my sister and I went to another school, riding our bikes to the train to get to the school. There were many boys on the train and my sister told me to cover my knees, not to smile with my teeth showing, and things like that. My sister got the idea that sexuality was bad from my mom, who got it from my granny because my grandfather was a minister. It was clear that I was not to wear anything revealing, yet I never got this message directly from my mom. She spoke to my sister and then my sister passed it on to me. No one talked about sex. There was no sex education and girls did not talk about it with each other because we were rivals. We were only interested in the boys. It was so fun, the magic of boys.

The first kiss—oh happy days, happy days! It happened after a Sunday School party when a boy walked me home. It was magic and innocent—so innocent. We did not know anything. I did not know what a penis was. I could not have told a penis from a tree. I did not know that boys had them and I had never seen one. I was so innocent. I had never seen anyone naked.

There was a lot of kissing. When I was 14 there started to be fondling. I remember those intense feelings of romance and seeking relationships with boys. It really drove my whole adolescence. When I was 15, I fell for a boy really hard. I saw him every day and there was a lot of kissing and touching but nothing genital. It was really innocent. It was all so connected with the landscape. When he broke up with me, I was heartbroken—it really cut deep. It was such a sweet relationship, so sweet. This was a beautiful first love.

After about a year, I trapped a guy. I snared the guy of my dreams. In that relationship, I had my own sense of deepening, my own sexuality. We went deeper into the sexual world, but still it was not intercourse. I remember intense feelings of sexual desire but I did not know what to do with it. There was a lot of touching but not in a genital way. There was never any talk of, “Should we have sex?” I just knew that I was not going to do that because it was just not done. I was afraid of getting pregnant. I still did not know that penises got erect, although I must have known about getting pregnant.

There was nothing about birth control at the time. No one talked about birth control. There was a sense of mystery about sex as something that happened when you got married. You did not have sex because you were not married and you waited until you were married to have sex. That was the cultural code. I believed that I would not have sex until I was married and whomever I had sex with was the person I would marry. When it did happen at age 22, it was a big mistake—such a mistake. I was not in love with him but I knew it was time to have sex. It was very disappointing. His penis penetrated me, but I was not going to feel anything. It was not safe to feel anything. After the rope swing, there was lots of masturbating going on, but I did not make the connection between that experience and sex with a man. I never knew it happened with boys. It was somehow separate.

*Marley's Narrative Account (Would Tell)*

I was born on Vancouver Island in 1941. I remember my mother telling me that I was lucky to have such shiny beautiful hair because it helped to make up for the fact that I was an ugly duckling. She threatened me if I didn't behave for grandma by saying she would take me to the men's barber shop where they would cut off my hair.

I was abandoned by my mother as a child and raised by my maternal grandmother. When I was 6 my grandma died and I moved next door to my grandma's kindly old friend and her husband—Granny and Grandpa M. He was a pedophile who molested me twice when I was 7. I felt confused, guilty, and ashamed of myself. Granny came home one day and caught him molesting me. She asked me, "Did that dirty old bugger touch you inside your underwear?" I said "yes" and then she took care of me and phoned my mother to say she couldn't keep me anymore.

Then I went to live in foster care where I learned that boys were favored over girls. I wished that I were a boy. When I was 11 years old my mother finally rescued me from the foster care and, for the first time in my life, I lived with my mother. She was remarried and we were going to have a home and be a family. I felt a sense of security and stability because I had a structured routine at home and I felt good.

I got my period at 11. I was so happy because some of my school chums had gotten theirs already. It made me feel like I belonged. I thought my mother would be happy for me, but she wasn't—instead she was furious. The first thing she said to me was, “Now we have really got problems!” She meant now I had the potential to become a pregnant teenager. You see, she became pregnant with me as a teenager so that incident burst my bubble. I knew that we weren't suddenly going to become magically close and have a special relationship. She didn't take the time to show me how to put the pad and belt together. She just angrily harnessed me into this strange foreign rig and left me there in the bathroom. I remember crying and not knowing how to change the pad. I developed pubic hair around the time I began my menses and I remember being aware of it especially when I was close to 16, anxiously wondering, “Oh my god! When will it stop growing? Is there no end to it?”

When I was about 13 or 14 years old, I became interested in boys and I remember living a double life. By day, I seemed so shy and innocent and by night daring and bold, stuffing my brassier with woolly gloves and heading out alone for the nearby ice rink. I wanted to have the biggest, most obvious boobs so that the older boys would notice me and ask me to skate with them. This is my first memory of wanting to be irresistibly sexy and desirable to men and wanting a man to kiss me and make love to me.

I finally got a best friend and we would go out and be bad and get into trouble together. We were the sluts of the school. My friend and I would go out streetwalking together, stroll up and down the main street all gussied up in linen suits, nylons, and high-heeled shoes, lots of makeup and tacky paper flowers stuck in our hair. We desperately wanted the boys in the cars to pick us up. Those boys never did pick us up, but we both got some sexual experience with this young cab driver who worked for a taxi service. He took me out one night and we necked and petted in his car. That was my first kiss. The next night he took my friend out and they did the same thing.

One night I went out streetwalking all by myself. I got all gussied up and snuck out of the window and went strolling down the highway. Two guys picked me up in their car and we drove around for a while just cruising and burning gas. I went back to their apartment and ended up having sexual intercourse with the driver of the car. God, I was such a tramp. When he was having sex

with me it was not like being in my body. I felt so emotionally detached from the experience. I was passive and numb, like when I was molested by my Grandpa M. It was something being done to me. However, I felt older—like I was progressing somehow. I was hoping the boy would want me to be his girlfriend, but I never saw him again.

When I began grade 10, I was acutely aware of my reputation among my peers. I knew that I had better tidy up my act if I was to fit in and be accepted—and so I did. I ended up just hanging out with my classmates and doing normal teenage things. I went out with a boy for a month and we had sex but there was some respectability to it because he was my boyfriend. However, he dumped me after a month. It was about this same time that my stepfather started to be very cruel to me. He accused me of sleeping around, but I wasn't. I wanted to have a good reputation. My mother thought I was out of control too. This made me angry and I said to myself "Well, if that is what you think, then that is what I will be." I started staying out later, drinking more and becoming more promiscuous by flirting and petting with different guys. When I was 17, I finally had one steady boyfriend for a whole year. It made me happy to have a boyfriend and be a part of the crowd. I had sex with him maybe once every ten dates, which seemed to be the norm in those days.

When I graduated from high school, my stepfather gave my mother an ultimatum: either she could live with him or me. Obviously, she chose him. There was never any hope for me with my mom. I felt so much hostility and resentment toward her. I mean, her obligation to take care of me was over, so she didn't need to even think twice about it. Looking back now, I sort of regret I didn't appreciate Mother's position more; I mean, objectively speaking, it was normal that she'd choose to live with her husband rather than her grown child who was old enough to move out on her own anyway.

### ***Mothers Who Chose Not to Share***

Five of the participants in this study (plus the 3 who dropped out of the study) chose not to share their early sexual experiences with their daughters. Their reasons for not sharing can be summarized briefly as maintaining the assumption that their daughters did not really want to

know about this story. They felt that it was embarrassing for both themselves and their daughters. One stated that it was not appropriate: "I think my personal experience is private. I do not think that my privacy should be invaded because I am a parent. I do not give my daughter information about me that she may not want to know. It is about respect and dignity—for her and me." Three stated that they feared being rejected for seeming to be "over-sexed." It left them feeling "vulnerable" and "insecure" and worried it would "alter" their daughter's image of them "in a negative way."

### ***Mothers Who Chose to Share***

Three participants said that they already had shared their story with their daughter(s).

Anne: This study has been so incredibly useful to me at a time when I was struggling with my daughter's emerging sexuality. I shared the story with her. It opened the door for me to discuss sexuality with her. It helped me get a handle on the experience of shame in my own life and how that was getting played out in my approach to my daughter's budding sexuality.

Petra: Yes, I gave it to my eldest daughter to read who is 15 years old. I hesitated at first because of the molestation incidents and because of the details of my first sexual experience. But I decided that the molestation story might help her awareness of the reality of sexual abuse and help think how she might set her own boundaries in the face of such a threat. I know that teens are sexually active younger now and, perhaps, knowing my story might encourage her to come to me when she considers having her first sexual experience.

Marley: Yes, I have told my daughter everything. I was as open and direct with her about my life as much as possible. I answered her questions about sexuality as very truthfully as I could from my heart. I made a conscious effort to teach her the difference between loving sex and empty sex, to guide her into understanding that there is a difference. My sexual history was difficult and not something to be especially proud of, and I wanted it to be better for her than it was for me.

There were four other participants who said they would be willing to share their story with their adolescent daughter(s). Two stated that they had shared some technical, non-personal information already with their daughters regarding menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and prevention techniques for sexually transmitted diseases. The reasons they were willing to share their own stories now were: (a) “Now that my mother has died, I wish I could have known more personal things about her, so I don’t want my daughter to have any regrets”; (b) “It would open up the communication between myself and my daughter”; (c) “There would be more trust between myself and my daughter”; (d) “I am no longer worried about my daughter knowing about my early sexual experiences”; and (e) “I believe I would seem more human (a real person) in her eyes if I shared.”

***PHASE TWO:  
ADOLESCENTS’ RESPONSES  
TO MOTHERS’ NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS***

***Participants***

Our adolescent participants consisted of 12 Canadian females between the ages of 15 and 19. As previously mentioned, because we did not have consent from all the mothers to interview their own daughters, we recruited 12 adolescents who were not related or known to the mothers. One participant was Aboriginal, another was of Asian descent, and the remaining were Caucasian.

***Data Collection***

We presented 12 stories from the mothers to two focus groups of adolescent females. The participants each read one of the 12 stories so that everyone had a different story to respond to. The adolescents spent 60 to 90 minutes writing their responses followed by a two-hour, audiotaped discussion in the focus group. We were interested in exploring their responses to mothers’ adolescent sexuality experiences. In their focus groups they wrote individual responses to each of four questions and then participated in a group discussion.

The questions were: (a) “After reading this story please write a response concerning what you think about this story, the feelings that this story evokes, or anything that comes to mind that you would like to

share about this story?" (b) "How are your sexual experiences similar/different than this mother's account?" (c) "If this was your own mother's story, how would you respond to hearing it?" (d) "Would it be okay for your mother to tell you this story? Why or why not?" and (e) "Why do you think mothers do not share their adolescent sexuality stories with their adolescent daughters?"

### ***Findings***

The responses to the mother narratives pertain to "then versus now" distinctions. They believe that families now communicate about sex more openly and that there is more accessibility to birth control. They also believe that there has been a shift from shame about being sexually active to "celebrating your sexuality" and "doing it a lot younger." Three stated that they identified with many of the experiences that the mothers talked about and normalized the mother's sexual exploration.

However, the majority of the responses were critical of the mothers' parents' behaviour, claiming that the parents seemed to show little support for their daughters. For example, "Her parents set her up for the worst kind of experience by ignoring her sexual development." Another stated that in the story she read, she could not imagine being put in the situation of needing an abortion and not having parental support: "They would definitely be disappointed but they would never leave me alone in the hospital." These adolescents felt that some of the mother's choices led to "inappropriate" behaviour. They felt that "dangerous exploration and sexual activity" demonstrated low self-esteem. One adolescent stated that the description of masturbating and playing sexual games with her own sister "was a bit odd." Most felt that "unhappy" or "unhealthy" adolescent experiences could have negative implications for future relationships.

### ***Adolescents Who Share: Similarities and Differences***

The adolescent females identified few similarities between their own sexual experiences and the mothers' experiences, and several differences were noted between these mothers' stories and their own sexual experiences.

*Similarities to mother's story.* Similarities to the mothers' narratives pertain to the early sexual exploration of touching and playing games like "love." Some of the feelings that adolescents experience were similar such as, "When she talks about kissing her friend for practice or her



obsession with breasts, I could really relate.” Other similarities were hiding their sexual experiences from their parents, particularly, dating boys that their parents did not approve of and losing their virginity at approximately the same age.

*Differences between mothers’ and adolescents’ experiences.* The adolescent females discussed many differences between their own experiences and the mothers’ stories. We highlight here the most common responses provided by these young women.

The adolescents stated that the idea of sex being shameful has changed and that sexual experimentation and sexual intercourse start earlier than in the mothers’ narratives. “This mother talks about sex as being shameful in her time where as now I think it is more of a celebratory event of the shift from teenager to young adult. It is rare for a girl to be a virgin at 19 years of age now.” “Sexual intercourse starts earlier these days.” Also, they expressed that they saw sex more “as a way to please the woman as opposed to an act just to please the man.” Overall, they felt that there was more sexual freedom now than in the early 1960s and 1970s.

Another major difference between the two generations was the opinion that there is more open communication about sex at school, within families, and between peers. “Mothering is different now than before.” They felt that girls can now talk more to their parents about sex. They stated that there is more open communication about birth control and more access to birth control than in the mothers’ era. One adolescent stated that her mother is different from the mother’s parents in the narrative that she read, explaining that this mother’s parents could not talk about sex because they feared she would start having sex: “My mother is very different from hers. My mother would never talk about sex of any kind with any of her children. However, this isn’t because she believes that her children shouldn’t be partaking, but more because I think she is just too embarrassed or nervous or maybe just doesn’t know how to approach the topic.” We note here that many mothers also felt that they would be too embarrassed to discuss sex with their own daughters, even though most adolescents in this study felt that there was more open communication between themselves and their mothers.

Several adolescents expressed more comfort with their own bodies. This comfort allowed them to be more exploratory and not fear intimacy as expressed in several mothers’ stories. They stated they would not have sex “just to get it over with.” Several mothers had stated that they had sex just to get it over with, but all of the adolescents in this study stated that they did not support this explanation for having sex. One ad-

olescent did not agree with one mother's approach to celebrating her own daughter's sexuality:

When she says at the end of her story that her daughter's sexual experiences need to be celebrated, I do not agree. It is really hard for daughters at that age to talk about sexual experiences. I have never spoken to my parents about my experiences yet I still enjoy them all the same. I think the issue is to make the daughter feel like it is okay to engage in sexual experiences at the right age but only talk about the actual experience if the daughter opens it up first because it seems like the mother is being a little selfish in trying to celebrate it with her daughter.

The adolescents in this study suggest many differences between their own experiences and the mothers, but the adolescents also disagree among themselves about what these differences are.

#### ***Adolescent Responses to "If This Was Your Mother"***

In the following section, we present more specific answers to the remaining questions that we asked the adolescents about their own experiences with their own mothers and their views about their own mother's sexuality.

*If this was your own mother's story, how would you respond?* There were five main reactions to this question: feeling horrified, feeling embarrassed or awkward, being surprised, and being interested in knowing more. Several adolescents expressed being embarrassed yet interested at the same time. Only one adolescent stated she would feel "happy to hear" the mother's story if it were her own mother.

I would feel happy to hear this story because a lot of the things she went through I did as well. I would like to know that she was responsible in having sex and also that she would be able to appreciate and understand the insecurities that I was having between grades 6 to 12.

*Would you or would you not want your own mother to share?* In response to this question, four adolescents answered with a clear "no." Five, however, responded that it would be okay to have their mothers tell them this story. One adolescent was tentative: "Okay but not likely," and two others stated that it would be "okay but it would be embarrass-

ing.” Those who did not want to hear their own mother’s adolescent sexual narratives stated that it would be upsetting and make them feel less confident.

It is safe and comfortable knowing what I know about my mother and I wouldn’t want my perspective of her to change so dramatically. The only positive thing that I think I would get out of hearing this story from my mom would be the realization that she is a very strong woman to be able to have gone through these awful things in adolescence and still turn out to be the wonderful mother that she is.

The group that said they would want to know their own mother’s stories was between the ages of 17 and 19, even though some felt that it would be unlikely that their mother actually would share.

Yes, because there are so many times in your life when you are too embarrassed or shy to even ask your friends so if someone like your mother told you about her experiences instead of hunting it down yourself, this would provide a greater sense of self esteem for adolescents to know that the way they are feeling is normal and it would also increase the mother/daughter relationship by building trust.

One adolescent female concluded this question by stating that, “Looking at today’s world through the media where every possible feeling and experience is thrown at you constantly, it seems funny that we still can’t talk about things with our mothers.”

*Why do you think that mothers are not willing to share?* The adolescents in this study felt that mothers do not share because their daughters might get embarrassed or, in contrast, mothers are too embarrassed to share. In essence, they do not have the kind of relationship where they can share these stories. Mothers also feared that daughters would get the wrong message, such as daughters “not waiting as long for sex” because if it was alright for “mother to do it, it’s alright for her!” Further, mothers feared they would lose their daughter’s respect because they felt ashamed of their own stories; it would most likely “shatter” their daughter’s perspective of them as mother. They also felt the information they might share with their daughters was not as relevant today. Finally, mothers were trying to protect their daughters because they believed that “not talking about it” means “it won’t happen.” Another stated that she thought that mothers develop “barriers and it prevents them from talking about it.”

**COMPARING MOTHERS' STORIES  
AND ADOLESCENT RESPONSES**

The findings in the first phase of this study are conflictual and paradoxical. When the “would-share” group of mothers is compared to the “would-not-share” group of mothers interesting elements emerged. Generally, the “would-share” group’s adolescent sexual experiences are more evocative, violent, and tragic. These stories are about surviving abuse and humiliation—a survivor’s tale. The “would-not-share” group in comparison narrated stories that are generally more naive and innocent—tales of budding sexuality and sexual exploration.

The mothers who chose to remain silent assumed their daughters would not want to know about their adolescent sexual experiences. They believed that mothers should be framed as the “good-mother” figure: a mother whose sexuality must be kept private to prevent “embarrassment,” “shame,” or “humiliation.” If mother is a sexual being she will lose “respect” and “dignity” and act “inappropriately.” Although many of these mothers expressed a yearning to know more about their own mother’s private lives, they believed they must protect their daughters from this aspect of their own womanhood.

On the other hand, mothers who chose to tell understood sharing their adolescent sexual experiences as a teaching tool. They believed that there was much for daughters to learn through the act of sharing. They wanted to protect their daughters from an unsafe world and to provide guidance or necessary knowledge to ensure their daughter’s success in navigating the sexual terrain as a woman. They wanted to teach their daughters not to blame themselves for wanting to express their sexuality, that there was no need for shame, that they had a right to define their own sexuality, that they had choices in defining their own sexual practices and, as young women, they could set boundaries that met their own needs. On this point, we noticed clear differences between the two groups of mothers. Those who chose to remain silent considered their role as mother of primary importance and their sexual identity secondary. However, those who chose to tell their daughters primarily valued the safety of the emerging sexual development of their daughter(s), willing to put their image as mother aside.

As we investigate the reasons mothers gave for remaining silent and the claims that daughters made about not wishing to hear their mother’s sexuality narratives, several of their arguments overlap. Both stated that it would change a daughters’ image of her mother in a negative way—it would change a mother’s “good-mother” status or shatter the daughter’s

“good-mother” image. It would upset daughters to know the details of their mother’s sexual experiences. It would be embarrassing or shaming or uncomfortable for both mothers and daughters to have to share/listen to tales of adolescent sexuality. Both mothers and daughters stated that sharing would make them feel vulnerable, insecure, and less confident in their own roles. Mothers expanded on their reasons for not sharing that included other significant elements: it is inappropriate, taboo, not good to cross a sexual boundary, burdens the daughter, is a private matter, creates fears about being judged or rejected, and daughters would not understand and daughters don’t really want to know. Mothers and daughters stated that not sharing the details of one’s sexual experiences allowed both mothers and daughters to maintain their own self-respect and dignity. Paradoxically, some participants from both groups stated that it would be interesting to know the private lives of their own mothers. And further, the adolescent females in this study, as they projected their lives into the future, could foresee sharing their own lives with their own daughters and wanted their future daughters to know about their own adolescent sexual development. This is consistent with Brock and Henning’s (1993) findings that daughters in their 30s wished they knew more about their mother’s personal and sexual lives.

As we examined the findings, we noticed a possible bridge for constructing conversations about sexuality. Mothers who were willing to share and daughters who were willing to know their mother’s stories believed that sharing would provide more open, honest, and “real” communication between mothers and daughters. Daughters yearned to be validated by their mothers and taught from personal experiences rather than sex education, classes, or books. Daughters felt that communicating with their mothers about sexual experiences would normalize their own experiences and give them more confidence in terms of their own sexual development. Mothers also expressed a desire to teach their daughters about sexual boundaries and wished to empower their daughters in their sexual development by speaking openly and sharing lessons learned.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE***

The findings of this study evoke many considerations for clinicians and educators working with adolescent females. The first implication deals with the provision of education for mothers and daughters related

to female life span development and issues of identity. Education needs to include a critical examination of topics such as beliefs and attitudes about women's sexual development and the deconstruction of cultural norms that perpetuate the dichotomies that exist for women as mothers. As clinicians, educators, and parents we need to dispel the myths and stereotypes regarding mothers as nonsexual beings. In other words, we recommend further discussion with adolescents regarding the myth of the nonsexual mother as "good mother" and the sexual mother as "bad mother."

Another area of focus for practice is education about the female body as portrayed in popular culture. There is an abundance of current research on adolescent body image and we suggest that this literature needs to be expanded to include women across the life span. The general trend is to devalue and to denigrate the aging female body and some attempts are being made to dispel this perception in the media. For example, recent movies such as *Calendar Girls* and *Something's Got to Give* depict mid-life mothers as openly expressing their sexuality in both family and public domains. As parents, educators, and clinicians working with youth, we need to broaden youth's perspectives to include older, aging female and male body types and broaden the discourse on sexuality across the lifespan as healthy, "normal," and vibrant. Topics such as ageism, sexism, and marginalization that are detrimental to human sexual development and identity are worthy of exploration in both educational curriculum and parental conversations for the healthy development of our youth.

Creating realistic curricula that includes decision-making models based in "real life" circumstances is warranted. We believe that the current curriculum in schools does not inform or prepare our youth for the hard decisions that they will have to face in the social world: How to create a dialogue with parents about sexual topics; not only how to say no, but how to decide when to say no; how to know when to say yes; how to know when and what kind of birth control is best; information about sexual pleasure and sexual agency, to name a few topics. Curriculum needs to be more than a delivery of facts, it needs to deconstruct practices that create gendered and often oppressive life scripts. The curriculum needs to be dialogical and contextual—a living curriculum that addresses the actual lived experiences of our youth and furthermore acknowledges the complex interplay between identity, rights to privacy, and parental responsibilities.

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