

FAMILY COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS FROM ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

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Abstract

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is defined as a lifelong learning process that begins in childhood and is ideally based on shared educational responsibility, primarily between schools and families. In Italy, there is no law formally introducing CSE in schools as a multidisciplinary and transversal subject, in line with international documents and guidelines. Moreover, in sociocultural and political debates, many Italians advocate for parents' primary educational role, citing Article 30 of the Italian Constitution, which establishes both the duty and the right of families to educate their children. However, sexual and relational issues are often neglected by parents due to a lack of knowledge, feelings of discomfort and embarrassment, or facing personal, cultural, and social factors. At the same time, adolescents consider CSE crucial and necessary, and affirm accessing information from multiple sources, such as the web and peers. Hence, literature often reports family communication as inadequate or unsatisfactory. The present research aims to explore CSE's experiences and opinions, as well as family communication experiences, in a triadic perspective, involving Italian adolescents and their parents. The research consists of two phases: 1) a qualitative phase including semi-structured interviews with families, specifically an adolescent, the mother, and the father in each family; and 2) a quantitative phase involving the administration of an online questionnaire to adolescents, mothers, and fathers. The first phase was an exploratory study involving 50 families. The second phase is also characterized as an exploratory study that aims to reach a wider, more heterogeneous sample, enabling the conduct of statistical analysis and comparisons of experiences, opinions, and communication styles between families and Italian contexts. Overall, the present research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how families discuss sexuality and relationship issues, and how adolescents and parents position themselves on CSE topics, with the future goal of designing training and educational programs for both adolescents and parents.

Keywords: *Comprehensive sexuality education, family communication, adolescents, interviews, questionnaires.*

1. Introduction

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is recognized as a human right and as a lifelong learning process since early childhood (IPPF, 2017; UNESCO, 2018; WAS, 2014), supporting healthy development and behavior, increasing knowledge and awareness, and preventing abuse (Bruno, 2024; Putri, 2022; WHO, 2010). CSE should be addressed in the school environment, where teachers and educators share educational responsibility with families (IPPF, 2018; UNESCO, 2023), to foster open and safe contexts to discuss with honesty, trust, and comfort, and to increase positive and respectful attitudes toward one's own and others' sexuality (Ball et al., 2023; Benoit & Ronis, 2023; Castro et al., 2024; Nattabi et al., 2023). However, when it comes to sexual, relational, and emotional issues, family conversations are typically avoided (Ballard & Gross, 2009). The literature highlights family conversations mostly focused on abstinence or medical prevention, aiming to prevent risks and negative consequences of sexual intercourse (Astle et al., 2022; Heels, 2019; Walters et al., 2024). The absence of CSE topics by parents seems to be due to personal factors, such as lack of knowledge, and perceived discomfort and embarrassment (Grossman et al., 2017; Holman et al., 2023), or cultural and social factors, such as generational gaps, taboos, and family dynamics (Fatemi et al., 2023; Hubble et al., 2024), resulting in a family communication often inadequate or unsatisfactory (Bruno et al., 2026; Ashcraft & Murray, 2017; Bleakley et al., 2018; Narushima et al., 2020).

This study aims to better understand family communication about CSE using a mixed-methods approach across two research phases, focusing on the perspectives of mothers, fathers, and their adolescent children. Studies show that adolescents have a positive attitude toward CSE (Alloni et al., 2017; Moreira et al., 2023; Unis & Sällström, 2020) and a willingness to access scientifically accurate information (Brunelli et al., 2022; Epps et al., 2023; Feijóo et al., 2025). Parents are cited as a source of information to address the gap in CSE education, although they are not always seen as valid or competent (Mbachu et al., 2020; McCrimmon et al., 2024). On the other hand, parents consider CSE necessary as well, but differ in their comfort levels (Gheysari et al., 2024). Specifically, the present work aims to explore family experiences of CSE in the Italian context, where recent research found that, within the family, talking about CSE is still a taboo (Save the Children, 2025).

2. Design

The work-in-progress study uses a mixed-methods, sequential approach, including two phases. The first phase included individual semi-structured interviews with three family members (adolescents, mothers, and fathers). The second phase, currently ongoing, includes administering an online questionnaire and maintaining the possibility of triadic analysis involving always three family members: adolescents, mothers, and fathers.

2.1. Objectives

The study aims to explore the perspectives of parents of adolescents (aged 18–21) and Italian adolescents on CSE within the family context. This objective arises from the following research questions: What prior experiences have Italian adolescents, mothers, and fathers had with CSE? How do adolescents and parents communicate about CSE topics within the family? Four specific objectives are identified: 1) to identify personal experiences of CSE; 2) to investigate possible educational or training needs; 3) to explore dynamics of family communication regarding CSE; and 4) to identify potential similarities and differences among participants' categories and/or within families.

2.2. Methods

The first phase included conducting semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) and involving more than one coder to ensure the credibility and validity of the interpretation process (Renz et al., 2018). The families were reached first among those known to the research team, and then through snowball sampling (Gierczyk et al., 2024). The inclusion criteria for participating in this study phase were to be a family including a cohabiting adolescent, mother, and father, without distinctions in socio-economic status (SES), geographic area (Northern, Central, or Southern Italy), or sexual orientation.

The second phase will include an anonymous online questionnaire administered to parents of adolescents and adolescents (aged 18–21) in Italy. Specifically, snowball sampling (ibidem) will be used to obtain a sample composed of parents and adolescents, without distinctions in SES, geographic area, gender, or sexual orientation. The inclusion criteria will be to be an adolescent or a parent cohabiting, expanding the previous phase and including single-parent and same-sex parent families. The desired sample size ($n = 300$) will consist of at least 300 participants (100 adolescents, 100 mothers, and 100 fathers). Results will be analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Differences in CSE experiences and family communication are hypothesized to vary by gender, sexual orientation, age, and background, particularly across high–middle–low SES and Northern–Central–Southern Italy (Killoren et al., 2024; Payne et al., 2024). As the second phase of the study is currently ongoing, the present work reports funding from the first phase.

3. Discussion

50 families participated in the first phase of the study, totaling 150 participants. Specifically, the sample included 50 mothers (age: $M = 49.72$, $SD = 5.72$), 50 fathers (age: $M = 51.67$, $SD = 4.58$), and 50 adolescents (females = 31; males = 19; age: $M = 17.44$, $SD = 1.57$). The reflexive thematic analysis identified four themes related to adolescents' sources of information and education on sexuality: Friends ($n = 71$), Family ($n = 48$), School ($n = 47$), and the *Web* ($n = 35$). Adolescents affirmed the positive aspects of referring to friendships as a source and experience of CSE, with peer discussions characterized by positive feelings, such as the freedom to share. However, the opposite also occurs in some cases, leading adolescents to perceive friends as not truly competent sources; as a result, they may avoid exchanges, questions, and discussions. Among the sources of information, adolescents reported the family context; however, they recalled dualistic experiences: of openness, such as discussions, exchanges of opinions, and

advice, and of avoidance or closure. The school context reveals absence and closure to CSE: Most adolescents reported experiences reflecting a lack of engagement with CSE topics in the school curriculum, even when student demand is high. However, some adolescents recall positive experiences thanks to teachers who choose to address CSE topics or thanks to experts who introduce interventions on sexuality-related issues. Finally, adolescents report using the web as an informal source of information, primarily in a direct, active manner to clarify doubts and satisfy curiosity. In some cases, the web seems to push adolescents to view content involuntarily through algorithms indirectly.

The analysis of interviews revealed similar experiences in mothers and fathers. Four themes emerged: *Absence of sources* ($n = 74$), *Self-education* ($n = 41$), *School* ($n = 39$), and *Family* ($n = 16$). Parents recall a general lack of formative and educative experiences regarding CSE topics, and to compensate for this absence, some parents report individual education through informal sources as their adolescent children – the web, friends, and peers – but also engaging in book reading and specific courses. Regarding the school context, parents of adolescents mainly recall sporadic interventions with experts, which are not always perceived positively. Indeed, the parents' educational absence reflects sociocultural taboos, transmitted even within the family through a closure of dialogue.

Deepening family communication, five themes emerged from the triadic reflexive thematic analysis: *What I talk about* ($n = 318$); *How I talk about it* ($n = 164$); *What I feel* ($n = 132$); *Who I talk about it* ($n = 118$); and *When I talk about it* ($n = 59$). Families seem to talk about, mostly, sexual health topics, recalling sexual risk prevention or general sexual issues such as identity and behaviors or sexual and romantic relationships, along with the importance of emotion management and the consent topic. Finally, adolescents and parents discuss myths and personal beliefs or sociocultural values regarding sexuality. However, they affirm a preference for sexual health topics for the present and future family discussions. Regarding how participants engaged in family communication, they mainly reported that personal experiences helped offer advice and share opinions. Some participants reported discussing sexually related issues through a scientific approach or, on the other hand, an emotional approach.

Reflecting on future discussions, participants express a preference for experiential or emotional approaches. Furthermore, adolescents and parents experience mostly positive feelings, such as happiness and comfort, in discussing CSE topics. However, embarrassment is not absent from the family's communication regarding CSE. Hence, sometimes adolescents and parents feel embarrassed; in some cases, embarrassment is linked to positive emotions like a normal feeling, and in others to negative emotions like something that can freeze the discussion. In other cases, instead, participants recall negative emotions such as anger, frustration, stress, and discomfort. Regarding the communication dynamics, both adolescents and parents seem to prefer gender-specific communication, engaging in dualistic communication based on hypothetical same-gender experiences (e.g., mother-daughter communication). Some other families, instead, seem not to engage in sexually related issues communication at all or, on the other hand, to engage all together (adolescent, mother, and father). Finally, family communication on CSE topics seems to be something that can be chosen at a specific moment, linking individual topics to adolescents' developmental phases or personal experiences. In some cases, external events and/or other experiences can help start the conversation.

4. Conclusions

People learn about sexuality within and through several contexts, experiences, and inputs (formal, informal, and non-formal). Among the wide range of stimuli on sexual issues, the family is one of them (Dyson, 2016). The present work aims to explore, in a triadic manner, the experiences and opinions of adolescents, mothers, and fathers in Italy regarding Comprehensive Sexuality Education, including their experiences of family communication. The findings corroborate the literature on the lack of education and the difficulties or dynamics of family communication. The findings provide a triadic, though not representative, overview of the Italian context and offer a starting point for rethinking and designing educational and training interventions to support families.

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