



## National HIV Prevention Conference

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### **[TITLE:] ATTITUDE MISMATCHING: THE ROLE OF SEXUAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DISCREPANCIES IN THE SEXUAL ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS AND THEIR PRE-ADOLESCENT CHILDREN**

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Gound, MM<sup>1</sup>; Long, N<sup>2</sup>; Forehand, R<sup>3</sup>; Miller, KS<sup>4</sup>; Armistead, L<sup>5</sup>; McNair, L<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Georgia, Athens, GA; <sup>2</sup>University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock, AR; <sup>3</sup>University of Vermont, Burlington, VT; <sup>4</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA; <sup>5</sup>Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA; <sup>6</sup>Spelman College, Atlanta, GA

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**BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES:** Adolescent sexual activity in the United States is both prevalent and occurring at earlier ages, particularly among African-Americans. One avenue of developing more effective prevention programs lies in examining the precursors to sexual behavior, specifically sexual attitudes and communication. The current study examined attitude misperceptions and discrepancies between pre-adolescents and their mothers, as research shows mothers are the primary sex communicators in the home. The relationship between mother-child sexual communication and attitude misperception was also examined.

**METHODS:** Baseline computer survey data from 932 fourth and fifth grade African American pre-adolescents and mothers from the longitudinal Parents Matter! Program was used. Each mother and child dyad; was separately asked to report their attitudes regarding the precursors of sexual behavior (i.e., dating, having a boyfriend/girlfriend), initiation of sexual behavior (i.e., initiating sex before marriage), and the potential, consequences of sexual behavior (i.e., pregnancy, AIDS). In addition, pre-adolescents were asked to identify their mothers' sexual attitudes regarding having a boyfriend/girlfriend, dating, and waiting until marriage to initiate sex. In order to measure sexual communication, each, dyad was asked to report how many times they had discussed each sexual topic (i.e., dating, waiting to have sex, getting pregnant, HIV/AIDS).

**RESULTS:** As anticipated, significant discrepancies were found between maternal and pre-adolescent attitudes on all of the variables examined, with pre-adolescents expressing more liberal attitudes than, their mothers. In addition, pre-adolescents misperceived their

mothers' attitudes regarding the acceptability of having a boyfriend/girlfriend, dating, and waiting until marriage to initiate sex, perceiving their mothers as more permissive than they actually were. Mother-daughter dyads were found to communicate more about all the sexual topics except for HIV/AIDS than mother-son dyads; correspondingly, fewer daughters misperceived their mothers' attitudes regarding dating and having a boyfriend/girlfriend than did sons. Furthermore, for the variable of waiting until marriage to have sex, both child report (OR = .67, 95% CI:.54-.82) and maternal report (OR = .78,95% CI: .63-.95) indicated that, more sexual communication was associated with less pre-adolescent attitude misperception.

**CONCLUSIONS:** These findings indicate that attitude misperception, and discrepancy are already present in pre-adolescence, particularly for boys. Lack of communication about sexuality between mothers and their children appears to be related to child misperception of maternal attitudes. As such, prevention programs should examine the effectiveness of helping parents communicate their values and attitudes about sex to their children before adolescence, when attitude discrepancies may already be emerging. Although both genders should be included in programs, boys may need special attention due to the greater likelihood of attitudinal discrepancies and misperceptions between mothers and, sons.



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