



Original Article

A qualitative study on mothers' experiences from sex education to female adolescents underlining cultural factors

Elahe Abedini¹; Zahra Tabibi^{2*}; Parisa Ziaee¹; Shiva Zarezade Kheibari¹

¹ Ph.D. student in psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

² Associate professor of Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

Abstract

Introduction: Sex education may differ depending on the cultural norms of each region and country. A great number of studies show that parents play a very important role in talking to their children about sexual matters. In this context, mother's position is more prominent, and most teenagers especially girls learn about these issues from their mothers. The present research aimed to deeply understand mothers' experiences from sex education to their daughters.

Materials and Methods: It is a qualitative, phenomenological research study, which was conducted using semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling was conducted until reaching the saturation level. The sample consisted of 13 mothers who lived in Mashhad and had 11- to 18-year-old daughters. Semi-structured interviews were adopted for gathering information and data was analyzed using Morse's content analysis method.

Results: Four main themes, each of which had categories and subcategories, were extracted. The main themes were: "education on puberty and menstruation," "education on sexual intercourse," "proper age for sex education," and "proper person for sex education."

Conclusion: In spite of all cultural developments regarding sex education in families, the dominant culture of society and families is still cautious about certain aspects of sex education and the mothers feel insufficiency about it. Hence, planning and implementing educational interventions for enhancing mothers' knowledge and a coordination between school and home with regard to this issue seem necessary for achieving better results.

Keywords: Female adolescents, Mothers, Sex education

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Introduction

Sex education is a lengthy process through which people acquire the necessary information and knowledge about sexual matters and form their beliefs, views, and values in this respect. Sex education takes into account all aspects of sexuality such as biological, cultural-social, psychological, and religious aspects and pertains to cognitive (information, knowledge), emotional (feelings, values, and views), and behavioral areas (communicative and decision-making skills) (1). Sex education is a wide term adopted for describing the education about human anatomy including sex organs or other body parts that play a role in reproduction. It also contains basic information about penetration, reproductive system health, emotional

connections, and proper use of birth control methods, pregnancy, and other aspects of human sexual behavior. This education plays a vital role in promoting awareness about abortion and STDs (2). Researchers have arrived at a consensus regarding sex education that talking to children about sexual acts and relationships will not lead to increased sexual activities among youngsters. In contrast, the evidence shows the opposite (3). In societies where policy making in schools has advocated sex education, the impact of this education on teenagers' delayed sexual activities has been reported (4). Vanderberg et al. argued that both official sex education and sex education by parents are related to delayed sexual behaviors in teenagers, fewer sex partners, and increased use of condoms and other birth control methods (5). Hence, a great number of experts support the extension of comprehensive sex education both by official sources and parents, assisting teenagers in making healthy sexual

*Corresponding Author: Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran
tabibi@um.ac.ir

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decisions and reducing high-risk sexual behavior. In a survey performed by Hovell on the impact of family on teenagers' sexual behavior, it became clear that the conservative, motherly attitude toward sexual relationship postpones puberty or sexual behavior (2).

However, sex education may differ depending on the cultural norms of each region and country. Countries such as the Netherlands exhibit great openness in talking to children and teenagers about sexual matters and create opportunities for discussing this issue and providing healthy sexual resources at home, school, and society (3). In US, the first official instruction to teenagers about sexual matters is offered in middle school. But in the Spanish/Portuguese culture, the youngsters receive no official education about sexual matters until before pregnancy. This is while teenage pregnancy rate in these cultures, i.e. in Latin American countries, is much greater than that in any other race, and the rate of infectious diseases caused by AIDS and STDs is high in those countries. In Latin American countries, teenagers' experiences in middle school show that their questions regarding sexual matters remain unanswered (6).

The study conducted by Mahajan and Sharma in the Indian society demonstrates that because talking about sexual relationship is considered to be a taboo in this society, teenagers cannot talk about such issues to their parents freely and receive advice. In addition, teenagers who try to speak with their parents about their sexual curiosities are oftentimes frustrated because parents avoid talking about sexual matters to their children, or they are unable to respond in a satisfactory manner. That is why teenagers tend to obtain sexual information from the Internet, books, and their friends, where they may receive invalid, wrong answers, and these misinterpretations and misunderstandings about sexual matters may live on during the person's life. Therefore, researchers believe that teenagers need to acquire sexual information from valid sources so that they would be able to better get along with the changes of the adolescence period (7).

Another study performed by Shatty et al. in India showed that mothers were not interested in talking to their daughters about sex education. They held that daughters should only talk to mothers about menstruation. Nevertheless, these mothers agreed that it is important for their daughters to learn about penetration and other aspects of sex education. However, they described talking about such issues as embarrassing (2).

The study of sexual behavior in developing

countries has been influenced by different, at times contradictory views throughout history. Because of cultural limitations, sex education is not offered in schools of these countries and parents talking to their children about sexual matters is considered to be unconventional. Such views have been predominant in developing societies for a long time. Parents see no point in their children learning and knowing more about penetration and reproduction. It seems this issue is considered to be a taboo to society. But they confirm the fact that it is highly important for teenagers to learn about various changes of the adolescence period, making them more inclined toward sexual activity. Adolescence period is an important stage of life. The lack of sufficient knowledge may lead to unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and STDs. Teenagers who find talking about these issues to their parents difficult resort to other sources such as films, the Internet, books, etc. in order to learn more. Such sources may not provide the person with proper information, causing turmoil in the person. It is thus advisable that correct, adequate information be provided to teenagers through official sources (2).

Dialard pointed out that parents' view on sex education to children has undergone substantial changes. The start of the twenty first century has introduced a change in parents' view from negative to positive. Most parents believe that sex education needs to be taken into consideration in order to protect sexually active teenagers (2). In spite of this, the research carried out by Vieira, Fernandes, and Vieira suggests parents' and families' inability and problems regarding the sex education of the children and their demand from educational centers to pay attention to this area. According to parents' viewpoints, the aforesaid researchers reported that the parents lack the sufficient confidence for teaching sexual matters to their children and they prefer that this would be done in schools and by professional teachers (8).

Teenage pregnancy prevention cannot turn out to be effective merely by increased awareness and sex education in schools. In fact, a great deal of education on sexual hygiene or sexual health starts in families (3). Parents are in particular the best people for education on family beliefs regarding intimate, sexual relationships to their children (9). In surveys conducted annually, many children recognize their parents as an important source for sex education. This is while scientific studies have found out that one third of girls do not talk about menstruation with their parents before it starts and that 43% and 72% of teenagers have never talked to

their mothers and fathers, respectively, about sexual matters (3).

Many studies suggest that parents play a very important role in talking to their children about sexual matters. In this context, mother's position is more essential compared with others, and most teenagers learn about healthy behaviors from their mothers (3; 10; 1). The impact of family-based sex education on teenagers' health and proper child-parent relationship has been strongly demonstrated (11).

Few studies have been performed in this field in Iran. The study performed by Olfati and Aligholi (12) in Iran showed that girls' knowledge about puberty and their proper, healthy views and behaviors on this phenomenon are at a much lower level than expected as a result of correct information not being transferred from parents to daughters. The findings of the research conducted by Sobhani-Nejad, Homai, and Siadat (13) corroborated the fact that the typical attention that families in Isfahan pay to the main areas of sex education, i.e. sexual hygiene, sexual ethics, and sexual future is below average. The results of this study altogether indicated the inability of families in sex education to their children. Sadegh-Moghaddam et al. investigated parents' needs for sex education using a descriptive-analytical approach. The results showed that merely 25.9% of mothers could properly answer their children. The results indicated the importance of education and empowering mothers (14). Another study carried out by Forouzi Aziz-Zadeh and Mohammad Alizadeh in Kerman revealed that the majority of parents had a negative outlook on the sex education of their teenagers. The results of this research recommended that the views of social classes be changed and parents' knowledge in this field be boosted (15). In a study on the experiences of mothers in Gorgan from sex education to their daughters, Kalantari et al. concluded that the dominant culture in society and families takes an overly conservative, silent approach to puberty despite all cultural developments regarding this issue in the Iranian society (12).

The aforementioned studies indicated that parents' view to sexual matters is at a low or medium level. On the other hand, due to the poor official educational system in schools, the only official source for transferring this information is parents and especially mothers. Hence, it seems necessary to discover parents' actual views about the information they provide to their children regarding sexual matters as well as their ideas in this respect. This research primarily aimed to find out whether

mothers talk to their daughters about sexual matters and what reasons they have for doing or not doing so. It also aimed to discover what aspects of sexual matters mothers teach their daughters and what age mothers consider as appropriate if they do talk to their daughters about sexual matters. Finally, it sought to find out how this education is performed, what factors affect it, and what techniques are considered useful for improving sex education.

The studies show that parents' attitude towards sex education is at medium or low level, and due to insufficient education at schools, parents, especially mothers are the only source for such information. For this reason, it is important to find parents' real attitude towards the sexual information they provide for their children and also the rate at which their ideas are influenced by cultural and religious beliefs about this issue. Therefore, this research aims to understand mothers' experience about teaching sexual issues to their young daughters.

Materials and Methods

To discover parents' view to sex education of their children, qualitative research methodology of phenomenological type was used. Qualitative research methodology, where the generality of human phenomena is underlined, is useful for obtaining deep, rich information from the participants. Therefore, it is considered to be the most appropriate method for investigating human experiences (12). In a phenomenological study, the researcher gathers information from the people who have experienced that particular phenomenon and arrives at a mixed description about the essence of experience from the viewpoint of all the people who have described their experience. The phenomenologist somehow focuses on the common aspect of people's experiences about that particular phenomenon. It may be stated that phenomenology mainly aims to reduce numerous people's experiences about the phenomenon under study to a fundamental description of that phenomenon (16).

The statistical population of this research was all mothers of 11- to 18-year-old teenage/pre-teenage girls living in Mashhad. Purposive sampling was adopted in this study for selecting the participants. In this method, the basic reason for selecting a person to take part in the research is the person's complete information about the respective phenomenon and the aim is to gather information (17).

In this study, since the aim is not to generalize the results to the population from which the sample was extracted, but an extensive discovery of parents'

experiences is the aim, sampling continued until reaching the saturation level. That is, sampling stopped after three interviews in which the data was repetitive. Thus, the sample of the present research included 13 mothers who had 11- to 18-year-old daughters and were present in public environments of Mashhad. The sampling process was done in this way that qualified mothers were invited to participate in the study via announcements in cyberspace groups. Inclusion criteria to the research were interest in conducting an interview and talking about experiences of sex education in addition to having at least one 11- to 18-year-old daughter.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted for gathering data. This is an appropriate method in qualitative research as it provides the opportunity for a flexible, heuristic conversation (18).

Before conducting the interviews, each interviewee was provided with a short description about the study by the researchers. The participants filled out a form containing information about their age, education, marital status, duration of marriage, and occupational status as well as their teenage/pre-teenage daughters' age. Moreover, ethical commitments were observed during the interviews. That is, the participants confirmed in writing their conscious consent for participation, and the right of their voices being recorded. Their data was promised to be kept confidential and they had the right to refuse to carry on participating at any given time. Ethical considerations were regarded as an important issue by the research team during these interviews because the nature of this study pertains to a sensitive aspect of social life considered by many people to be their private area. For this reason, after the permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Faculty of Education and Psychology at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, the participants completed a consent form in which it was stated that all of their information including voice record during the interviews will remain confidential and they are entitled to withdraw at any time during the survey.

This was the main question of the interview: "Do you talk to your daughter about sexual matters? Why?" Afterwards, exploratory questions were used for deepening the interviews and extracting experiences. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers and tape-recorded were done by other research members. The interviews were performed by one of the researchers and they were all recorded. The research team members simultaneously took notes from the interviews. The interviews, which were jotted down, were checked

by the interviewer in order for the errors to be corrected.

The interviews were conducted at the parents' home or workplace. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes on average. Meanwhile, the participants were given the opportunity to call in case they were willing to provide more information about their experiences.

Morse's content analysis was employed for data analysis. Content analysis has a valuable position in studies and is an appropriate method for researchers in the qualitative method. In this method, the content of texts is analyzed for extracting the main themes and the patterns that exist in the data. To do so, the researcher:

1. listens carefully to the interviews and reviews the notes several times.
2. reads the notes taken several times and separates the important parts from others.
3. breaks down the important parts to the smallest constitutive and meaningful units (themes).
4. prepares a list of themes. These words are then reviewed in order for the similarity in their meaning to become clear. They are then put in a subcategory according to the connection between the themes.
5. puts the relevant subcategories in one category in line with the same reductive, inductive procedure.

These reviews, the slippage of categories on each other, and merging of the initial notes and final categories repeat until the researchers eventually arrive at an acceptable stability in the data and a feeling of satisfaction regarding the categories and subcategories (12).

The following techniques were used for verifying the validity of our analysis (18):

- Participant checking for confirming and possibly correcting codes and categorizations; five participants were asked to provide us with their feedbacks about data interpretation and validate whether or not our interpretations reflect their experiences.
- Maximum variation of sampling; simultaneous data analysis and feedback for completing the research and providing the adequate, proper time for gathering data.

Results

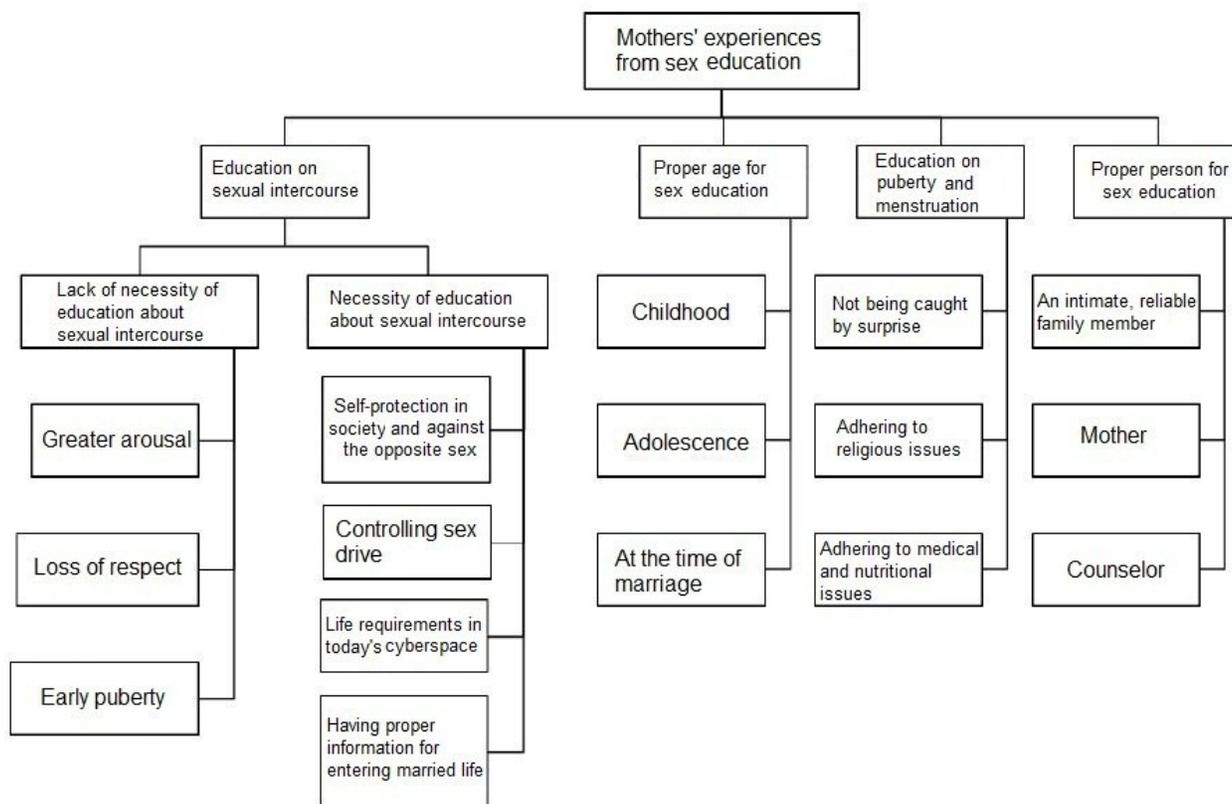
The sample of mothers participating in the study had an average age of 40.37 with a standard deviation of 4.67. The average duration of their marriage was 15.02 years with a standard deviation of 3.26. In addition, the average age of their teenage/pre-teenage daughters was 13.37 with a standard deviation of 1.29. Two of the mothers were

educated below the high school diploma level, two had a high school diploma, three had a bachelor’s degree, two had a master’s degree, two had a Ph.D., and two had an MD. Six of the mothers worked and others were housewives.

Four main themes, namely “education on puberty and menstruation,” “education on sexual intercourse,” “proper age for sex education,” and “proper person for sex education” were extracted from the text of the interviews with mothers. The theme “education on puberty and menstruation” consisted of three categories, namely “not being caught by surprise,” “adhering to religious issues,” and “adhering to medical and nutritional issues.” Furthermore, “education on sexual intercourse” was divided into two categories, namely “the necessity

of education about sexual intercourse” and “the lack of necessity of education about sexual intercourse” according to the mothers’ positive or negative response to the necessity of education about this matter. Each of these categories also included other subcategories on the basis of the reasons that mothers provided for their responses. The theme “proper age for sex education” also consisted of three categories, namely “childhood,” “adolescence,” and “at the time of marriage” according to the mothers’ responses. Finally, the theme “proper person for sex education” was divided into three categories, namely “mother,” “counselor,” and “an intimate, reliable family member” (see Fig. 1).

Fig 1. Themes, categories, and subcategories of mothers’ experiences of sex education to teenage/pre-teenage girls



When mothers were asked “Do you talk to your teenage/pre-teenage daughter about sexual matters?,” they specifically began to answer by pointing out to puberty and especially menstruation in their daughters. When they were directed by the interviewer toward talking about other sexual issues such as the necessity of awareness of sexual intercourse or the lack of the same and other aspects of sexual behavior, they would then talk about the necessity or lack of necessity of such education

and provided their reasons. As the interviews continued, their experiences and ideas regarding the proper age for such education in general, the proper person who should talk about these matters to their daughter, as well as the appropriate methods of doing so were gradually revealed. A) *Education on puberty and menstruation:* The mothers unconsciously took responsibility for preparing their daughter to enter puberty and deal

with menstruation in particular. The experience the mother herself had of her puberty and menstruation (how, by whom, and when she was informed and what impression this left on her) was very effective in transferring puberty-related issues to her daughter. For example, a mother said: *“At the time I myself was hitting puberty, my mother told me you are now a lady, and I tried to give my daughter the same feeling of trust and pride.”* Another mother stated: *“Since I felt so uneasy and ashamed about this, I did not like my daughter to experience the same bad feelings. I told her this is normal and it happens to any girl.”*

The main reasons why the mothers considered education on puberty and menstruation to their daughters as necessary are as follows:

1. *Not being caught by surprise:* The majority of mothers considered it a duty for themselves to prepare their daughters for menstruation. They made their daughters ready before entering puberty so that they would not be caught by surprise. One of the mothers commented: *“I let her know about this so that she would not freak out when it happens and so that she would know this is nothing weird.”*

2. *Adhering to religious issues:* One of the points that mothers generally regarded in their education to their daughters in this period was adhering to Islamic rules, for instance: *“I told her she cannot say her prayers during this time, and she should definitely perform Ghusl after that,”* *“I explained to her how she should take care of the state of being Najis or clean.”*

3. *Adhering to medical and nutritional issues:* When giving education about menstruation, the mothers pointed out to hygienic issues, the duration of this period, especial diet for this period, etc. For instance, they noted: *“I explained to my daughter that backache and bellyache is normal at this time and she had better not eat endothermic food,”* or *“I told her about the duration of menstruation and hygienic issues such as the length of showers and changing sanitary napkins.”*

B) *Education on sexual intercourse:* Usually the mothers did not consciously talk to the interviewer about their experiences of informing their daughters about sexual relationship and issues pertaining to sexual intercourse or other aspects of sexual behavior. They only did so when they were asked about the necessity of bringing up such issues. According to their positive or negative answer to this question, this main theme was divided into two categories, namely “the necessity of education on sexual intercourse” and “the lack of necessity of education on sexual intercourse,” each of which was

broken down to other subcategories, described below, according to the reasons provided by mothers.

1. *The necessity of education on sexual intercourse:*

1/1. *Life requirements in today’s cyberspace:* Some mothers believed that because a great deal of information is transferred to their children via the cyberspace, especially the Internet and other media, it is necessary that they also provide correct information to their children as a reliable source. For instance, a mother commented: *“Today our children have access to the Internet and the cyberspace. They are inundated by information. If I fail to talk to my daughter about these issues, she may receive erroneous information from elsewhere.”* Another mother remarked: *“Satellite TV channels and the Internet have transferred Western culture to Iran. I must make my daughter aware of the differences regarding the relationships with the opposite sex.”*

1/2. *Self-protection in society and against the opposite sex:* Owing to fears of psychological and physical damage to their daughters against the opposite sex and their daughters’ vulnerability, the mothers were worried about their daughters as a result of lack of knowledge. For instance, they said: *“My daughter needs to know how to protect her body. She may receive proposals in society, that is why she needs to know about these issues,”* or *“She should learn about these matters so that she would not be fooled or harassed.”*

1/3. *Controlling sex drive:* Few mothers talked about the fact that their daughters will inevitably have sexual desires at this period. They believed that if they talk about these issues to their daughters, they will also be able to control their desires more easily. For example, a mother stated: *“When I talk to my daughter about sexual matters, I can help her and give her proper information on how to control her desire.”*

1/4. *Having proper information for entering married life:* Some mothers considered it a necessity to talk about sexual relationship to their daughter in order for her to be prepared for accepting her sexual role. They often used their own experiences when talking to their daughters. For instance, a mother commented: *“When I got married, my mother had told me nothing about sexual matters. I had such a bad feeling and I was hurt. I do not like my daughter to go through the same feeling. I need to prepare her.”* Another mother said: *“She needs to know about such relationships to a certain extent and she should be prepared so she can enjoy being with her husband and fulfill his needs more easily.”*

2. *Lack of necessity of education on sexual intercourse:*

2/1. *Loss of respect:* A number of mothers who did not consider as necessary direct education about sexual intercourse believed that their daughter will indirectly become familiar with these issues through friends and acquaintances, books, films, etc., and that there is no reason for them to break the barrier of respect between them and their daughters by talking about such issues. For example: *"Nowadays girls and boys know more about sexual matters than we do. If I also talk to her about this, it will make her impertinent,"* or *"If I talk to her about this, my position as a mother will be downgraded and the barrier of respect between us will be gone."*

2/2. *Early puberty:* A number of mothers considered it unnecessary to talk about sexual matters to their daughter because they held that unawareness of such issues will postpone puberty and that, in contrast, learning about these relationships leads to early puberty in their daughters. For instance, a mother commented: *"If I let her know anything about these issues, it will make her experience early puberty."*

2/3. *Greater arousal:* Some mothers believed that talking about these matters preoccupies their daughters and causes them to be sexually aroused. For example, they said: *"If I talk to her about this, it is as if I am allowing her to think about these issues and become aroused,"* or *"These issues had better remain unsaid because if they are elaborated, it will cause my daughter to envision things and get more aroused. She will then be harder to control, too."*

C) *Proper age for sex education:* The mothers considered different ages as appropriate for sex education and they had different reasons. According to these reasons, this theme is divided into three subcategories:

1. *Childhood:* Few mothers believed that sex education regarding primary sexual matters such as anatomical differences of the two genders, marriage, and having a child should start from childhood. For instance, a mother remarked: *"Talking about these matters should start from childhood and continue commensurate with each stage of life. When she was little and she asked me how a baby is born, I really did not know what to tell her."* Another mother said: *"My daughter became familiar with sexual matters at a primary level through observing animal mating. I think such basic education allowed us to have a good relationship with one another regarding sexual issues."*

2. *Adolescence:* Some mothers considered the adolescence period to be the most appropriate age

for bringing up sexual matters because of the features and nature of this period. For instance, the mothers said: *"I think her curiosity about sexual matters has risen a lot compared to two years ago, and now is the right time for her to receive correct information,"* or *"The necessary education in the adolescence period helps her take care of herself and properly deal with the issues she encounters."*

3. *At the time of marriage:* All mothers who felt no necessity for sex education believed that this education should be postponed until marriage. For example, a mother commented: *"My daughter will learn about these issues through university or pre-marital classes. There is no need for her to know about this earlier."*

D) *Proper person for sex education:* When answering the question "Who do you consider to be proper for offering sex education and why?," the mothers mentioned different people as the most appropriate person owing to various reasons. This main theme includes three different categories according to their answers as follows.

1. *Mother:* Some mothers held that they can themselves handle this task well and they can talk about such matters to their daughter as they find proper and answer their questions. For instance, a mother stated: *"I bring up these issues with her so she begins to trust me and come to me if she faces any problem because I am the closest person to her."*

2. *Counselor:* Since they lacked the adequate knowledge about these issues and they did not know their daughters' needs, many mothers considered the school's counselors and experts to be the most proper people for sex education. For example, a mother said: *"I do not have sufficient, up-to-date information about this issue, and I do not know exactly how I should talk to her about this. I think it would be much better if a counselor or expert helped her in this respect."*

3. *An intimate, reliable family member:* Few mothers said they preferred a reliable family member to talk about such issues to their daughter because of the greater intimacy between the daughter and that family member or their own shyness and modesty when talking about such issues. For instance, a mother mentioned: *"My daughter is close to her aunt and talks to her about most of her sexual issues. I feel so ill at ease if I want to talk to my daughter about sexual matters."*

Discussion

According to the information obtained from the interviews conducted with mothers who participated

in this study, it seems that mothers' experiences regarding sex education to their teenage/pre-teenage daughters may be categorized into 4 main themes. These themes are as follows: "education on puberty and menstruation," "education on sexual intercourse," "proper age for sex education," and "proper person for sex education." It seems that cultural and, to a certain extent, religious factors impact the emphasis the participants place on these themes and their categories.

That sex education begins with puberty and especially menstruation, i.e. the theme "education on puberty and menstruation," indicates that mothers are unofficially educating their daughters on puberty at present. Some studies also suggested that mothers have a special position in talking to their children about these issues, and most teenagers learn about healthy behaviors from their mother (1; 3; 10; 12; 19). On the other hand, the mothers' initial emphasis on puberty and menstruation when answering the question "How do you talk to your daughter about sexual matters?" can imply that puberty and menstruation outshine other aspects of sexual issues in teenage years. Whereas sex education includes basic information about sexual intercourse, reproductive system health, proper use of birth control methods, knowledge of abortion, etc. according to definitions (2), the aforementioned issues are not given educational priority by mothers and, at times, they are seldom stressed owing to cultural obstacles and religious education regarding the limits of relationship with the opposite sex.

One of the categories of the theme "education on puberty and menstruation" was adhering to religious issues, indicating the impact of religious factors in the orientation of mothers' education. Another study also demonstrated that this is one of the essential needs of adolescence (20).

A remarkable result of the present research is that some mothers mentioned "self-protection in society and against the opposite sex" as a reason for "the necessity of education on sexual intercourse." This is while in the study conducted by Nouri-Sistani and Merghati-Khoi, it was stated that mothers avoid education on sexual intercourse and considered it as the last priority of sex education although they were worried about this fact (20). The same thing holds for another reason some mothers mentioned for the "necessity of education on sexual intercourse." They considered "life requirements in today's cyberspace" and access to the Internet and other media as a reason why they should provide their children with correct information as a reliable source. This is while the study performed by

Mahajan and Sharma in India showed that when teenagers fail to receive sexual information from their parents, they resort to the Internet and other sources, where it is likely that they receive invalid, wrong answers(7).

Despite the fact that a number of mothers considered "controlling sex drive" in their children to be a reason for "the necessity of education on sexual intercourse," the main reasons mentioned by those mothers who felt no necessity for education on sexual intercourse were "early puberty" and "greater arousal." This can be indicative of a lack of information in these mothers or the influence of wrong cultural beliefs. Research results in Western cultures show that not only does talking to children about sexual issues not increase sexual activities among teenagers, but also it postpones such activities (3; 4; 5).

An important result of the present study is the fact that even though most mothers considered the "proper age for sex education" to be the adolescence period, a number of mothers believed that sex education should start from childhood at a primary level, providing the necessary grounds for greater education at subsequent stages in mother-child interaction. In line with this finding, the effect of family-based sex education on teenagers' health and proper child-parent relationship was strongly demonstrated (11).

Despite the fact that some mothers felt self-sufficient regarding sex education, a great number of mothers mentioned a "counselor" as the "proper person for sex education." They stated as reasons their inadequate knowledge in this area and lack of education on the correct methods of transferring information in this respect. This is a result reported in other similar studies and it was demonstrated that parents prefer that schools and professional teachers perform sex education (21; 8). It should, of course, be mentioned that few mothers, owing to their shyness and modesty, preferred reliable people to deliver their children sex education. This was also pointed out in other studies (2; 12) and it may be attributed to cultural backgrounds.

In spite of all cultural developments regarding sex education in families, an instance of which was clearly seen in the mothers participating in the present research, the dominant culture of society and families is still extremely conservative about certain aspects of sex education. This is true to an extent that although a great number of studies indicate the prominent role of mothers in sex education, the mothers do not feel self-sufficient in this area.

The present research is a short introduction to the

vast subject of sex education. To be sure, a more accurate knowledge of this issue entails more research in this area. This study addressed the aforesaid matter only from the viewpoint of mothers who had an 11- to 18-year-old daughter and lived in Mashhad. Furthermore, since sexual issues is an especially sensitive one in our society in cultural and social terms, some mothers refused to fully express their experiences in the interviews. This was one of the limitations of this study. Hence, planning and implementing educational interventions for enhancing mothers' knowledge and a collaboration between school and home with regard to this issue are proposed for achieving better results. It is also proposed that the teenagers' experiences from their parents' education be utilized and teenage boys be also investigated for increasing the richness of data in future research plans.

Conclusion

The results indicate despite the cultural change in sex education among families, which some samples of mothers in our study were found in this research, the cultural traditions and families have a conservative approach to some aspects of sex education. Although many studies show the distinguished role of mothers, they still feel inefficient in sex education.

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Appendix

Sample Questions of the Semi-Structured Interview Implemented in the Research

As you know, your daughter is past her childhood

and has entered a new stage called "adolescence." This is a different situation than what she has experienced so far, and it involves a lot of questions. Puberty is one of the issues our children face in the adolescence period. The particular issue regarding girls is menstruation. I would like to have a chat with you about your experiences and those of your daughter about this issue.

Have you talked about this to your daughter? Why (Why not)?

- What did you explain to her?
- How did she feel as you were explaining?
- How do you feel about menstruation as a woman?
- (Finding a chance in between the mother's comments for bringing up sexual issues. For instance: "You talked about the private world between you and your daughter and the private areas nobody should see. In this private world, have you ever talked to her about sexual matters that pertain to her private areas?")
- What did you most talk to her about?
- Why does your daughter need to be aware of sexual matters?
- What age do you think is appropriate for sex education to your daughter? Why?
- If she does not start to talk about sexual issues, do you take the first step to talk about these matters?
- What characteristics do you think a parent should possess so that the child can ask for help regarding sexual issues?
- What do you think about sex education delivered by school and counselor?
- Imagine your daughter talks to you about her great sex drive. She says this is bothering her. What solution do you recommend to her?
- Do you think your daughter is curious about sexual matters? How do you respond to her curiosity? From what sources does she satisfy her curiosity?

What reasons do parents who do not talk about sexual matters to their children have?

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