

EXPLORING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ADOLESCENT HEALTH RISK BEHAVIORS

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Purpose

Adolescents participate in activities that place them at risk for serious health outcomes such as STDs and pregnancy. With the family as the adolescent's primary environmental influence, we need to explore how family issues affect adolescent's participation in health risk activities. This descriptive study explored ways adolescent girls and their divorced/separated mothers related to each other in areas such as communication, expressions of affection/caring, perceived pubertal development of the adolescent girls and health risk behaviors.

Methods

Following IRB approval, mothers with a daughter 11 – 15 years old were recruited during a health screening program in Alabama; a follow-up phone call ensured the daughter's willingness to participate and an appointment was made. Data collection occurred during a home visit. Questionnaires and an in-depth interview explored communication issues, pubertal status, parent-adolescent attachment, and adolescent autonomy / parental separation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each parent and adolescent was paid \$15.

Findings

Adolescent girls (n=14) and their mothers (n=13) (one family had two daughters) participated; 66% had a family income of less than \$20,000/year with 76% in a single-parent home. About 84% were Caucasian; 16% were African American.

Preliminary analysis suggested that household chores and schoolwork were topics most often discussed between mothers and daughters. Discussions about household chores were emotionally charged for both mothers and daughters. Mothers perceived their daughters as more biologically developed than the daughters assessed themselves, particularly breast development.

In terms of autonomy, these young women believed themselves mature. The daughters reported stronger attachment to their mothers than their fathers.

Discussion

Further analysis (quantitative and qualitative) will be conducted to further examine these variables and their relationship to adolescent health risk behaviors. The family is charged, both ethically and legally, as the entity responsible for the healthy growth and development of their children. Information from this study will provide a basis for further delineation of how family can be included in developing effective interventions designed to prevent adolescent health risk behaviors.