

Parent – College Student Conversations about Sexual Violence

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Purpose of the Study

Examine parent–college student conversations about sexual violence in order to gain an understanding of the attitudes and messaging about the topic parents are communicating to their students.

Results will:

- add to existing research about sexual violence on college campuses
- help higher education professionals share with parents of college students ways to help support their students' understanding of sexual violence
- aim of helping prevent its occurrence



Sexual Violence on college campuses

- One in five college women (one in twenty college men) reported sexual assault at some point in their college career (Anderson & Clement, 2015)
- Factors associated with increased sexual violence rates:
 - ***Fraternity membership*** (e.g. Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014, Sanday, 1992, & Seabrook et al., 2016)
 - ***Hypermasculinity and heteronormative beliefs*** (e.g. Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014, & Eaton & Matamala, 2014)
 - ***College drinking and party scene*** (Armstrong, 2000, Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014, Hines, Armstrong, Reed, & Cameron, 2012)
 - ***Rape myth acceptance*** (e.g. Hayes, Abbott, & Cook, 2016, & Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015)
 - ***Gender differences in obtaining and indicating consent*** (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013)
- Title IX/Dept. of Education Dear Colleague Letters/Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)



Parent involvement in higher education

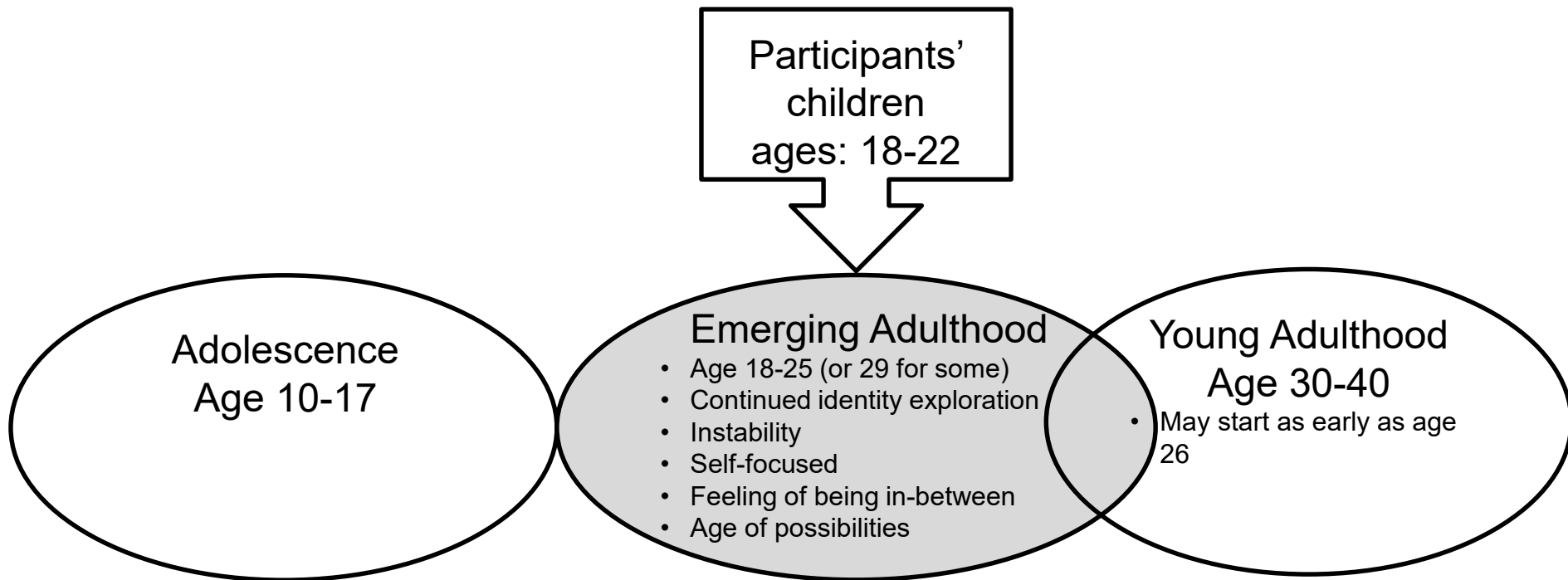
- Undergraduate students communicate with parents an average of **13.4 times per week** (Hofer, 2008)
- **Parent communication** assists in transition to college (e.g. Gentzler et al., 2011, & Lee, Meszaros, & Colvin, 2009)
- **High parent involvement** supports transition to college (Taub, 2008)
- Students rely on parents in **decision-making** (e.g. Fingerman et al., 2012 & Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011)
- Colleges and universities provide following **involvement opportunities** for parents:
 - *Parent orientation – 98%*
 - *Family weekend – 95%*
 - *Parent newsletter – 95%*
 - *Parent handbook – 78% (Savage & Petree, 2015)*



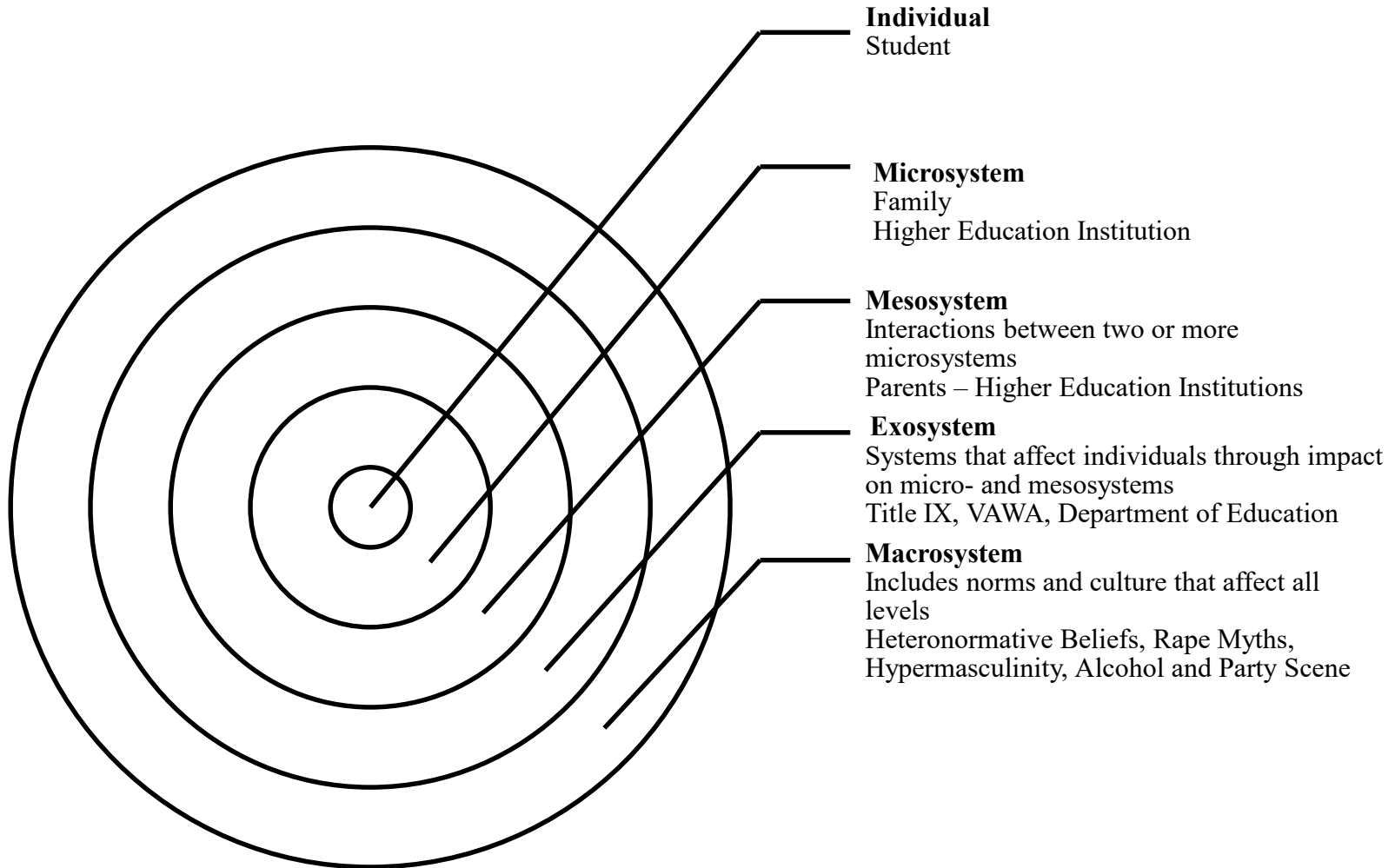
Parent communication about sex and sexual violence

- **Open and honest communication** about sex is related to later onset of sexual activity (Rogers et al., 2015) and higher likelihood of reporting sexual violence (Smith & Cook, 2008)
- **Sex communication with sons is more open and supportive**; conversations with daughters are more prohibitive (Downie & Coates, 1999)
- **Gender double-standards in sex communication** are related to more endorsement of rape myths, higher incidence of sexual violence victimization/perpetration (Levin et al., 2012)
- **Family support instrumental in survivors' willingness to report** (Fehler-Cabral & Campbell, 2012)
- **Support of parents/peers generally helpful to survivors** (Freidman & Morgan, 2009)
- **Parent-based interventions** have been associated in lower levels of alcohol consumption (Turrisi et al. 2010) and incapacitated rape (Testa et al, 2010)

Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett, 2000)



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979)



Research Questions



RQ1: What messages are parents sending college students in conversations about sexual violence?

RQ2: How do messages about sexual violence differ depending on the gender of the parent/college student having the conversations?

RQ3: What resources do parents identify as helpful in facilitating conversations about sexual violence with their children?



Qualitative Research

- Instead of determining cause and effect, I attempted to **understand the experiences** of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Phenomenology

- Phenomenon: **How** college parents talk with their children about sexual violence



Interviews

- Parents of current students attending 4-year, public, doctoral granting higher education institutions in the SW United States
- Recruitment of participants - American Higher Education Parent Programming Professionals (AHEPPP) list serve
 - *21 member institutions fit criteria for study (public, four-year doctoral granting universities in Southwestern U.S.)*
 - *Recruitment email/information sheet sent to parent program directors*
- Interviews recorded with permission; pseudonyms used for all participants, students, institutions
- Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype

Participants



Pseudonym	Gender	Gender of student	Age of student(s)	Other children	Institution
Susan	Female	Female	18	Son at small private	Ascent University
Ann	Female	Female	20	Son in HS	Ascent University
Denise	Female	Female	20	2 sons, not in college (older)	Celebrate University
Stephanie	Female	Male	20	Daughter in HS	Ascent University
Rebecca*	Female	Female (2)	20, 22	Two other daughters not in college	Pinnacle University
Marcia	Female	Male (2), Female	19 (m), 21 (f), 22 (m)		Pinnacle University
Jane*	Female	Female	22	Three other daughters not in college	Pinnacle University
Jennifer	Female	Female	19	3 daughters, two sons.	Pinnacle University

*only daughters in family



Data Sources, Collection, & Analysis

Documents

- Orientation schedules
- Orientation presentations
- Websites
- Videos – “Tea Consent” and “Not on My Campus”



Data Sources, Collection, & Analysis

Data sources analyzed:

- Transcription of interviews
- Notes taken during interviews
- Researcher's journal
- Documents

Data analysis procedures:

- Constant comparative method
- Line-by-line coding
- Sorting codes into major categories
- Categories became themes

Findings and Discussion



Seven themes emerged:

Theme:	Research Question:
1. Parents' understanding of and attitudes about consent	RQ1: What messages are parents sending?
2. The role of alcohol in sexual violence	RQ1: What messages are parents sending?
3. Stranger danger	RQ1: What messages are parents sending?
4. Victim-blaming and hypermasculinity	RQ1: What messages are parents sending?
5. Gender double-standards and heteronormativity	RQ2: Are there gender differences in communication about sexual violence?
6. Using examples	RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in facilitating conversations?
7. Campus resources	RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in facilitating conversations?



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

Theme 1: Parents' understanding of and attitudes about consent

- *Consent*: Consent is defined as “words or overt actions by a person who is legally or functionally competent to give informed approval, indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact” (Basile et al., 2014 p, 11).
- Confusion about giving/obtaining consent contributes to sexual violence victimization and perpetration (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013)
- Some participants demonstrated a solid understanding of consent:

“Consensual is definitely “yes” and “yes,” and there's no doubt about that “yes,” there's no game playing. But even, you know, in a committed relationship, there still has to be consent. Just being married isn't automatic consent for whenever somebody wants to have sex. So, it has to be “yes” and “yes” without any equivocation or pressure” (Susan, 93-96).

“Another issue is that, just because consent for sex was given one time, that does not mean consent was given for other sexual activities that occurred later. I have talked with my children about all of these scenarios” (Marcia, 86-88).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

- However, others shared inaccurate messages about consent or did not discuss it with their children

“And I just said I said to him, I said, ‘I just would really advise against sleeping with somebody that is in an inebriated state. It is because you don't know if they're truly consenting, and they might change their mind the next day’” (Stephanie, 220-224)

“It means they're fully aware of the consequences of unprotected sex. And, you know, to be perfectly blunt, okay, because my son is still a college student. You know they're going to do what they want to do, and you try to respect that. I'm blunt enough to jokingly say, ‘I don't want to be a grandmother anytime soon’” (Denise, 143-146).

Two participants did not discuss consent at all



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

Theme 2: The role of alcohol and drugs in sexual violence

- Alcohol consumption is related to higher incidence of sexual violence victimization and perpetration (Armstrong, 2000, Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014, Hines, Armstrong, Reed, & Cameron, 2012)
- All participants in the study discussed alcohol and/or drugs with their students when talking about sexual violence

“You just have to be very careful with drinking involved” (Ann, 160).

“And, you know, when I was in college, I’d be warned, ‘Well, you know if you go to that party, be aware, don’t drink the punch, guys there want to get you really drunk.’ Because they want to convince you to do things you wouldn’t unless you were really, really drunk. So, I knew avoiding getting really drunk could be really important” (Susan, 245-250).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

Theme 3: Stranger Danger

- Rape myth: “most rapes involve a stranger using a weapon attacking a woman violently at night in an isolated, outdoor area, and that women sustain serious injuries from these attacks” (Waterhouse, Reynolds, & Egan, 2016, p. 1).
- 9/10 victims of sexual assault know their perpetrators (Fisher et al., 2000).
- Rape myth acceptance is related to underreporting of sexual violence and undermines deterrent effects to perpetration (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2016).

“She has mace, and she knows that that needs to be with her and held when she’s walking. We did talk to her about being out on the campus and walking, or, when she’s going from point A to point B to be alert...” (Denise, 203-205).

“So, you know, we really stressed to be aware of her surroundings. Keep your phone with her. Keep it handy. Try to avoid walking alone on campus, but especially at night. Her dad got her pepper spray to carry” (Susan, 146-148).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

- However, three participants discussed the possibility of sexual violence with known perpetrators

We discussed sexual violence coming from unknown individuals and from known individuals. Sexual violence can occur when you are in a relationship with someone.... (Jennifer, 106-108).

“... romantic relationships, parties, especially with alcohol or drugs, and walking alone in the dark. Incidents with romantic relationships are often not reported” (Marcia, 84-86).

“Drinking for sure. Drugs for sure. Fraternity and sorority life for sure. And you know, I think it happens more so than I would have cared to believe in trusted relationships” (Jane, 213-214).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

Theme 4: Victim-Blaming and Hypermasculinity

- Victim-blaming (like rape myth acceptance) may lead to underreporting of sexual violence and undermines deterrent effect to perpetrators (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015)
- Two participants recognized victim-blaming as problematic

“I think one thing that really bothers me is the whole blaming mentality. “What were you wearing? Where were you at?” And I’ve even heard other females say that. I’ve had clients that come in and say, “Hey, my roommate says this: ‘Well, that’s why it happened, because of where she was at.’” (Ann, 140-145)

“You know, I think, unfortunately, we live in a day where most of the rapes that occur, you know, especially towards women, it’s always on them. “What were you doing? Who were you with? How were you dressed? How drunk were you? You know, what drugs had you taken? It’s always on the victim, which is very unfortunate and very devastating as well” (Rebecca, 264-267).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

- Two participants included victim-blaming messages in discussions with their daughters

“And I guess one of the things we talked about, and this is never a cause, but, in my mind, how you carry yourself can lead to impressions... and I don’t want to put that on the woman” (Jennifer, 208-210).

“It’s like, what’s making you inside willing to do that? Like, you’re wanting someone to love you, you’re wanting attention. It feels good and you want that validation. Like, okay, why do you want that? You know, what’s driving you to place that above self-protection and losing your voice?... Why? Why are you getting in that car with that person? Why are you drinking so much that you’re not making good decisions?” (Stephanie, 453-459).



RQ1: What messages are parents sending?

- *Hypermasculinity*: Hypermasculinity is “an exaggerated adherence to traditional male gender role beliefs” (Corprew & Mitchell, 2014, p. 549).
- Hypermasculinity was found to be a predictor of sexually aggressive behavior in college men (Corprew III & Mitchell, 2014)
- Two out of eight participants discussed hypermasculinity as contributing to sexual violence

“You know, one of the things that really burns me up is this idea that guys can't control themselves. I think that's not fair to them. But it creates a culture where it's not fair to any of us, if someone can't control himself, then women are supposed to give it to him, because, you know, we can't cause him pain. But that's ridiculous. And so that culture right there...men are not capable of self-discipline? That sex is so overwhelming a thing that they can't be self-disciplined? I don't think we've talked about that enough” (Susan, 323-328).



RQ2: What differences exist depending on gender?

Theme 5: Gender double-standards and gender roles

Sub-theme: Differences between conversations with sons and daughters

- Gender double-standards in sex communication and strict adherence to gender roles are related to higher incidence of sexual assault victimization/perpetration (Levin et al., 2012; Eaton and Matamala, 2014)
- Participants shared more protective messages focusing on stranger danger with daughters, more messages about sexuality and avoiding pitfalls of sex with sons

“And then I am blunt with him to say that, ‘You’re going to be doing what’s right with this responsibility because, you know, you can’t trust that that female may be on birth control like she’s telling you, or what if that fails?’” (Denise, 146-148).

“He’s talked to my daughter more, I think, just as a protective means. I know he’s talked to my son about his sexuality, but not necessarily about sexual violence” (Ann, 122-123).



RQ2: What differences exist depending on gender?

Sub-theme: Differences between conversations with mothers and fathers

- Some participants were unified team when talking about sexual violence; for others, there were differing messages or the mother talked more about the topic

“My conversations I’ve always had with him is... I’d really like you to wait until you’re married to have sex. I don’t know how realistic it is. You know, that’s what we put out there as husband and wife” (Stephanie, 199-201)

“You know, we’ve had conversations for instance where he has said, ‘You need to be mindful of the fact that men are visually stimulated when they see women dressed provocatively’” (Rebecca, 188-190)

“I talk about it more than he does, and he’ll just kinda like, chime in, but I think he just leaves that to me. But, I mean, he doesn’t shy away from the conversation if we’re talking about it” (Jennifer, 182-185).

RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in discussing sexual violence with their children?



Theme 6: Using Examples

Sub-theme: News stories

“Our family discusses current events quite often, so often discussions were based on that. For example, news about rapes at frat parties led to a discussion about not putting yourself in a position where something like that would be possible, like not going at all or staying with friends at all times” (Marcia, 33-36).

I texted my daughter this week and I told her it came out on the news about the [redacted] University cheerleader.... And I said, “These are the things that I try and make you understand, that you always have to be aware of what’s going on.” (Denise, 260-263)

RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in discussing sexual violence with their children?



Sub-theme: Personal and professional experiences

So, for me, a lot of this is very personal. It makes it a reality. It's not something that I think in terms of, "Oh, it could happen to somebody else, but it's not going to happen to me," because the reality is that it did happen to me. So, I think with that foundation, even early on with the girls, I've always had very open, transparent, honest conversations with them about sex, about sexual relationships, about intimacy, about when you say "no" it's "no" regardless of the situation. (Rebecca, 56-63)

I think I was pretty comfortable with that, because, just as my profession, I'm used to talking to people about that, and I, you know, I've heard several people's stories, and would even talk to her about some of those as far as people's experiences at college and things like that. (Ann, 92-94)

RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in discussing sexual violence with their children?



Sub-theme: Campus incidents

About the same time, another student from her school, back in October, and he was found unconscious. And really, that hit close to home for her because he was found on the couch in the apartment of a friend of hers she had graduated high school with. So, it was just like, “Okay, you see what happens.” This is my chance to talk to her and say, “This is what happens.” (Denise, 272-276)

On the Pinnacle University campus, actually in the dorm where she’s living, there was a student, oh, less than five years ago, walking back to the dorm and she was sexually assaulted and was killed. So, you know, we talked about that, and not to walk alone.... (Jennifer, 193-195)

RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in discussing sexual violence with their children?



Theme 7: Campus Resources

Sub-theme: Orientation presentations

- All participants mentioned attending orientation programs at their students' institutions

“They talked about reporting, and how to report, to whom to report, and when to report, whether it’s for yourself or someone else. They also talked about counseling services on campus that you can go in and the counselors will hear your report, and they don’t have to report it, you know, unless they see an ongoing danger.... The way they kept talking about it, to me, made it seem very accessible and very real” (Susan, 277-283).

“In fact, our university, on orientation day, offers several breakout sessions, and one of the breakout sessions was actually the chief of the university police coming to talk to parents and, you know, along the lines of, “How do you prevent your student’s bike from being stolen?” and, you know, “Be sure to tell your student to lock their dorm room door... They were the ones that made it aware to us about their Rape Aggression Defense program” (Rebecca, 292-297).

RQ3: What resources do parents find helpful in discussing sexual violence with their children?



- However, two participants felt orientation programs did not do enough to raise awareness about sexual violence.

“You know, there’s nothing that I am aware of that is directly provided for parents, you know, there’s liquor and alcohol information, how to talk about alcohol with your child, how to talk about drugs with your child, that, you know, the anxiety of first-year college life with your child. You know, more general topics, and there’s webinars and all kinds of things. But no consent education or sexual violence education” (Jane, 234-238).

“So, I think the campus officers can be involved in education which, I’m almost positive they did speak, but, you know, what are you speaking about? That we’re here? Our doors are open? We don’t need to hear doors are open. Have some stories” (Denise, 610-612).

Theme: Campus Resources



Sub-theme: Talking points

“The immediate thing I think of is something that offered something that maybe gave you topics you could talk about, maybe high-risk situations and how to prevent those.... Some guidelines of, “These are high risk situations and how can you protect yourself in this situation.” And also what to do if something does happen” (Ann, 189-194).

“But maybe just having things in the newsletter or, just points for us to think about, because, like, the whole thing about... well what is consent? I mean, I hadn't really thought about it and, you know, it is... kind of a detailed thing. Well, if someone's kissing you, does that mean that they're consenting to a relationship? And if you, I mean you've got to get kind of intimate in that conversation. What if you're taking their top off? Does that mean that's consent? I mean, you know, like it's kind of an intimate subject. So, I could see that there would be some challenges to how you do that? So, it might be good to have some content, like here's some high point tips that you might want to talk about with your students” (Stephanie, 393-400).

Theme: Campus Resources



Sub-theme: Electronic resources

Videos: “About a year ago, we all watched the ‘Consent Tea’ video together and found it to be helpful in discussing consent” (Marcia, 29-30).

Website: “How to support your students... so, they could talk about concepts, issues, and vocabulary and resources, how to handle the conversation, what to do, how to listen and react, how to mend, and what resources may or may not be available to them” (Jane, 267-269).



Research Question 1: What messages are college parents sending their children in conversations about sexual violence?

- Wide range of understanding of and attitudes about consent
- Role of alcohol in sexual violence
- Sharing rape myth of stranger danger
- Victim-blaming messages

Discussion



Research Question 2: How do messages about sexual violence differ depending on the gender of the parent/college student having the conversations?

- More open with sons about sexuality
- More protective of daughters
- Sharing stranger danger messages more with daughters
- Half of participants: couple were unified team in discussing sexual violence



Research Question 3: What resources do parents identify as helpful in facilitating conversations about sexual violence with their children?

- Using Examples
 - *News Stories*
 - *Personal/professional experiences*
 - *Campus incidents*
- Campus Resources
 - *Orientation presentations*
 - *Talking points*
 - *Electronic resources*

Implications for Higher Education



- Encourage parents' use of examples
- Orientation presentations – involve safety education, Title IX offices, Student Affairs to present to parents rather than relying solely on police presentations about general safety
- Campus communications – be transparent about sexual violence on campus; provide information on all types of sexual violence, not just those fitting “stranger danger” model

Implications for Higher Education



- Campus collaborations – involve safety education, parent programming offices to disseminate talking points about sexual violence and consent between orientation and move-in and at other timely intervals
 - *Tips for discussing consent while avoiding rape myths, victim-blaming language, gender double-standards*
 - *Share resources, reporting mechanisms, and victim-support structures*
 - *Consider use of “Tea Consent” or other videos*
- Sexual violence web page for parents
 - *Comprehensive list of links to resources for discussing sexual violence and consent, sexual violence prevention, support resources*

Limitations



- Limited scope – parents of students enrolled at public, four-year doctoral granting institutions in the Southwestern United States
- Only mothers participated
- All participants identified as heterosexual, married women with students who were in heterosexual dating relationships

Further Research



- Fathers
- Sub-populations of college parents
 - *Parents of LGBTQIA students*
 - *Students of color*
 - *First generation*
 - *Other institutional types: Faith-based, private colleges, Community Colleges*
- Other regions of the United States
- Students – how did they experience conversations about sexual violence with their parents

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Thank you!

Questions



Questions