

The Role of Strength-based Parenting in Family Sex Communication

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Abstract

Strength-based parenting is a parenting style where parents focus on children's strengths and positive qualities. This approach is generally linked to better well-being and psychological states in adolescents. However, the impact of this parenting style on how families communicate about sex remains unclear. This is a crucial issue, considering that adolescents need sex education, and parents should play a key role in providing it. This study aimed to investigate the role of strength-based parenting dimensions (strength knowledge and strength use) on family sex communication. Participants were 253 senior high school students in Surabaya who completed the Strength-Based Parenting Scale and the Family Sex Communication Quotient questionnaires. Using multiple regression analysis, the result showed that strength-based parenting influenced family sex communication. Parental encouragement for adolescents to utilize their strengths (strength use) was a significant predictor of family sex communication. This indicates that parents' positive encouragement motivates both children and parents to engage in discussions concerning sensitive topics such as sex. Future studies should consider the social and cultural values held by the family, parental understanding of sexual issues, and adolescents' gender.

Keywords: Family Communication; Sex Education; Strength-based Parenting; Adolescents; Parent-child Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. This developmental stage is characterized by accelerated changes, encompassing biological maturation, abstract and critical thinking, expanding social relationships, and fluctuating emotional experiences (Santrock, 2014). These changes contribute to an increased sense of curiosity regarding their identity and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, issues concerning

sexual development, reproductive health, and romantic relationships frequently emerge as common topics among adolescents. This specific interest and curiosity about sexual issues can be considered a normative facet of adolescent development (Purnama et al., 2020; Saputro, 2018).

Sex education is required to address adolescents' heightened curiosity and interest in sexual topics. Ideally, sex education provides knowledge and understanding of various aspects of sexuality, including the cognitive, emotional, social, interactional, and physical dimensions, with this knowledge intended for a broad audience, encompassing children, adolescents, and adults (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2016). Sex education serves to safeguard adolescents' sexual development, assist them in understanding their sexuality, foster safe relationships, and cultivate responsibility for maintaining their own and others' sexual health (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2016).

Family should provide adolescents with sex education; in this case parents bear the responsibility to address adolescents' curious questions and discuss sexual issues (Pop & Rusu, 2015). Parents can also discuss social values, familial and societal expectations concerning healthy and low-risk sexual behavior. Through this communication, parents can influence adolescents' belief, attitude, intention, and behavior, thereby positively impacting their sexual health (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Furthermore, open communication can result in adolescents exhibiting assertive behavior in discussing sexual matters with their partners, ultimately fostering healthy and safe relationships (Warren & Warren, 2015).

Despite its importance, family communication regarding sex is frequently perceived as taboo (Situmorang, 2024). Many parents consider sexual topics inappropriate for discussion, leading them to avoid these topics with their adolescent children (Parwati et al., 2021). Notably, Javanese culture even has the term "*saru*," signifying the taboo nature of openly discussing sexual topics (Windijarti, 2011). Surveys on adolescent reproductive health in Indonesia indicate that 84% of adolescents (aged 12-17 years) have not received adequate sex education (Putri, 2019). This aligns with our preliminary research on 33 senior high school students in Surabaya, where 63.6% reported never receiving sex education from their parents. While parents are often the initial source of information when adolescents experience the early signs of puberty, over time, adolescents increasingly turn to peers to discuss sexual topics (Putri, 2019). Research involving 541 senior high school students in Sinjai, South Sulawesi, revealed that 60.4% of adolescents identified friends as their primary source of information on sexual topics, followed by social media (13.6%), school (11.2%), mass media (9.9%), and lastly, parents (4.9%) (Awaru et al., 2018). The reasons cited by adolescents for their reluctance to speak with parents and their preference for other sources on sexuality include feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, and fear of negative parental reactions when discussing such topics (Grossman et al., 2018). Furthermore, research suggests that adolescents' limited sexual knowledge, negative peer influence, and frequent exposure to pornography on social media are associated with an increased risk of engaging in premarital sexual intercourse (Sari et al., 2020). Conversely, when adolescents maintain good communication with their parents and have positive peer environments, problematic sexual behavior seems to decrease (Simawang et al., 2022).

Family sex communication refers to the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between parents and children, aimed at fostering mutual understanding and agreement regarding perspectives, attitudes, values, and sexual behavior (Warren & Warren, 2015). To facilitate this process, parents and their adolescent children must

maintain a positive and supportive relationship. According to Warren and Warren (2015), family sex communication is characterized by three key elements: comfort, information exchange, and shared values. A supportive family climate and parental empathy help build comfort and promote open communication about sexual topics. Moreover, parents and their adolescent children need to engage in frequent and meaningful conversations to ensure that adolescents receive adequate information about sexual issues. Family sex communication not only provides adolescents with essential knowledge but also transmits important values that can be passed down to future generations (Warren & Neer, 1986; Warren & Warren, 2015).

The relationship between parents and their children is related to parenting styles (Bi et al., 2018). Parenting styles reflect the attitudes displayed by parents towards their children, creating a specific emotional atmosphere that subsequently influences their parenting behaviors (Darling & Steinberg, 2017). Research shows that positive parenting styles (warmth and acceptance accompanied by supervision) strengthen the relationship between parents and adolescents (Bi et al., 2018). Therefore, positive parenting styles may impact effective communication within the family, including when discussing sensitive topics such as sex. Kiptiyah & Baroya (2019) found a significant relationship between communication and parenting styles with adolescent sexual behavior in Jember. Poor communication between parents and children in daily life and in discussing sexual issues was associated with increased high-risk sexual behavior in adolescents. Meanwhile, compared to positive (authoritative) parenting styles, negative (authoritarian and permissive) parenting styles correlated with increased high-risk sexual behavior in adolescents. These findings are supported by other studies showing that authoritative parenting styles and quality relationships between adolescents and parents were significant predictors for reducing high-risk sexual behavior in adolescents (Yimer & Ashebir, 2019). Unfortunately, neither of these two studies examined the relationship between parenting style and communication, particularly concerning adolescent sexual behavior. Nevertheless, positive parenting styles may foster adolescents' sense of worth and encourage their independent decision-making. This, in turn, can cultivate satisfaction within adolescents regarding the parent-child relationship, potentially leading to stronger attachment to their parents and the fulfillment of their emotional needs (Yimer & Ashebir, 2019).

Research on parenting styles generally refers to the parenting styles proposed by Baumrind (2012), who categorized these styles into authoritarian (characterized by harsh parenting), permissive (characterized by lenient parenting), and authoritative (characterized by warm but firm parenting). The authoritative parenting style has the most positive impact on children's development and behavior, as parents are responsive to their child's needs while also fostering self-regulation through discussion and negotiation (Baumrind, 2012).

Notably, authoritative parenting is not the sole parenting style with beneficial effects on children's behavior. Waters (2015, 2017) emphasizes that when during interactions with children, it is crucial for parents to attend to and cultivate their child's potentials and positive qualities – in essence, their child's strengths. This approach is termed strength-based parenting, comprising two key aspects: strength knowledge (an understanding of the child's strengths) and strength-use (encouragement for the child to develop these strengths). Research on adolescent life satisfaction indicates that contribution of strength-based parenting exceeds that of authoritative parenting (Waters, 2015a). Strength-based parenting has been perceived positively by adolescents,

correlating with increased happiness (Loton & Waters, 2017), well-being (Jach et al., 2018; Sumargi & Giovanni, 2021; Waters, 2015a), self-esteem (Sumargi & Firlita, 2020), self-compassion (Ratna et al., 2021), and other positive characters and behaviors such as perseverance and personal growth initiative (Ju et al., 2023; Waters et al., 2019). Furthermore, strength-based parenting is also associated with a reduction in stress and depressive symptoms (Tang et al., 2022; Waters, 2015b) as well as a decreased urge for self-injury (Sumargi et al., 2022).

To date, research on strength-based parenting has primarily focused on its impact on children's or parents' psychological states and behaviors. However, there has been a lack of studies examining its influence on family relationships, particularly family sex communication. This issue warrants attention as an effort to identify protective and promotive factors that contribute to adolescent sexual development. This study aims to examine the influence of strength-based parenting, specifically strength-knowledge and strength-use, on family sex communication. These two aspects of strength-based parenting empower adolescents to become more aware of their strengths and feel encouraged to utilize them in daily activities and interpersonal relationships (Arslan, 2024; Jach et al., 2018). Parents employing strength-based approaches are viewed favorably, as they appreciate their child's strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses (Waters, 2017). This positive parental regard may foster a sense of closeness and comfort when communicating their needs with their parents, including when discussions on sensitive topics such as sex. The primary hypothesis of this study posits a significant influence of both aspects of strength-based parenting on family sex communication. The secondary hypotheses are as follows: (1) strength-knowledge is a significant predictor of family sex communication, and (2) strength-use is a significant predictor of family sex communication.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 253 adolescents (14-17 years old; $M = 15.93$, $SD = 0.83$) from a senior high school in Surabaya. The majority of participants were in the 10th grade (37%) and 11th grade (36%). Most participants resided with both parents (77%), while the remainder lived with a single parent (16%) or alone/with relatives (7%). The highest level of maternal education was predominantly senior high school (40%) and a bachelor's degree (38%). Likewise, the highest level of paternal education was primarily senior high school (42%) and a bachelor's degree (35%).

Data collection was conducted at the school through the distribution of an online questionnaire link (via Google Forms) to students, facilitated by teachers and class representatives. Students completed the questionnaires in their classrooms after the researcher explained the study's objectives and they had provided informed consent. Participation in the study was limited to those who provided their consent.

Measures

Measures employed in this study were the Family Sex Communication Quotient (FSCQ) to assess family communication about sex (Warren, 2020) and the Strength-Based Parenting Scale (SBPS; Waters, 2015a), which has been translated into Indonesian by Sumargi & Giovanni (2021). Factor analysis of the SBPS revealed two distinct factors: strength-knowledge and strength-use, allowing both to be measured separately (Jach et al., 2018). The FSCQ consists of 18 statements with 5 response options, ranging from Strongly

Disagree (score 1) to Strongly Agree (score 5). The SBPS consists of 14 items, specifically 7 items assessing strength-knowledge and 7 items assessing strength-use, each with 7 response options ranging from Strongly Disagree (score 1) to Strongly Agree (score 7). Prior to use, permission for the FSCQ' use and translation was obtained, followed by a rigorous process of forward translation, backward translation, and review by expert judges.

The corrected item-total correlation values for the FSCQ ranged from 0.304 to 0.795, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.914, indicating excellent internal consistency. For the SBPS, the corrected item-total correlation values ranged from 0.552 to 0.852 for strength-knowledge and from 0.656 to 0.787 for strength-use. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.917 for strength-knowledge and 0.906 for strength-use, both signifying excellent internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Multiple regression analysis (Ordinary Least Squares or OLS) was employed for data analysis, with family sex communication as the dependent variable and strength-knowledge and strength-use as the independent variables. Prior to conducting the data analysis, several assumption tests were performed, including tests for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. These analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were assessed through examination of the Normal P-P Plot and the Scatterplot of the residuals. The results indicated that the data points tended to follow the diagonal line of normality on the P-P Plot. Meanwhile, the distribution of data residuals on the Scatterplot was random with a concentration of data points around the midline. This suggests that the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met. The assumption of multicollinearity was also met, as indicated by a Tolerance value above 0.10 (value = 0.54) and a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) value below 10 (value = 1.85).

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations between Variables

Variable	Score range	M	SD	Correlation	
				1	2
Family sex communication	1-5	2.53	0.73	-	-
Strength-knowledge	1-7	5.31	1.18	.23***	-
Strength-use	1-7	5.45	1.18	.25***	.68***

Notes: M = mean, SD = standard deviation
 ***p < .001

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the research variables, including the correlations between them. The mean score for family sex communication is below the scale midpoint, indicating that family discussions about sex are not frequent. Conversely, the mean scores for strength-knowledge and strength-use are above the scale midpoint, suggesting that adolescents perceive their parents as employing strength-based parenting relatively well. The correlations analysis reveals significant relationships between all variables. Specifically, both strength-knowledge and strength-use exhibit significant positive relationships with family sex communication, as well as a significant positive correlation with each other.

Table 2. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Family Sex Communication from Strength-Based Parenting

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Strength-knowledge	0.07	0.05	0.12	1.44	.151
Strength-use	0.11	0.05	0.17	2.03	.044*
Constant	1.56	0.23		6.88	.000
<i>F</i>	9.41				
<i>df</i>	2.00				
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.06				

Notes: *B* = unstandardized beta coefficient, *SE B* = standard error of *B*, β = standardized beta coefficient.
 **p* < .05

The results of the multiple regression analysis, with both aspects of strength-based parenting as independent variables and family sex communication as the dependent variable, demonstrated a significant effect, $F(2, 250) = 9.41, p < .001, R^2$ value = 0.063. This indicates that strength-based parenting significantly influences family sex communication, explaining 6.3% of the variance. The primary hypothesis of this study was supported. Furthermore, Table 2 reveals that only strength-use made a unique and significant contribution to family sex communication ($t = 2.03, p < .05, \beta = 0.17$). Therefore, only the second secondary hypothesis was supported: strength-use was a significant predictor for family sex communication.

The results in this study align with previous research reporting the positive impact of strength-based parenting on adolescents (Jach et al., 2018; Loton & Waters, 2017; Ratna et al., 2021; Sumargi et al., 2022; Sumargi & Firlita, 2020; Sumargi & Giovanni, 2021; Waters, 2015a; Waters et al., 2019). Based on the present findings, the positive impact of strength-based parenting is not limited to adolescents' well-being and psychological states but also extends to family relationships, particularly in communicating about sex.

The results of this study also indicate that merely recognizing an adolescent's strengths (strength-knowledge) is insufficient. Instead, parents need to actively help their adolescents utilize these strengths in their daily lives (strength-use). These strengths can encompass adolescents' abilities, skills, or potential, as well as their character and positive traits (Waters, 2017). Parents can create opportunities for their adolescents to employ their strengths (e.g., by encouraging or allowing them to participate in activities aligned with their interests and abilities), provide support and praise when an adolescent demonstrates these strengths (e.g., by appreciating their participation, work, or achievements), and connect the adolescent's strengths with the challenges or tasks they face, enabling them to use these strengths strategically (e.g., by encouraging an adolescent to use their curiosity, a key strength, when facing a difficult task). According to various studies, this parental approach can enhance adolescents' self-esteem (Sumargi & Firlita, 2020), foster self-compassion (Ratna et al., 2021), and self-efficacy (Loton & Waters, 2017), as well as motivate adolescents to use their own strengths (Jach et al., 2018) and exhibit prosocial behaviors that lead to an increased sense of meaning in life and overall well-being (Arslan, 2024). Meanwhile, the impact on parents includes an increase in their self-efficacy and the development of positive emotions such as joy and pride towards their children (Waters & Sun, 2016). The positive impacts experienced by both adolescents and parents have implications for the relationship and communication between them, as observed in this study. A close relationship between parents and adolescents can motivate adolescents to be open in communicating about sex. According to Warren and Warren (2015), a good and supportive relationship fosters comfort, which encourages adolescents to bravely express

their opinions and ask questions related to sexual issues. The exchange of information and discussion about sexual issues can shape values regarding the importance of communication about sex within the family. Research shows that an open and supportive family atmosphere promotes discussions about sexuality between parents and their adolescents, and this communication subsequently influences adolescents' intention to maintain their sexual and reproductive health (Wu & Pask, 2024). Conversely, limited family communication regarding daily issues and sexual topics is associated with an increase in risky sexual behaviors among adolescents (Kiptiyah & Baroya, 2019).

The present findings indicate that while statistically significant, the contribution of strength-based parenting to family communication regarding sex is relatively modest (Table 3). As shown in Table 2, the observed correlation coefficients reveal a generally weak association between strength-based parenting (both strength-knowledge and strength-use) and family sex communication. An examination of the means and standard deviations for the study variables suggests that discussions about sex within the family are not particularly prevalent among the majority of the participants. This may be attributed to the prevailing societal and cultural norms in Indonesia, where sex continues to be considered as a taboo subject. Consequently, many parents express discomfort in engaging in open discussions about sexual issues with their adolescent children (Windijarti, 2011). Furthermore, concerns exist that sex education may inadvertently promote permissive sexual behaviors within the community (Parwati et al., 2021). These negative perceptions surrounding sex education are a significant barrier to more open discussions about sex within the families.

In addition to social and cultural values pertaining to sex, other factors that may influence family sex communication include parental understanding of sexual issues and the adolescents's gender (Likith, 2024). Limited parental knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health can result in a lack of information or the delivery of inaccurate information to adolescents. Furthermore, adolescents who perceive their parents' limited knowledge are reluctant to communicate with their parents about sexual issues, subsequently seeking sexual information from peers and media, sources that may potentially contribute to high-risk sexual behaviors (Yimer & Ashebir, 2019). Regarding gender, parents appear to exhibit greater protectiveness towards adolescent girls. Parents often assume that sex education is more necessary for adolescent girls compared to adolescent boys, considering earlier puberty in females and their vulnerability to sexual violence and unintended pregnancies (Robinson et al., 2017). However, similar to adolescent girls, adolescent boys also require sex education within the family to prevent high-risk sexual behaviors (Likith, 2024). Future research needs to consider parental understanding and gender differences as potential influences on family sex communication. Furthermore, considering the limitations of this study, future study should involve a larger number of adolescents from various schools across Indonesia to expand the generalizability of the research findings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that strength-based parenting, particularly strength-use, exerts a significant influence on family communication regarding sex. This underscores the importance of active parental involvement in fostering children's strengths, which, in turn, enhances the closeness of parent-child relationships, thereby facilitating communication and discussion about sexual issues.

Although sex remains a sensitive topic for family discussion, such conversations are crucial for adolescents to satisfy their curiosity and acquire information about healthy and normative sexual behavior, consequently mitigating the risk of engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors. This also carries implications for schools to strengthen their collaboration with parents concerning both the development of adolescents' strengths and comprehensive sex education. To this end, schools can organize seminars on positive parenting and adolescent sex education to provide opportunities for parents to engage in dialogue with their adolescents about relevant sexual issues, thereby potentially preventing the development of problematic sexual behaviors in the future.

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