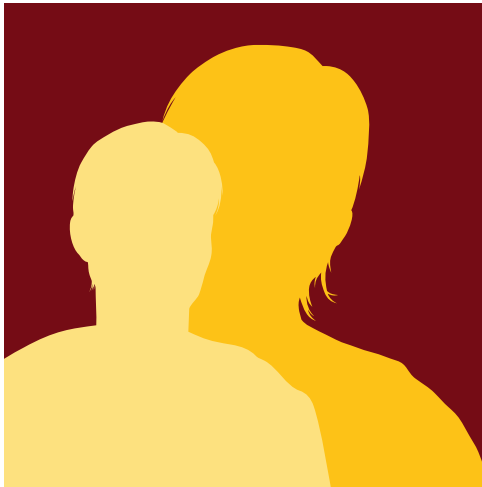


Parent-Adolescent Communication about Sex in Latino Families: **A Guide for Practitioners**

By Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, Ph.D., LCSW and Alida Bouris, MSW

January 2008



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Introduction and purpose

Social workers, guidance counselors, pediatricians, nurses, and other practitioners working with Latino families are in a unique position to help parents concerned about the risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Research shows that Latino parents matter when it comes to influencing their teen's sexual behavior—through specific parenting behavior and practices, parents can help reduce the risk of teen pregnancies and STDs among Latino youth. The purpose of this guide is to provide practitioners with practical, research-based strategies that can help Latino families improve parent-adolescent communication about sexual behavior in an effort to reduce the high rate of teen pregnancy and childbearing in the Latino community. Although many Latino parents are comfortable talking with their children about sex, love, and relationships, Latino parents themselves make clear that they want and need assistance in communicating more effectively with their children on these issues.^{1,2}

In seeking to help practitioners and Latino parents improve the quality and effectiveness of parent-adolescent communication about sexual behavior, we encourage Latino parents to do what is naturally and culturally important: provide the leadership, guidance, and love that promotes healthy youth development and reduces the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs. To help practitioners in their efforts to strengthen parents' ability to talk about sex, this guide provides advice in four areas: (1) the content of communication, (2) the context of communication, (3) the timing of parental discussions, and (4) the frequency of parental discussions.³

In addition, the guide reviews potential barriers to communication, such as religiosity and acculturation, that practitioners may encounter when working with Latino families. Communication is one way to help reduce the risk of Latino teen pregnancy and STDs. However, effective communication occurs within a constellation of other parent-adolescent factors that practitioners can highlight for parents. Therefore, practitioners will find information on how to help parents improve the quality of parent-adolescent relationships, as well as the quality of parental

monitoring and supervision. This information supplements the information presented in the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's pamphlet, *Consejos a los Padres* (available at www.teenpregnancy.org/espanol). Even effort has been made to ensure that this information is presented in a way that honors the cultural values and experiences of Latino families.

The majority of research on parent-adolescent communication about sex in Latino families has been conducted with mothers. This may be due, in part, to the fact that Latino mothers are more likely to talk about sex with their child than are fathers, according to some studies.⁴ However, this does not mean that fathers are not influential. In general, we know comparatively little about how Latino fathers communicate with their adolescent children about sex. While the strategies in this manual draw upon mother-adolescent research, practitioners working with fathers should still find this information useful and should be aware that fathers are an understudied group.

Across research studies with different Latino subgroups living in diverse communities across the United States, we see that Latino parents can use specific parenting practices and behavior that help reduce the risk of teen pregnancies and STDs among Latino youth. This is excellent news for advocates and practitioners whose work is focused on reducing teen pregnancy and STD rates in the Latino community. The evidence from these reports must now be transferred to the field so that practitioners can work effectively with Latino parents to ameliorate this public health challenge. As practitioners know, there is great diversity in Latino families with respect to acculturation, education, family structure, and religiosity. Each of these factors can impact parent-adolescent communication about sex, as well as the broader parent-adolescent relationship. Practitioners should be sensitive to this diversity and how it may affect parental communication about sex. Practitioners are strongly encouraged to explore the relevance of these topics with Latino parents and to tailor the information presented in this guide to the specific needs of the parents with whom they are working.

Through specific behavior and practices, parents can help reduce the rise of teen pregnancies and STDs among Latino youth.

Parent-adolescent communication

Whereas much of the early research on parent-adolescent communication about sex tended to conceptualize parent-adolescent communication as the occurrence or frequency of conversations, researchers are now calling for a more complex approach.⁵ Accordingly, we view parent-adolescent communication about sex as an ongoing process rather than a one-time conversation, and one that focuses on what messages are sent, what messages are heard, and what messages are understood. These messages can be direct or indirect, and the timing, frequency, and ways in which messages are delivered can all affect how Latino adolescents internalize and respond to parental communication about sex.

The content of communication: What parents say matters

The first of our four areas of communication focuses on the content of communication. Latino parents can talk about a wide range of topics with their children, including puberty, dating, abstinence values and expectations about sexual behavior, marriage, pregnancy, and contraception. Research suggests that, in general, Latino parents most often talk about puberty,^{6,7,8} the negative consequences of sexual behavior^{9,10} and about sexual morals, attitudes and values.^{8,10,11,12} With respect to values and attitudes, parents often emphasize the need to abstain from sex until marriage^{9,13,14} or until adolescents finish school and establish a meaningful career.^{7,9} Additionally, Latino parents discuss how having sex would be morally wrong,^{8,10} a message that teens appear to internalize.¹⁰ Importantly, studies show that parental disapproval of sex is related to less risky sexual behavior in both adolescence and adulthood.¹⁵

A number of studies have suggested that Latino parents have a difficult time talking about the technical aspects of sexuality, including contraceptives and birth control.^{8,11} This may be because many Latino parents believe they lack the knowledge to discuss such topics or that talking about contraception may encourage adolescent sexual activity.⁹ However, in longitudinal studies, parental communication about contraception is associated with less sexual risk taking on the part of Latino adolescents.¹⁶ In cross-sectional studies where a relationship between parental communication and increased rates of adolescent sexual activity have been observed, this finding is generally attributed to the fact that family communication about sex increases when parents perceive or know that their child has become sexually active.^{12,17}

Latino parents tend to talk about sex with their daughters more than with their sons.¹⁰ Adolescents are aware of this dynamic and want their parents to deliver the same message about responsible sexual behavior to sons and daughters.^{1,9} Although daughters are most often on the receiving end of parents' conversations about sex and related issues due to pregnancy concerns, Latino boys are more accepting

of having sex at an earlier age than Latina girls.¹⁰ This finding is supported by national data showing that Latino boys report sexual activity at earlier ages than Latina girls.¹⁸

In seeking to change adolescent behavior, practitioners should help parents understand that it's necessary to deliver messages that resonate with adolescents. Many Latino parents are motivated to talk about sex out of a concern for their child's safety and well-being.¹³ Given this concern, it is not surprising that parents focus on questions of morals and values as well as the negative consequences of adolescent sexual activity. However, studies examining Latino adolescents' reasons for having sex also suggest that social concerns such as reputation at school, relationships with peers and romantic partners, as well as their expectations of love, closeness, and physical pleasure are relevant.¹⁰ Given the difficulty and complexity of these topics, it is not surprising that they are not often addressed by most parents.¹⁰ Few programs have helped Latino parents address their child's beliefs that having sex will feel good or make them feel more attractive. These are difficult issues and addressing them is challenging for all parents. Practitioners can help parents to address difficult topics and develop concrete ways to talk with their teen about these topics.

Strategies for practitioners: What should Latino parents say?

Practitioners can help Latino parents deliver effective messages in three areas that can, in turn, help reduce their children's risk of pregnancy and STDs. The first area concerns parental messages that delay the onset of adolescent sexual behavior and focus on parental disapproval and values. The second also addresses issues that delay the onset of sexual activity but focuses on topics that may be particularly difficult for parents to address such as love, social influences, positive expectations, and healthy relationships. The third addresses the technical aspects of sexuality that can reduce the risk of pregnancy and STDs, such as birth control, contraceptives, STDs, and HIV.

Parental messages that delay the onset of adolescent sexual behavior

Messages that focus on parental disapproval of adolescent sexual behavior are one of the most effective ways to decrease the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs for young adolescents and for youth who have not yet become sexually active. Messages disapproving of adolescent sexual behavior can be delivered in different ways. For example, Latino parents often communicate their disapproval by talking about the negative consequences of sexual behavior, such as pregnancy, STDs, and HIV. Many Latino parents tell their teens that they disapprove of sexual activity at young ages, because of moral or religious reasons, because sex should not occur outside the context of marriage or a loving relationship, or simply while their teens are still in school.

These messages reflect important family, social, and cultural values. The good news is that Latino parents are relatively comfortable talking with their teens about some of these topics and that Latino teens are internalizing their parents' messages. For example, a recent study found that fear of getting themselves or a partner pregnant and religion and moral values were the two primary reasons that Latino virgins abstained from sex.¹⁹ Practitioners should encourage parents to keep talking about morals and values that are culturally important. Helping Latino parents to keep doing what is natural and comfortable for them, such as addressing moral issues and health consequences, can help parents to feel comfortable in their ability to talk about sex with their teens.

Research suggests that the negative consequences associated with teen sexual activity motivate Latino parents to talk with their teens about sex.¹⁰ Consequently, practitioners should take advantage of this by reviewing the health consequences of adolescent sexual behavior with Latino parents, as this will increase the likelihood that parents talk about sex and improve teen knowledge about pregnancy, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. At the same time, practitioners need to help parents address some of the other factors associated with teen's sexual

Encourage parents to keep talking about morals and values that are culturally important.

behavior, such as social influences and positive expectations. Common social influences that affect Latino adolescents' decisions about sex include peer influence (being popular or getting a bad reputation at school, for example) and partner influences (such as feeling closer to a boyfriend or girlfriend). Additionally, some Latino teens naturally also have positive expectations about sexual activity—that sex will feel good or that having sex will make them feel more attractive or grown up. Practitioners can address these issues with parents so that parents can develop the knowledge and skills to address them in a way that will be relevant for teens. The challenge for practitioners is to understand that while parents are motivated to talk about sex by the negative consequences associated with adolescent sexual behavior, the factors that are often most important to young people relate to social influences and positive expectations about having sex.

We suggest that practitioners motivate parents to talk about sex by reviewing the negative consequences of Latino adolescent sexual behavior, such as the rates of teen pregnancy, STDs and HIV among Latino youth, as well as how teen pregnancy and STDs interfere with teens' well-being and future life opportunities.²⁰ After doing this, practitioners should provide parents with an overview of the social reasons and expectations most strongly associated with adolescent sexual decision making. By highlighting social influences and expectations, practitioners will help parents to (1) understand sex from their child's perspective and (2) tailor the content of their communication to address youth's beliefs about having sex. The 10 social reasons and expectations addressed here are based on responses from middle-school aged Latino youth and are delivered from the teen's point of view.¹⁰ They include:

1. I think I would enjoy the way that sex feels.
2. If I had sex, I would feel more attractive.
3. I would feel more grown up if I had sex.
4. I would feel closer to the boy/girl with whom I had sex.

5. I would be more popular with boys/girls if I had sex.
6. If I have sex, I might get a bad reputation at school.
7. Having sex would interfere with school.
8. I think that having sex right now would be morally wrong.
9. I would feel guilty if I had sex at this time in my life.
10. It's better to wait until I am married to have sex.

In addition, another area practitioners can help parents relate to is love and what it means to be in a healthy romantic relationship. Practitioners can help parents define a healthy adolescent romantic relationship in the context of their cultural values, religious beliefs, and overall desire to keep their child safe from harm. Let parents know that this is a good opportunity to highlight their values and their wish for their child to learn about love in ways that won't increase their risk of pregnancy.

Parents need to know that it's not just about raising their teen's awareness of the possible negative consequences of sex, it's about sending messages that are relevant to them. To be clear, parents shouldn't avoid talking about the negative consequences of adolescent sexual behavior. It's important for parents to communicate their disapproval of early sex, talk about values, love, and healthy relationships, and address the risks of pregnancy, STDs, and HIV with their children. However, the effectiveness of parent-adolescent communication is likely to improve when message content reflects the factors most strongly associated with an adolescent's decision to have sex.

Finally, practitioners should also help parents understand that it's equally important to talk with their sons, not just their daughters, about these issues. Let parents know that social influences, relationship issues, and expectations about sex affect *all* teens, and that pregnancy, STDs, and HIV can negatively affect their child's future health and life opportunities. Given the difficulty of these topics, practitioners should consider role-playing these conversations with parents. In addition to individual work, it may

It's equally as important for parents to talk with their sons, not just their daughters.

help to bring groups of parents together to discuss this difficult topic, as group discussion, support and feedback may help parents feel more confident in their ability to tackle these tougher issues.

Helping parents talk about the technical aspects of sex and Contraception

Many parents will want to know if they should talk with their teens about some of the more technical aspects of sex and contraception. And if so, what should they say? Practitioners can help parents by providing them with the knowledge and skills to talk effectively when they are ready to do so. Of primary importance is the provision of accessible and accurate information about sex, pregnancy, STDs, HIV, and contraception. Latino parents—like all parents—need factual and science-based evidence in these areas. This information, whether transmitted through printed materials, audiovisual media or person-to-person, should be available in Spanish and English and delivered in a way that is easy to understand.

It is not sufficient to simply hand parents written materials about contraceptives with the expectation that they will read it, understand it, and feel comfortable enough to speak with their child knowledgeably and effectively. Rather, practitioners need to take an *active role* in helping parents understand and talk about contraception. This approach may necessitate reviewing information together, asking open- and close-ended questions to help ensure that parents understand, and role-playing different conversations. Alternatively, practitioners can refer parents to agencies, clinics, and organizations that offer programs designed to help parents talk about the technical aspects of sexuality with their children. In these cases, practitioners should work with parents to help them identify an appropriate program. Parents will need to consider if the program and curricula are compatible with their personal and cultural values and beliefs. Practitioners can work with parents to identify appropriate programs. The focus should be on strengthening parental knowledge, comfort and ability to talk about pregnancy, STDs, HIV, and contraceptives.

Many Latino parents view American culture as sexually permissive and worry that discussing contraception and sexuality in detail may inadvertently encourage adolescent sexual behavior.⁹ In addition, some Latino parents are opposed to contraception for moral or religious reasons. In these cases, we recommend that practitioners let parents know that it's still important to talk with their child about contraception. Let parents know that teens' sexual behavior is less risky when parents are the major source of sexual information for adolescents.²¹ In the absence of parental guidance, teenagers may turn to other sources, such as friends or the Internet. Unfortunately, adolescents may receive inaccurate information about contraception and other sex-related topics. Parents can make sure that their teen has accurate and developmentally-appropriate information by being the person who communicates this information to them. Parents can help their teen put information about contraception into the context of parental values that promote abstinence and healthy decision making. These approaches are discussed in additional detail in the Strategies for Practitioners and Parents section in Barriers to Communication.

If opting to present this information in a group setting, practitioners should pay particular attention to group dynamics. A lack of participation in the group context may indicate that a parent is uncomfortable with the material and needs additional support and assistance. If a practitioner is unable to work with each parent individually, it may help to have parents practice conversations with each other in ways that allow them to strengthen their communication skills and receive feedback from each other. Whenever possible, we recommend that a practitioner or other knowledgeable service provider be available to provide parents with focused support and feedback on these conversations.

Take an active role in helping parents understand and talk about contraception.

The context of communication:

How parents communicate matters

The second dimension of the communication framework addresses the context of communication. Context, or *how* parents say it, is important. Studies have shown that the way parents deliver messages about sex influences adolescents' receptiveness to the message itself.²² Research on the context of communication indicates that greater levels of perceived parental openness, responsiveness, comfort, and confidence in discussions about sex and related issues are associated with lower levels of adolescent sexual risk behavior.^{23,24,25,26} suggesting that adolescents' perceptions of the quality of communication may influence the effectiveness of parental messages about sex.

In recent focus group discussions with Latino families, teens said that they want their parents to remain open and calm when talking about sex.^{1,9} However, even though many Latino parents recognize the importance of an open communication style, many also acknowledge that it is difficult to remain calm and open due to their anxieties about their teens' sexual behavior.⁹ Research suggests that one practical way that parents can be open is to talk about their own experiences with dating and relationships as a teenager. Latino teens want to hear from their parents and appear to be particularly receptive to hearing about their parents' adolescent experiences dealing with difficult topics, like dating and the decision to have sex. For example, studies with Latino youth have found that higher rates of parental self-disclosure are predictive of higher levels of perceived parental openness in conversations about sex.¹² Additionally, Latino youth who perceive their parents as being willing to talk about how they dealt with tough issues during adolescence report less willingness to engage in sexual intercourse.²⁷ Practitioners should let parents know that if their child is struggling with a problem or serious issue, such as the decision to have sex, it can help to talk about their own adolescent experiences with that specific issue. Openness in this area reinforces that parents have the type of

knowledge and experience that can help their child deal with difficult issues.

Practitioners can work with parents to explore ways to be open to these types of conversations. One practical way is to work with parents to identify "teachable" moments. Teachable moments can occur while watching a TV show, *telenovela*, or movie, while watching news events, after learning about friends' challenges, or by attending a community event together. The goal is to help parents identify and take advantage of opportunities that make it easier for them to talk about sex with their child in ways that highlight values and beliefs that reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs.

Other studies examining the context of communication have found that trust between parents and adolescents is important, as are adolescents' perceptions of parental expertise and accessibility.^{24,28,29} High levels of trust in the parent-adolescent relationship have been associated with higher levels of parent-adolescent communication about sex and lower levels of adolescent sexual behavior.²⁴ In part, this may be because Latino adolescents who perceive their parents as trustworthy also seek out the advice of their parents and believe that they give good and helpful advice.²⁴ In turn, these perceptions of parental expertise appear to foster the type of communication that protects against youth involvement in risky sexual behavior.²⁴ In addition to trustworthiness and expertise, Latino adolescents also indicate that parental accessibility is an important component in parent-adolescent conversations about sex. Specifically, when youth perceive that it is easy to find time to talk with their parents and that their parents are not too busy to talk to them, they report higher levels of communication about sex and lower rates of sexual behavior.²⁴

Help parents identify and take advantage of "teachable" moments.



Strategies for practitioners and parents: How should parents talk to their teens?

Practitioners can help improve the context of communication by guiding parents on the best way to communicate to their child about sex. Practitioners can capitalize on the cultural value of *personalismo*, which emphasizes honesty, personal character and inner qualities in personal relationships.^{30,31} The messages presented here are directed at parents.

1. **Be Open.** Adolescents want their parents to talk to them in an open way. Remember, teens appreciate parental honesty and want to hear about your own experiences with dating and relationships. This type of parental openness may help your teen better understand your messages about acceptable sexual behavior and your wishes for them to stay safe. You will need to use good judgment in deciding what personal information to share. But talking about your own problems and experiences and about what things were like for you when you were a teen can go a long way.
2. **Be the Expert.** Teens who believe that their parents know a lot are more likely to listen to them. Even if you feel like you don't have all the answers, take the time to listen and to respond. Being an expert on your teens' life means talking with them and hearing their point of view. If your teen asks you questions that you don't know the answer to, it's okay to say, "I don't know." Let your teen know that you'll find the answer and get back to them. Depending on the question, you can try to find the answer together. When it comes to teen sexual behavior, many answers can be found online, from your healthcare provider, at school, in the library, at your church, or at a local community center.
3. **Be Accessible.** Parents have busy schedules, but it's important to be available to your teen when they need to speak with you. If you can't talk, schedule a time to talk as soon as possible. Teens know that their parents are busy and are willing to work with you to find a time that works. The important



¿Cómo deben hablar los padres con sus hijos adolescentes?

Los proveedores pueden ayudar a mejorar el contexto de la comunicación orientando a los padres acerca de la mejor manera de comunicarse con sus hijos sobre el sexo. Los proveedores pueden sacar provecho del valor cultural del *personalismo*, el cual subraya la importancia de la sinceridad, el carácter personal y las cualidades internas en las relaciones personales.^{30,31} Los mensajes presentados aquí son para los padres.

1. **Sea Abierto.** Los adolescentes quieren que sus padres hablen con ellos de manera abierta. Recuerde que los jóvenes aprecian la sinceridad de sus padres y quieren saber de sus propias experiencias acerca de relaciones de noviazgo. Este tipo de sinceridad por parte de los padres puede ayudar a que sus hijos entiendan mejor sus mensajes sobre el comportamiento sexual aceptable y su deseo que sus hijos estén seguros. Usted tendrá que emplear buen juicio para decidir qué tipo de información personal quiere compartir. Aún así, el hablar de sus propios problemas, experiencias y de cómo eran las cosas cuando usted era joven puede ser muy útil.
2. **Sea el Experto.** Los adolescentes que creen que sus padres saben mucho son más propensos a escucharlos. Aún si usted no piensa que tenga todas las respuestas, tome el tiempo para escuchar y responder. Ser experto en la vida de sus hijos significa hablar con ellos y escuchar su punto de vista. Si sus hijos le hacen preguntas que no sabe contestar, está bien decir, "No sé." Dígales que encontrará la respuesta y luego la compartirá con ellos. Dependiendo de la pregunta, ustedes pueden tratar de encontrar la respuesta juntos. Cuando se trata de la actividad sexual entre adolescentes, se puede encontrar muchas respuestas por el Internet, de su proveedor de salud, en la escuela, en la biblioteca, en la iglesia o en un centro comunitario local.
3. **Sea Accesible.** Aunque los padres estén muy ocupados, es importante ser accesible para sus hijos cuando tienen que hablar con usted. Si no puede hablar con ellos, programe una hora para hablar cuanto antes. Los hijos saben que sus padres están ocupados y están dispuestos encontrar una hora que les convenga a todos. El mensaje importante para comunicarles

message to communicate is that talking with your teen about what's going on in his or her life is your number one priority. While teens say that it's hard when they can't find time to talk with their parents, they also say that parents can still communicate how much they care. Some practical tips teens suggest include writing down a date and time on a calendar or on a piece of paper, or finding time to talk when doing things together, such as laundry, cooking, going to the park, going to church, or taking a drive.

4. **Be Trusting.** Teens want to talk with their parents about sex but sometimes fear that their parents will assume that they are sexually active. Teens want their parents to trust them and to show that they love them no matter what. This doesn't mean that you have to be overly permissive or hide your disapproval of your teen's decisions. Talk with your teen about the topic of trust and what it means for each of you to trust each other. You can tell your teen that you trust that they will share their thoughts about the big issues in their life, including the decision to have sex. In turn, your teen can trust that you will be there for them to talk about the big issues in life.
5. **Stay Calm.** Some teens worry that their parents may react badly if they learn that they are having sex or are thinking about having sex. Teens say that staying calm is one thing that parents can do to really improve conversations about sensitive topics like sex. Even if you feel strongly about something, try to remain calm as you talk with your teen. Avoid shouting. If things get too heated or emotional, suggest that you take a break until each of you has cooled down.
6. **Ask Open-Ended Questions.** People like to talk about themselves and their ideas. Ask your teen what he or she thinks, using open-ended questions (ones that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"). Be curious about your teen's ideas and opinions. You still have a lot to learn about your teen!

es que hablar con sus hijos sobre lo que está pasando en su vida es su primera prioridad. Mientras que los adolescentes dicen que se les hace difícil cuando no pueden encontrar el tiempo para hablar con sus padres, también dicen que los padres todavía pueden demostrar cuánto se preocupan por sus hijos. Algunos consejos prácticos sugeridos por adolescentes incluyen: anotar una fecha y una hora en el calendario o en una hoja de papel, o encontrar el tiempo para hablar durante momentos de convivencia, como mientras están lavando la ropa, preparando la comida, paseando por el parque, yendo a la iglesia, o dando una vuelta.

4. **Sea Confiado.** Los adolescentes quieren hablar con sus padres sobre el sexo, pero a veces temen que supondrán que estén teniendo relaciones sexuales. Los hijos quieren que sus padres les tengan confianza y que les muestren que les quieren, pase lo que pase. Esto no quiere decir que usted tenga que ser demasiado permisivo o esconder su desaprobación a las decisiones de sus hijos. Hable con ellos sobre el tema de la confianza y lo que significa para cada uno de ustedes confiar en el otro. Puede decirles a sus hijos que usted confía en que ellos compartirán sus pensamientos acerca de los asuntos importantes en su vida, incluyendo la decisión de tener sexo. A cambio, sus hijos pueden confiar en que usted estará presente para hablar sobre los asuntos grandes de la vida.
5. **Manténgase Tranquilo.** Algunos adolescentes se preocupan que sus padres puedan reaccionar de una forma negativa si se enteren de que están teniendo relaciones sexuales o pensando tenerlas. Los adolescentes dicen que mantenerse tranquilo es algo que los padres pueden hacer para mejorar las conversaciones sobre asuntos delicados como el sexo. Aún si usted tiene opiniones fuertes sobre algún tema, trate de mantenerse calmado cuando hable con sus hijos. Evite gritar. Si las cosas se vuelven demasiado acaloradas o emocionales, sugiera que tomen una pausa hasta que todos se hayan tranquilizado.
6. **Haga Preguntas Abiertas.** Es común que a las personas les guste hablar de sí mismos y de sus propias ideas. Pregúnteles a sus hijos lo que ellos piensan, haciendo preguntas abiertas (las que no se pueden contestar con un mero "sí" o "no"). Sea curioso sobre las ideas y opiniones de sus hijos. ¡Usted todavía tiene mucho que aprender sobre sus jóvenes adolescentes!

7. **Listen To Your Teen.** Let your teen speak without interruption; don't finish sentences for them. You may feel like interrupting, but don't. Let your teen finish his or her thoughts. Sometimes it helps to repeat what you think you have heard: "So what you're saying is..." Then ask: "Did I get that right?" If you're not sure about something, ask about it. But above all, avoid turning the talk into one big lecture. Show a willingness to listen.
8. **Put Yourself in Your Teen's Shoes.** Teens like it if you try to see things from their point of view. Make an effort to put yourself in the place of your teen and think about things from his or her point of view. Let your teen know that you are trying to do this by saying simple things like, "I get you..." or "I had some of the same experiences when I was your age..." If you're not sure what it was like for your teen, ask them to tell you more about their experience. This will show your teen that you care and are interested in their life.
9. **Appeal to Common Goals.** Your teen needs to be reminded that you are on his or her side. You often want the same things your teen does. Whenever possible, emphasize common goals and tell your teen you want what is best for him or her. Be supportive.
10. **Show Your Interest.** Make sure your teen feels you're giving them your full attention. Even if you have to talk while doing something else, make eye contact with your teen when talking. Nod your head to indicate you understand what your teen is saying and say things that indicate you are paying attention and are interested.
7. **Escuche a Sus Hijos.** Deje que sus hijos hablen sin interrupción. No termine sus oraciones. Puede ser que usted quiere interrumpir, pero no lo haga. Permita que sus hijos terminen de expresar sus pensamientos. A veces ayuda repetir lo que usted piensa que ha escuchado: "Bueno, lo que estás diciendo es que..." Luego pregunte: "¿Entendí bien?" Si tiene dudas sobre algo, haga preguntas. Sobre todo, evite que la conversación se convierta en un gran sermón. Muestre una buena voluntad de escuchar.
8. **Póngase en el Lugar de sus Hijos.** A los jóvenes adolescentes les gusta que los padres tratemos de ver las cosas desde su punto de vista. Haga un esfuerzo para ponerse en el lugar de sus hijos y pensar en las cosas desde su perspectiva. Déjeles saber a sus hijos que usted está tratando de hacer esto, diciendo cosas sencillas como, "Te entiendo..." o "Tuve algunas de las mismas experiencias cuando yo tenía tu edad..." Si no sabe exactamente cómo les fue a sus hijos, pida que le cuenten más sobre sus experiencias. Así, les mostrará a sus hijos que usted se preocupa por ellos y que está interesado en su vida.
9. **Apele a Metas Comunes.** Hay que recordarles a sus hijos que usted está a su lado. A menudo quiere las mismas cosas que sus hijos. Cuando quiera que sea posible, ponga énfasis en las metas comunes y dígales a sus hijos que usted quiere todo lo mejor para ellos. Sea compasivo.
10. **Demuestre su Interés.** Asegúrese de que sus hijos sientan que usted está prestándoles toda su atención. Aún si tiene que hablar mientras hace otra cosa, mantenga contacto visual con sus adolescentes cuando habla. Asiente con la cabeza para indicar que entiende lo que sus hijos están diciendo y diga cosas que indiquen que usted está prestando atención y que está interesado.

For additional tips, read or download a copy of *Consejos a los Padres*³² which provides parents with practical tips to help their children avoid pregnancy. Available in Spanish and English, parents can use these tips to support their efforts to reduce their teen's risk of pregnancy and STD.

Consejos a los Padres provee a los padres consejos prácticos para ayudar a sus hijos evitar el embarazo. Disponible en español y en inglés, los padres pueden utilizar estos consejos para reforzar sus esfuerzos para reducir el riesgo del embarazo y de las EST en sus hijos.

The timing of communication:

When parents communicate matters

The third part of the communication framework focuses on the timing of communication. Many Latino parents wonder when it's appropriate to begin talking with their teen about sex. Should they start talking when their child enters puberty? Should they wait until their teen starts dating? Or do they wait to talk until their teen starts asking questions about sex? Research literature suggests that parents should begin talking to their kids about sex, love, and relationships before their teens start dating or become sexually active.^{33,34} Put another way, parents have an important opportunity to socialize their teen about acceptable sexual behavior *before* they find themselves in the types of situations that heighten the risk of sexual activity. Not surprisingly, a number of studies indicate that the onset of dating is one of the strongest predictors of sexual activity.^{35,36,37} This suggests that parents should begin talking to their children before they begin dating. Additionally, teens who report talking with their parents about condoms before they become sexually active report higher rates of condom use at first sex, which in turn increases the likelihood of greater lifetime condom use.³⁸

Unfortunately, many parents wait to initiate these sorts of conversations until it's too late. Many Latino parents underestimate the extent of their child's involvement in risky sexual behavior. A study conducted by *Latina* magazine and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that while 47% of Latino teens said they were sexually experienced, only 30% of Latino parents thought their teen had had sex.³⁹ While the inclination for parents to underestimate sexual activity among teens is not limited to Latino families,^{40,41} it does show a disconnect between parents and teens. Many parents, in the absence of clear signs of sexual activity, will assume that their teen is not sexually active. Practitioners need to help parents understand that a significant proportion of young people are beginning to have sex at an early age. For example, one in seven teens have sex before age 15. Parents need to understand that talking about sex with their child is critical. Although some parents may believe that high school is an appropriate age to begin talking about sex, practitioners should let parents know that sexual behavior begins in early adolescence, *before high school*.¹⁰ Practitioners should let parents know that 51% of **Latina teens become pregnant before age 20**.⁴² Waiting until high school to begin talking about sex may be too late.

Strategies for practitioners and parents: When should parents talk?

The primary message for practitioners to communicate is that the best time to talk is *before* teens start dating and having sex. It is easier to delay the onset of sexual behavior than it is to stop sexual behavior once it has begun. But when is "before?" Practitioners can let parents know that they should talk *earlier* rather than later. Many parents begin these talks with their children between the ages of 10 and 12. For many Latino parents, it's hard to believe that children this young have had sex. But practitioners need to let parents know about the importance of talking early.

Practitioners can help parents with the "When" and "Where" aspects of talking to their teen. Ideally, parents will want to choose a place and time:

- That is quiet and free of distractions, as much as possible;
- Where they will not be interrupted;
- When there is no upcoming activity that will force them to stop talking too soon; and
- When they or their teen are not caught up in thinking about or doing something else.

As noted previously, a good time to talk might be after something has happened that is related to teen sex in a TV show or a *novela*. This might be after parents and teens have seen a news story on television about teen sex, or after a movie where the topic is part of the plot. Or, parents may simply ask their child to sit down to talk.

Practitioners are likely to encounter parents who have difficulty finding a time and place to talk with their teen. Other children, a busy work schedule, any number of things can fill a family's day. Parents shouldn't postpone conversations indefinitely because the time and place are less than ideal.

Practitioners can help parents by asking questions such as:

- Where do you feel most comfortable talking with your teen?
- Is there a place in your home that is relatively free of distractions?
- Are there times when you and your teen are doing something together where you could talk?

Practitioners play a particularly important role in helping parents to understand that teachable moments can be found in less than ideal conditions.

The frequency of communication:

How often parents talk matters

The final aspect of the communication framework addresses how often Latino parents should talk about sex with their children. The frequency of conversation between parents and children is a direct measure of the sexual socialization that adolescents receive from parents.⁴³ Simply put, the more that parents talk about sex, the more opportunities teens have to be exposed to parental messages and values that reduce the risk of pregnancy and STDs.

Interestingly, research with Latino parents and adolescents has shown that parents and adolescents don't always agree on the frequency of communication about sex.² For example, when Latino parents and adolescents report how often they have talked about sex, parents report a greater frequency of conversations than do adolescents.¹⁰ The reasons for this disconnect are not well understood. To be clear, it does not mean that parental discussions about sex are ineffective. Rather, there are likely to be different contextual factors influencing each time parents and teens communicate that may affect how parents and adolescents recall these conversations.¹⁰

Practitioners need to help Latino parents understand that talking about sex throughout adolescence is an important part of helping their teen reduce their pregnancy and STD risk. Studies with Latino youth show that the more parents talk about specific sexuality-related topics, the more likely it is that adolescents will share similar views with their parents on that topic.¹⁰ This indicates that adolescents are indeed listening to parents and that greater frequency of parental communication about sex affects adolescents' sexual decision-making.

Strategies for practitioners and parents: How often should parents talk?

To date, there is relatively little guidance for Latino parents about how often they should communicate with their children about sex. Is it sufficient to only talk once? Should parents talk to their children a specific number of times each year? Overall, we recommend that practitioners work with parents so that sexuality communication is viewed as an

ongoing part of the parent-adolescent relationship that requires regular parental attention and involvement as children progress through adolescence. This approach necessitates that parents be proactive communicators who begin discussing sex *before* their child becomes sexually active, and maintain open lines of communication throughout adolescence. Multiple conversations provide parents with the opportunity to reiterate previous messages and adapt what they say about sex to their child's needs.

Unfortunately, many parents, practitioners, and others mistakenly believe that parents need only address these issues with their teens once. In popular culture, this is known as “The Big Talk.” Parents and adolescents are depicted as anxious and uncomfortable participants in these conversations, often stumbling through these talks to comedic effect. Practitioners should refrain from promoting “The Big Talk” approach, and instead should emphasize that parents and teens need ongoing conversations. While some of these talks may be uncomfortable, ongoing communication enables parents to (1) consistently discuss parental values, (2) add new information as their child grows and develops, and (3) become more comfortable talking about sex. Additionally, practitioners should encourage parents to use humor, as this can be a good way to minimize anxiety and increase comfort.

In promoting a long-term approach, practitioners can help Latino parents understand a “Big Talk” approach is incompatible with teens who are rapidly maturing and experiencing new opportunities and pressures. With each passing year, adolescents mature physically, mentally, socially, morally, and emotionally. The cultural value of *familismo*, which emphasizes strong family relationships based on high levels of closeness, loyalty, and mutuality,^{44,45} means that being involved in their children's life is important to Latino parents. Practitioners can capitalize on this by promoting ongoing communication as a way to strengthen familial bonds and interconnectedness. Let parents know that the more they talk about sex with their teen, the

Refrain from promoting “The Big Talk” approach. Emphasize the need for ongoing conversations.

Barriers to communication: About sex and related topics

more likely it is that their teen's knowledge, values, and behavior will reflect their values.

If parents struggle with how to do this, let them know that they can set up regular times—perhaps once a week or once a month—to talk with their teen about important topics. During these “talk times,” both the parent and the teen knows that open and respectful discussion will take place. Such a routine guarantees the “right time and place” for discussing not only sexual issues, but also issues related to other risky behavior, such as alcohol and drug use. Some parents plan activities with their teens to take place outside the home about once a month. Parents and teens can choose activities that they both enjoy. When they have this chance to be alone together in a relaxed setting, both are likely to feel more comfortable talking about sensitive topics. Practitioners should also let parents know that “talk times” need not focus solely on risky behavior, but also should address those factors that promote healthy adolescent development and reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs. For example, parents can also talk about the importance of success in school and having academic and career aspirations. A balance of topics will help to ensure that teens don't feel lectured.

Summary: Focus on the content, context, timing and frequency

By focusing on these four dimensions of communication, practitioners can help parents strengthen their ability to talk more effectively about sex and to reduce their adolescent's risk of pregnancy and STD. Although the communication framework is a useful organizing tool for practitioners working with Latino families, practitioners also need to be aware that parents will need support in other areas. In particular, research has identified barriers to communication in Latino families that warrant additional attention.

Although parents from all ethnic and racial groups find it difficult to talk to their child about sex, a number of studies have suggested that Latino parents do not talk as often about sex as do other parents.^{1,7,16,46,47,48} In part, this may be because when it comes to talking about sex, Latino parents don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.^{1,49} One of the most widely reported barriers to sexuality communication in Latino families is parental discomfort and embarrassment.^{9,49,50,51} Although the reasons *why* parents feel embarrassed are less well understood, some have theorized that generational and cultural differences unique to Latinos in the United States may be partially responsible. For example, many Latino parents were raised in families and cultures with limited to no family communication about sex and related issues.^{9,49} Some researchers also have noted that traditional cultural norms, such as *marianismo*, may encourage women to maintain a kind of “sexual silence,”^{8,9,52} and that Latina mothers may be unable to relax when talking to their children about sex.⁵¹

Interestingly, studies have found that parents also delay discussions about sex out of a desire to not embarrass their child.⁵¹ For their part, many Latino youth acknowledge feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed when talking with their parents about sex.^{7,9,13} Although some teens say that feeling awkward when talking about sex with a parent is to be expected, others say it is rooted in a fear of negative reaction from parents stemming from parents' perceptions or knowledge of their child's sexual behavior.⁹ These studies do not indicate, however, that teens don't want to hear from the parents. On the contrary, research with Latino youth has found that most adolescents want and prefer to hear from their parents about sex.^{1,53,54}

Another barrier to sexuality communication stems from parents' lack of knowledge about the technical aspects of sex.⁵¹ Latino parents report feeling like they don't have the necessary knowledge or skills to talk about sex with their children.^{7,51}

Parental discomfort and embarrassment are prominent barriers.

This may be why many parents do not feel effective or confident in their communication skills.⁹ Yet another barrier to communication deals with parental expectations. A lot of Latino parents worry that talking about sex could encourage their child to become sexually active.^{1,9} In contrast, other Latino parents have indicated that their decision to talk about sex with their teen is rooted in the belief that it will help their children to avoid pregnancy and STDs by encouraging them to adopt more mature thinking and decision-making.⁵¹

Another challenge relates to parent's confidence in their ability to influence their child's sexual behavior. Some Latino parents believe that talking to their kids about sex will have little or impact on their child's decisions about sex.⁹ This may reflect the cultural value of *fatalismo*, or the idea that people can do very little to alter fate.⁵⁵ In this context, a "master plan" guides teens and nothing parents say can interrupt those forces. When asked to identify other reasons for not talking about sex, parents have said that they expect their children will get sexuality instruction at school^{9,13} or will talk with other adults or family members, such as sisters, cousins, and aunts.⁵⁶

Finally, theorists have noted that communication in Latino families may be influenced by other important factors, such as parents' religiosity⁵⁷ and acculturation.^{58,59} Religious beliefs and acculturation differences between parents and adolescents may serve as a barrier to communication. For example, religious parents may perceive that their faith community discourages open discussions about sexual behavior, especially explicit discussions about contraception. Additionally, parents who immigrated to the United States may have a difficult time being open about sexuality communication.⁹ Practitioners need to help parents negotiate both of these barriers, as they may heighten the risk of parent-adolescent miscommunication and conflict.⁶⁰

Strategies for practitioners and parents: How can parents feel more comfortable talking about sex?

Although the barriers reviewed previously do not represent all of the potential reasons that parents have for not talking with their teen about sex, they suggest that Latino parents need assistance feeling more comfortable talking about sex. The good news for practitioners is that Latino parents freely admit that they want help with talking to their child about love, values, sex, and relationships.² The communication framework discussed previously can help practitioners by providing four specific points of intervention: content, context, timing and frequency. For example, many Latino parents believe that they lack the knowledge to talk effectively with their children about the technical aspects of sexuality.² Practitioners working with parents struggling with this barrier can utilize the strategies presented in the section addressing the content of communication. Similarly, parents struggling with how to talk to their teen can draw upon the strategies discussed in the context of communication.

However, beyond the dimensions addressed in the framework, there are some additional barriers that practitioners can help parents to overcome. We present below some practical techniques practitioners can utilize to help Latino parents overcome barriers to communication.

1. Support Parent's Confidence in their Ability to Communicate.

- Improve parental knowledge about sexuality, pregnancy, STDs, HIV, and contraception.
- Work with parents to generate two lists: List 1 should identify the reasons parents think that talking about sex will not make a difference. List 2 should identify how parents have made a difference in their teen's life. The goal is to identify parents' strengths that can be capitalized upon and to identify those areas that require assistance and intervention.

Many Latino parents freely admit that they want help with talking to their child about love, values, sex and relationships.

- Place parent-adolescent communication about sex in a framework of responsible parenting that 1) shows that parents care, 2) helps adolescents focus on school, 3) helps teens think in a more mature way, and 4) helps teens to do better in life.

Emphasize the Message: Talking with your teen about waiting to have sex is important for many reasons besides preventing pregnancy and STDs. It shows that you are a responsible parent and that you take being a parent very seriously. It shows that you care about your child and what happens to him or her. It may also be the case that if your child does not become wrapped up in a sexual relationship with another teen, then he or she can focus more on school. As you talk with your child about these things, you will help your child think in a more mature way. You will be teaching your child how to be more mature. These things will help your child do better in life. Remember, your child wants to hear from you and you can make a difference!

2. Identify and Manage Parental Embarrassment.

- Again, work with parents to generate two lists: List 1 should focus on why parents feel embarrassed about talking about sex. This list provides parents and practitioners with clear points of intervention. List 2 should identify for parents and practitioners those areas where parents feel comfortable, which can be used to support parents' strengths.
- Work with parents to develop an outline of what they will say to their child. The outline should organize the key messages that parents want to communicate. Use the outline to practice conversations with parents so that they feel comfortable talking about the topics that cause them to feel embarrassed. Let parents know that they shouldn't actually use the physical outline when talking to their teen.

Emphasize the Message: As embarrassing as it feels, remember that your teen's future is at stake

and a little embarrassment shouldn't prevent you from giving your child the best chance for a safe and successful life. Remember, teens appreciate honesty. You can let your teen know that talking about sex is hard for you because your own parents rarely or never discussed the topic with you, if that is the case. Tell your teen that you're going to work through the difficulty because you care about them. With practice, we can work together to make you feel more comfortable. Embarrassment doesn't have to be a permanent feeling.

3. Address Perceived Religious Disapproval.

- Identify and explore if parents perceive that their religion or faith community disapproves of parent-adolescent communication about sex.
- Let Latino parents know that the majority of Latino teens think that religious leaders should be more involved in the fight against teen pregnancy.¹
- If parents perceive that their religion discourages parent-adolescent communication about sex, let them know that Latino religious leaders throughout the United States are working to prevent teen pregnancy in the Latino community. A good guide for parents and practitioners is *Faith, Hope & Love: How Latino Faith Communities Can Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy* by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (available at www.teenpregnancy.org).

Emphasize the Message: It's important to remember that the guidance and wisdom that the church and your faith provide can *help* you to advise your teen. Discussions about sex, love, relationships, and family that are focused on your religious beliefs and values may help your teen understand how these morals are important in their decision not to have sex.

4. Address Generational Differences.

- Talk to parents about the potential presence of acculturation-related or generational differences. Do parents believe that such differences interfere

Teens appreciate honesty

with their ability to talk with their teen about sex? Help parents to understand their teen's perspective and to identify common ground that can bridge generational differences.

- Let Latino parents know that the majority of Latino youth don't think that being a virgin is embarrassing.¹
- Work with parents to identify family and cultural values that can be transmitted to adolescents. How can values such as *familismo*, *respeto*, *simpatía*, *personalismo*, *marianismo*, and *machismo* be utilized to support parent-adolescent communication about sex?

Emphasize the Message: Many Latino teens live in two worlds. One is the world of non-Latino people and the other is the world of Latinos. Your teen needs to learn how to deal with the differences in these "worlds." This is part of growing up. Your teen may learn things outside the home that are different from basic Latino values. This is not a bad thing. All Latino teens must learn to balance the values of Latinos with the values of non-Latino groups. Talk with your teen about your family's values. Explain the positive aspects of being Latino. Recognize that your teen will need to adjust to two worlds. Try to help your teen understand the demands of the "two worlds."

5. Identify a Support Network.

- Work with parents to identify a list of trusted adults who can support their efforts to prevent their teen from becoming pregnant. The list should include adults who share parents' cultural values, are knowledgeable about teen sexual behavior, and are respected by their teen. Supportive adults can include friends, family members, extended family members, and religious leaders.
- Have parents reach out to the individuals on the list: Who can help you practice conversations with your teen? If you're unable to do so, is there anyone on the list who could talk to your teen about sex?

Emphasize the Message: If you can't talk to your child about sex, is there another adult in your life who could? Some parents ask aunts, uncles, other close adults, or a religious leader to talk with their child about sex. No matter who you choose, make sure that your teen respects this person and that this person shares your values about your teen's sexual behavior. As a parent, you need to make sure your teen knows the facts, and other family members and friends who share your values can support you in this role.

6. Minimizing Parents' Fears and Anxieties.

- Many parents fear that talking about sex or contraception with their child will encourage their teen to become sexually active.¹ Help ease their concerns by pointing out that research makes clear that *talking* about sex does not hasten the onset of sex among teens nor do teens tend to identify such conversations as tacit approval to have sex.
- Focus on the fact that research has shown that when parents are the major source of information about sex, teens are less likely to engage in it.²¹ Let parents know that Latino adolescents are receptive to hearing messages about abstinence, contraceptives, and delaying sex until after high school.¹

Emphasize the Message: Research shows that teens are less likely to have sex when parents are their major source of sexuality information. Parents should be comfortable talking about contraception even if they are opposed to teens having sex. If you talk about contraception and want your teen to not have sex, you need to be very clear about your wishes. Leave no ambiguity. This will make a difference! One strategy is to tell your child that you are going to talk with him or her about contraception and how to use it, but that this information is for later—when they are older and ready to have sex. You will explain things now so that they will be fully informed.

Talking about sex does not hasten the onset of sex.

7. Answering Challenging Questions: Did You Have Sex as a Teen?

- Work with parents to manage the worry that their teen will ask them if they had sex as a teen. This is a particularly challenging question that requires practitioner support. If parents had sex as a teen but answer “no,” they are not being honest. If they answer “yes,” they may look hypocritical to their teen. Practitioners can prepare parents for this question so that when adolescents ask, parents have an appropriate response that reflects their values.
- Let parents know that it is natural for teens to be curious. Highlight that some research shows that Latino teens are less likely to have sex when their mothers talk about how they negotiated difficult decisions in adolescence, such as the decision to date or have sex.²⁷
- Talk with parents about how they want to answer this question and how they think their adolescent will respond. Two sample responses are presented.

Emphasize The Message: Keep the Focus on Your Teen. If your teen asks if you had sex as a teen, you can tell them that the focus of the discussion is not on you. If you believe that your sexual history should not be part of the discussion, tell your teen that this is not relevant. Let your adolescent know that the focus is on *their* decisions and not your own. Highlight that the overwhelming majority of sexually active Latino youth regret having sex too soon¹ and that you don’t want your teen to have these same regrets. You can also explain that the risks today are more severe than they have been in the past. Help your teen understand your values and wishes for them to avoid becoming pregnant or causing a pregnancy.

Be Honest. Alternatively, if you decide to tell your child that you had sex as a teen, consider in advance what to say. For example, you can use this opportunity to talk about your reasons for having sex at an early age and to discuss how

you feel about it in retrospect. Perhaps you had a negative experience? If not, parents can say that just because they were lucky enough to escape too-early pregnancy doesn’t mean that your teen will have the same luck. Take this opportunity to talk to your teen about how you dealt with this difficult decision in adolescence, and what you think about sex, love, relationships and family values. Help your teen understand your values and your strong desire for them to avoid becoming pregnant or causing a pregnancy.

With the above strategies, practitioners can utilize individual or group approaches. Programs like Plain Talk/Hablando Claro⁶¹ and Linking Lives/Uniendo Vidas²⁰ have brought together groups of parents in homes and community settings in order to provide factual information about adolescent reproductive health and pregnancy and STD prevention. Focus groups with Latino parents indicate that these groups are welcome and appreciated.^{2,13} Practitioners can organize community seminars that give parents the opportunity to improve their knowledge and communication skills, connect with other parents, and feel supported in their ability to talk effectively with their child about sex. Practitioners using this approach should make sure that locations are accessible and appropriate for Latino families. Community seminars and groups should be scheduled at times that are convenient for working families, with attention paid to the fact that parents may work multiple or non-traditional jobs.

Be prepared for the question: Did you have sex as a teen?

Putting Latino parent-adolescent communication into context: The importance of establishing a strong parent-adolescent relationship

Parent-adolescent communication occurs in the broader context of parent-adolescent relationships. In general, good parent-adolescent relationships are likely to strengthen the effectiveness of parental communication. Parent-adolescent relationships that are based on mutual warmth, closeness, trust, and connectedness are one of the strongest factors protecting youth from early sexual activity and pregnancy.^{62,63} Latino adolescents who report feeling close to their parents are less likely to initiate sex at an early age⁶⁴ and are more likely to use contraception consistently and carefully.²⁹ A number of studies have noted the high levels of warmth and connectedness between Latino parents and adolescents.⁶⁵ These reflect cultural values of *familismo*^{44,45} and *simpatía*, which speaks to the value of keeping relationships between people in the family smooth and flowing.⁶⁶ Practitioners working with Latino parents should support these dynamics when present and work with parents and adolescents to help strengthen these emotional bonds if absent.

Strategies for practitioners and parents: How can parents improve their relationship with their teen?

Latino values such as *familismo*, *personalismo*, *simpatía* and *respeto* all emphasize the importance of family relationships characterized by closeness, interdependence, respect and harmony, especially between parents and adolescents.^{44,45,66,67,68} Yet, practitioners are likely to encounter parents who want to know what they can do to build a better relationship with their teen. First, practitioners can help parents understand the qualities that characterize a good parent-adolescent relationship. The most important qualities are:

1. **Respect** for one another.
2. **Understanding** each other's feelings.
3. Being able to **trust** each other.
4. Having **concern** for each other's well-being.
5. **Knowing** each other (what each other is like, what each other wants, and what each other likes and dislikes).

Emphasize that a good relationship is always a two-way street. While this may seem intuitive to some parents, other parents struggle with understanding what makes a good relationship. Practitioners may want to give parents a copy of the National Campaign's *Consejos a los Padres*, which provides additional tips for parents.

Practitioners also can give parents effective strategies to improve parent-adolescent relationships. The following messages reflect the important cultural values that characterize many Latino families and are directed at parents to help them think about and enact ways to improve their relationship with their teen.

1. **Talk About the Importance of Respect.** *Respeto* is important for both parents and adolescents. Let your teen know why you believe respect is important. Think of examples where showing disrespect creates problems and where showing respect helps. Try to use examples of family members or of people who are important to your teen—this can help improve their understanding.
2. **Give Respect.** The single best way to get respect is to *give* it. Some parents believe that because they have authority over their teen, they don't need to listen to their teen's opinions or show respect. But teens say they have a hard time giving respect when they don't get it. Think about people you know who don't respect your opinions. Do you respect them? One way to show respect is by listening to your teen and taking his or her opinions seriously.
3. **Emphasize Support for Each Other.** Communication with your teen becomes easier when your teen understands the importance of unity and support within the family. Even when you may not agree on something, keep in mind that many Latino families believe in *familismo*. Although you and your teen may disagree, the importance of maintaining close ties is a common goal.

Respect is important for both parents and adolescents.

4. Be Willing to Admit When You Are Wrong.

People do not respect others who believe they are always right. If you make a mistake, be willing to admit it to your teen. When you do this, you show your teen that you value honesty, personal character and inner qualities, also known as the Latino value of *personalismo*. Practicing what you preach can have a powerful impact on your teen. When you admit that you've made a mistake, you increase the respect your teen has for you and the set of values you are trying to teach.

5. Spend Time Together. Families are very busy these days. Between jobs and chores and other things, there often is little time leftover for enjoying each other's company. You need to grab onto whatever time you can to be with your teen. It will help you keep your teen's free time occupied and you will get to know your teen better. You will build a good relationship, and let your teen know you care. One mother we spoke to talked about playing basketball with her teen even though she was terrible at it! Whatever it takes — even if it's just once a week. Even if it's just going to the store together. Your teen will notice if you make time.

6. Keep in Touch. Touch base with your teen regularly, even when everything is going smoothly. Let your teen know what's going on in your life and find out what he or she is up to. Keeping in regular touch with your teen is one of the most important things you can do as a parent. Teens feel their parents care about them when they take an interest in what's happening in their lives. Teens, like anyone else, don't want to feel ignored.

7. Don't Avoid Conflict. Getting along and avoiding conflicts is important in many Latino families. Some Latino parents prefer to avoid conflict and not raise the issue if their teen breaks an agreement. This is demonstrated in the Latino value of *simpatía*. Reducing conflict with your teen is a good idea, but there are times

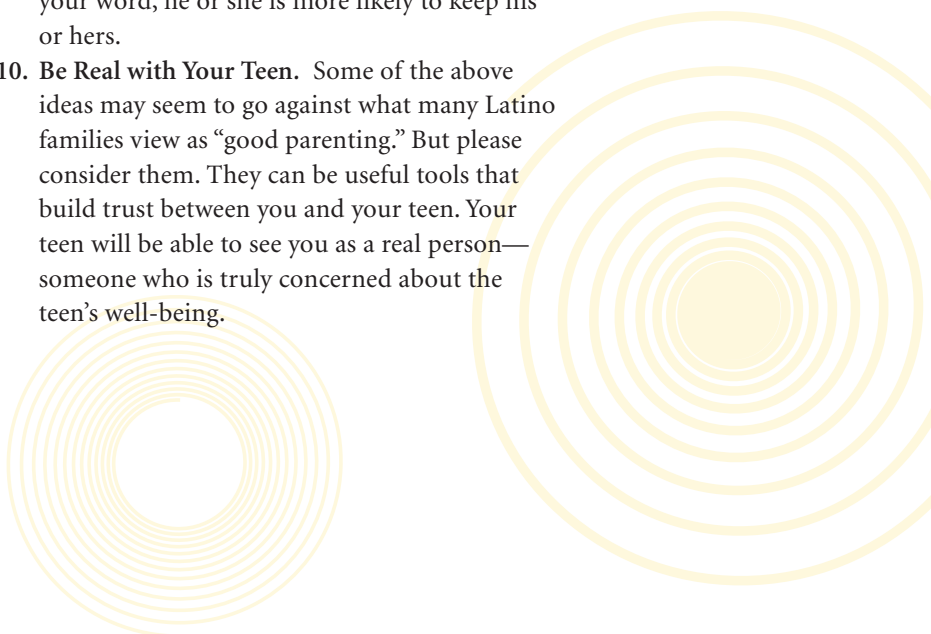
when you must talk directly, even if conflict occurs. If your teen breaks rules and agreements, you need to talk about it. You do not want it to happen again. Your teen needs to understand why rules are important. He or she cannot understand this if you never say anything.

8. Explain Rules. Latinos value the importance of obeying authority, or *respeto*. And, of course, it is important for teens to respect you and your rules. But it also is important for teens to understand *why* you have the rules you do. For example, when you set a time for your teen to come home at night (called a "curfew"), why are you setting the curfew? What is the purpose of it? Why is it necessary? Teens will be more accepting of curfews if they are given reasons.

9. Keep Your Word. If you make a promise to your teen, keep it. If you are unable to keep your promise because of something you can't help, talk to your teen about it. Say you are sorry. Your teen needs to know he or she can count on you to keep your word. This is an important part of gaining trust and respect. If you keep your word, he or she is more likely to keep his or hers.

10. Be Real with Your Teen. Some of the above ideas may seem to go against what many Latino families view as "good parenting." But please consider them. They can be useful tools that build trust between you and your teen. Your teen will be able to see you as a real person—someone who is truly concerned about the teen's well-being.

Grab onto whatever time you can to be with your teen.



Putting Latino parent-adolescent communication into context: The importance of parental monitoring and supervision

In addition to having a strong parent-adolescent relationship, parental monitoring and supervision also are factors that can reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs. Parental monitoring traditionally has been defined as knowing about the activities, whereabouts, and companions of one's child.⁶⁹ Whereas some emphasize the *behavior* of parents that lead them to acquire information about their child, others emphasize simply knowing about the activities, whereabouts and companions of their children.⁷⁰ As with parent-adolescent communication, parental monitoring should be conceptualized as an *active and ongoing process* in which both parents and adolescents send and receive information.

A number of studies have found that higher levels of parental monitoring are associated with higher rates of abstinence²⁹ and lower levels of risky sexual behavior in Latino adolescents.^{71,72} While parental monitoring protects against teen pregnancy and STDs, how parents acquire this knowledge is important. Studies have found that adolescents may perceive parental questions about their friends and personal experiences as intrusive and may respond in a hostile manner.⁷³ Practitioners can work with parents to help them ask questions that minimize negative teen responses and promote adolescent sharing of information.

Strategies for practitioners and parents: How can parents improve the quality of monitoring and supervision?

Practitioners can let parents know that when it comes to supervising and monitoring their teen, the best approach is one that monitors their teen while slowly giving him or her the necessary knowledge, power and skills to make good choices in life. In this regard, parental rules are important. They provide teens with firm guidelines on acceptable behavior and help parents maintain a healthy amount of control over their teen. Many Latinos value the importance of obeying authority or *respeto*.^{68,74} In the context of *respeto*, practitioners should highlight two primary messages with parents:

1. It's important for teens to respect you and your rules.
2. It's also important for teens to understand *why* you have the rules you do. For example, when you set a time for your teen to come home at night (called a "curfew"), why are you setting the curfew? What is the purpose of it? Why is it necessary? Teens will be more accepting of curfews if they are given reasons.

As parents seek to elicit information from their child, practitioners can help them understand that their child may choose not to disclose information. This reluctance may be particularly high when teens think that their answers may cause their parents to respond in a negative way. Practitioners can help parents find ways to elicit information about their adolescents' friends, whereabouts and activities in ways that foster open communication. The strategies listed in the Context of Communication may be especially helpful. In addition, let parents know that having a good relationship with their teen also helps, as teens may be more receptive to parental questions in the context of a relationship based on mutual love, trust, warmth, and openness.

A lot of parents tend to supervise and monitor their teen less and less as he or she grows older. Practitioners should emphasize that the risk of adolescent sexual behavior increases as teens get older. While parents should not be overly controlling, they also should stay knowledgeable about where their teen is, who their teen hangs out with, and what their teen is doing when parents aren't home. Parental knowledge in these areas can reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs. Strategies to increase the quality of parental monitoring include:

1. If your teen is not coming home after school, find out where he or she will be and who he or she is hanging out with. Find out if there will be an adult around.
2. If you can't be home after school, try to make sure your teen is involved in activities where an adult

Parental monitoring and supervision are important.

will be around. Something like being in a club or playing sports.

3. If your teen is going out on a weekend or at night, find out where he or she is going and who he or she will be with. Try to make sure it is a place where adults will be around.
4. As much as you can, try to have an adult at home when your teen is there. This might be a neighbor or other family member. Teens are more likely to get in trouble when they have friends over with no adult around.
5. Discourage your teen from going out on school nights. You want to keep your teen focused on school. You want your teen to do his or her homework and get plenty of sleep on school nights. Partying or hanging out on school nights is not the way to do this.
6. When your teen goes to parties, make sure there will be an adult there. Call the parents of the teen who is having the party. Double check the time of the party and ask if an adult will be there. You might even offer to help.
7. If you let your teen have a party, chaperone, keep alcohol and smoking out of the party. Ask guests to leave jackets and bags with you when entering the party. Allow only invited guests into the party.
8. Discourage your teen from hanging out with older teens. This usually leads to trouble. Older teens are more likely to take risks.
9. Discourage your teen from early dating. A romantic partner can have a big influence on your teen. This influence may not always be good. Teens that date early are more likely to get into trouble. This is even more likely if your teen dates someone older. This does not mean you should forbid dating. Nor should you stop your teen from interacting with the opposite sex. Just do not encourage serious dating. Your teen will do fine without being involved in a serious romantic relationship with someone. Be extra careful if your teen wants to date someone who is older.

10. Ask your teen about his or her life. When you ask your teen about this, try not to sound suspicious. Let your teen know that you care. You just want to keep in touch. Supervision is easier if you show an interest in your teen's life in general, and not just when your teen is going out.

Conclusion

Practitioners working with Latino families have good reason to believe that they can help parents reduce the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs. Overall, the existing research on Latino families clearly shows that parents matter. Latino parents are concerned about teen pregnancy, STDs, and HIV, and they want to keep their children safe from harm. The strategies presented in this guide are designed to help practitioners work with Latino parents to do just this. Latino parents want and need assistance in talking more effectively with their teens about sex, love, relationships, and family. Practitioners can work with parents to reduce the barriers to communication and to improve parents' communication skills with respect to the content, context, timing, and frequency of communication. Additionally, helping Latino parents to maintain strong parent-adolescent relationships based on love, warmth, and appropriate levels of parental monitoring all can help parents keep their teens safe. Whether working with parents individually or in group settings, a focus on the evidence-based communication and parenting strategies presented in this guide will help practitioners and parents to work together to reduce teen pregnancy and STDs among Latino adolescents.

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Note: Many of the strategies in the manual are based on the Linking Lives/Uniendo Vidas Health Education program. Linking Lives is an applied parent-based intervention program designed to foster parent-adolescent communication about sexual risk behavior in Latino families. The developers of Linking Lives Program Drs. Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, James Jaccard and Patricia Dittus. The *Linking Lives/Uniendo Vidas Program* was supported by funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Cooperative Agreement #U87/CCU220155-3-0. The findings and conclusions in this manual are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the CDC.



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Currently, Dr. Guilamo-Ramos is developing a Latino Family Institute at the Columbia University School of Social Work. The Latino Family Institute will conduct applied family-based research with Latino families in the United States and abroad. Dr. Guilamo-Ramos has published a number of scholarly articles on parent-adolescent communication about sex and on the role of parents in the preventing adolescent sexual risk behavior. In addition, he has published methodological articles related to adolescent risk behavior. His scholarly work has been published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, the *American Journal of Public Health*, the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *Health Psychology*, and *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. He also is finishing an edited volume entitled "Parental Monitoring of Adolescents," to be published by the Columbia University Press.



Alida Bouris is a doctoral candidate and Project Coordinator at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Ms. Bouris is a Master's level social worker with practice and research experience with Latino parents and adolescents residing in urban communities.

Her primary research interest is in the development and design of family-based interventions to prevent adolescent risk behavior, with an emphasis on preventing secondary and higher-order pregnancies among pregnant and parenting teens. She has published several scholarly articles on adolescent risk behavior, including youth involvement in alcohol, tobacco and sexual risk behaviors. Her scholarly work has been published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, and the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

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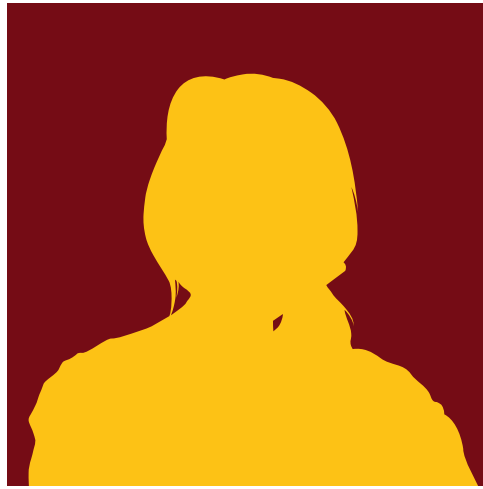
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The goal of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

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