

**Parent-child communication about sex and sexuality:  
Everyday practices, processes and meanings**

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## **Declaration**

I certify that I am the sole author of this work.

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## **Abstract**

The sexual health of young people in the UK is a major public health concern. Recent evidence reporting the limited effectiveness of school-based sex education has led to renewed research and policy interest in the wider social and cultural influences on young people's sexual health. Strategies to improve young people's sexual health which involve parents have been identified as a key area for development. There is, however, a lack of qualitative data concerning parents' and children's experiences of communicating with each other about sex and sexuality.

This study examines the content, contexts and processes of parent-child communication about these issues. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 61 parents and young people (aged 11-15) from 23 families in Scotland. Accounts were gathered from multiple members of the same family, enabling insights into the interaction of perspectives within and across families.

The thesis highlights parents' and young people's understandings of the challenges of communication, contextualising these within changing dynamics of parent-child relationships as children reach their early teens. The negotiated management of young people's pubertal bodies is identified as a significant mechanism through which 'appropriate' sexuality is implicitly communicated between parents and children. Parents and children found it difficult to describe their interactions about sex and sexuality, suggesting that communication itself is a slippery concept. Indeed, the stereotypical notion of parents and children 'sitting down to talk about the birds and the bees' appeared far removed from these families' experiences of sexual communication. The thesis illuminates parents' and children's understandings of the *nuances* of communication, which extends the narrow focus on direct talk in much other research. The active construction of familial contexts in which communication is either constrained or encouraged is also explored. Fathers' perspectives on the barriers to communication are particularly elucidated, most notably uncertainty about the boundaries of 'appropriate' involvement in their children's physical and sexual

development. The thesis concludes by highlighting the implications for the development of sexual health policy and practice, and the implementation of the sexual health strategy in Scotland.

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## **Glossary of Scottish Dialect**

arnae = are not, aren't

cannae = can not, can't

didnae = did not, didn't

dinnae = do not, don't

greetin' = crying

ken = know

mair = more

wasnae = was not, wasn't

wouldnae = would not, wouldn't

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Aims

The aim of this research was to investigate parent-child communication about sex and sexuality within a diverse range of families in Scotland. Young people experience varying degrees of information and influence about sex and sexuality from a range of sources including parents<sup>1</sup>, siblings and other relatives, friends and peers, school and the media. Much national and international research investigating influences on young people's sexual health has focused on formal sex education in schools. Within the UK, however, recent evidence reporting the limited potential of school-based sex education to change behaviour has led to renewed interest in the wider social and cultural influences on young people's sexual health (Henderson, M. et al., 2007; Stephenson, 2004). In particular, strategies to improve young people's sexual health which involve parents have been identified as a key area for development (Allen et al., 2007; Henderson, M. et al., 2007; Powell, 2007; Wight et al., 2006). However, in order to develop and support the role of parents in their children's sexual health, we need to know more about parents' and children's experiences of communicating with each other about sex and sexuality.

This thesis aims to provide greater understanding of the content, contexts and processes of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality. Clearly each individual's experience of communication is unique and will be affected by a multitude of factors. However, identification of common challenges and concerns, as well as possible differences within and between families, could inform the development of strategies and enable resources to be targeted more effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'parents' is used to indicate people in a parenting role, whether biological or 'social' parents. Of course, some children live in other contexts, such as residential care settings. The sex education of looked-after children and young people involves a complex and distinct set of considerations which are beyond the scope of this study. For further information, please see SCIE (2004).

## **1.2 Research questions**

The research questions were formulated following a review of the existing (largely quantitative) data on parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, and were also informed by broader sociological theories of families, parenting and youth. This literature is outlined in Chapter Two. As there has been relatively little qualitative research on this specific area, the questions were designed to reflect the exploratory nature of the project:

- **As children enter teenage years, what are the implications of changing dynamics of parent-child relationships for their communication about sex and sexuality?**
- **What do parents and children say about the content and process of their communication with each other about sex and sexuality?**
- **What is the nature of boundaries of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality and how do these operate in family settings?**

## **1.3 Young people's sexual health in UK: current trends and policy responses**

The sexual health of young people in the UK is a major public health concern. Teenage pregnancy rates are the highest in Western Europe (UNICEF, 2001), rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are rising (ISD Scotland, 2007) and young people report regret of early sexual experiences (Gillan, 2004; Wight et al., 2000). Some notable behavioural trends underlie these data. Young people are reporting a greater number of lifetime and concurrent partners (Johnson et al., 2001), and the average age at first intercourse has fallen to 16 for both men and women (Wellings et al., 2001). In 2002, Scotland had one of the highest rates of early sexual activity among 15 year-olds, compared with 29 other countries in Europe and Canada, while in 2006, approximately a third of 15 year-olds reported having had sexual intercourse

(30% of boys, and 34% of girls) (Currie et al., 2008). The increasing proportion of young people having sex under the age of 16 (Johnson et al., 2001), has been associated with lack of contraceptive and/or condom use, early age at first conception, termination of pregnancy, increased likelihood of contracting a STI, and subsequent feelings of regret (Wellings et al., 2001). These trends indicate a failure to equip many young people with the knowledge, skills and motivation necessary to achieve sexual health.

Concerns about young people's sexual health are increasingly prominent in public health initiatives, such as the UK government's (1999) teenage pregnancy strategy and the Scottish Government's<sup>2</sup> (2005) sexual health strategy, *Respect and Responsibility*. This latter strategy marked a move away from UK policy developed at Westminster prior to Scottish devolution (in 1998), which has been criticised for reactively focusing on individual issues relating to sexual health and failing to recognise the importance of wider social factors (Hosie, 2002; UNICEF, 2001). Indeed, the Scottish strategy acknowledges the need for a broader, more holistic and socially-oriented approach to improving the nation's sexual health. Significantly, by identifying a link between young people's sexual health and their skills and expectations, the strategy also recognises that increased knowledge is a necessary but insufficient cause of change in sexual behaviour. For example, even though a young person may know condoms reduce risk of pregnancy, s/he may feel unable to negotiate their use with a partner.

Hosie (2002) argued that consideration should be given to the political significance of the terminology used in policy documents. Whereas 'teenage pregnancy' is generally used to portray a negative situation<sup>3</sup>, the term 'sexual health' can be used to describe both an acceptance of sex and sexuality and the right to be healthy in that sphere of life. The Scottish Government's pursuit of a 'sexual health strategy', rather than a 'teenage pregnancy strategy' (as in England and Wales) is a positive step

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<sup>2</sup> Established in 1999, the government was known as the Scottish Executive, but changed its name to the Scottish Government following national elections in May 2007.

<sup>3</sup> This is despite evidence that early parenthood can be a positive, rational and intended option for some young people (Arai, 2003; Bonell, 2004; Duncan, 2007).

forward as it provides a platform from which to promote good practice in sexual health (Hosie, 2002). Indeed, *Respect and Responsibility* stresses the importance of recognition that sexual wellbeing is not just the absence of disease but also encompasses positive aspects of sexuality and relationships (Scottish Executive, 2005). However, the final strategy has received criticism for being a “watered down” version of the earlier draft strategy, which was published for consultation in 2003 (Harvie, 2005: 19). Furthermore, ongoing high profile debate between religious leaders, MSPs and health practitioners, among others, over the implementation of aspects of the strategy indicates that sexual health is inextricably linked with the moral and political climate within Scotland.

Health promotion constitutes a significant element of the Scottish strategy, but much of this has focused on the provision of sex education within schools. Families are acknowledged as an important context for young people’s sexual learning, but there are no clear targets set out in relation to their involvement. Nevertheless, recognition of the role of families as a resource for sexual health is emerging in recent initiatives across Scotland, including *Healthy Respect*, the national sexual health demonstration project.

#### **1.4 A few words on terminology...**

There is much “ideological baggage” (Valentine, 1997: 39) surrounding the terms used to refer to young people aged between 11 and 15, such as those in this study. Legally they are defined as children, although childhood could be considered to end with the onset of ‘adolescence’. However, while the terms ‘adolescent’ and ‘adolescence’ are commonly used within psychological discourses, these may also be considered to have negative connotations (Brannen et al., 1994). Within this study, these latter phrases were used extremely rarely by parents and not at all by young people, suggesting these were not terms within which they understood themselves. While most of the young people in the sample called themselves ‘teenagers’ (see section 4.3), not *all* of them did. Therefore, this thesis refers to the younger

generation of the sample as 'young people', as this was often how they referred to themselves and their generation in their interviews. Where the term 'child' or 'children' is used, this is meant relationally (i.e. the child of a parent), rather than to denote an age-based meaning.

## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

In this short introductory chapter, I have located the research within its Scottish context. Chapter Two outlines the empirical and theoretical starting points for the study, including an overview of existing data on parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, in addition to the broader theoretical perspectives which have shaped my research. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodological approach, including discussion of the research design and methods, the sample, data construction and analysis.

Chapters Four to Eight discuss the empirical findings of the research. Broadly speaking, Chapters Four to Six contextualise parent-child sex and sexuality communication within family relationships and interactions. Chapter Four explores the transition from childhood to teenage years, examining participants' constructions of 'growing up', their perspectives on how the experience of 'growing up' has changed across generations, and the implications of this for their communication about sex and sexuality. Chapter Five focuses on parent-child relationships during the early teenage years, examining participants' reflections on the evolution of their relationships with each other during this time, and exploring their thoughts on shifting conceptualisations of these relationships across generations. This chapter also considers parents' roles in their children's sexual learning, particularly focusing on the division of responsibility between parents and schools, and mothers and fathers. Chapter Six explores parental surveillance and management of young people's changing bodies within families, arguing that this is a key way in which ideas about sex and sexuality are implicitly communicated between parents and

children. The chapter also considers the negotiation of privacy and bodily modesty between parents and children as they grow older.

Chapters Seven and Eight turn more closely to parent-child sex and sexuality communication. Chapter Seven examines participants' accounts of the *processes* of communication, focusing particularly on discourses of sexuality and understandings of the different layers of communication. Chapter Eight explores participants' talk about the contexts of their communication, elucidating negotiations concerning the appropriateness of various settings for communicating about sexuality. In Chapter Nine I draw together the substantive findings of the research, highlighting interconnections between the different themes explored in Chapters Four to Eight, and locating these within the literature. I also reflect on the implications of the findings for policy, in addition to limitations of the study, and possible directions for further research.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In Chapter One I presented a broad overview of young people's sexual health in the UK, and also the Scottish government's sexual health strategy. This chapter offers an overview of literature relevant to the thesis, in order to provide the context for the research. The chapter is divided into two sections: firstly, I critically review empirical studies of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality; secondly, I situate the study within broader theoretical debates concerning communication, youth and parent-child relationships. This chapter also highlights some of the gaps within the literature and locates this project within these missing links. Overall, this chapter reflects the issues and concepts which guided me at the beginning of the study (although some of the literature cited is more recent), and excludes themes which emerged over the course of the research (these will be discussed in Chapter Nine).

The empirical research reviewed in this chapter is mainly based on data from the UK, USA and Australia. Although some trends may be localised, a number of issues concerning parent-child sexual communication are relevant across developed nations. Furthermore, as there has been far more research in this area in the USA than the UK, key findings of these studies are presented. Obviously there are urgent issues concerning the sexual health of young people in developing countries, particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS, but consideration of parent-child communication in these contexts is beyond the scope of this study.

Literature reviewed in this chapter was identified through several strategies including searches of two main databases (Web of Knowledge and JSTOR), using relevant key words; references cited in peer-reviewed publications and recent reports and articles suggested by other academics. My review of the literature has been limited to the English language.

## **2.2 Parental influence on young people's sexual behaviour**

The evidence indicating parental influence on young people's sexual behaviour is compelling, although the mechanisms through which this occurs remain unclear. Evidence of parental influence can broadly be split into two categories: structural and process factors (Miller et al., 2001; Wight et al., 2006).

UK and US studies indicate that structural factors such as family forms (e.g. dual/lone parent), the age of parents at the birth of first child and parents' education level are associated with young people's sexual health behaviours (Blum, 2002). For example, living with only one biological parent has been related to earlier sex (Bonell et al., 2006; Upchurch et al., 1999) and a higher number of sexual partners (Feldman and Brown, 1993). Teenagers who become pregnant are also more likely to have a mother who had a teenage pregnancy (Seamark and Gray, 1997), while having sexually active older siblings has also been associated with younger siblings' earlier sexual debut (Widmer, 1997). However, Sweeting et al. (1998) criticised research focused on associations between family structure and sexual behaviours, warning that these may result from other factors, such as poverty. Furthermore, Fullerton and Lee (2004) argued that due to the difficulty of changing the structural factors associated with young people's sexual health outcomes, much research and prevention work has focused attention on process factors, which are more easily targeted by health interventions.

Familial process factors thought to be related to young people's sexual behaviour include various aspects of parenting styles, strategies and interactions with children. In a comprehensive review of more than twenty US-based studies from 1980-1999, Miller et al. (2001) found consistent evidence that parent-child relationships influenced teenage pregnancy risk through a variety of mediating mechanisms including parent-child connectedness, parental support, regulation and monitoring. In a recent Scottish study, Wight et al. (2006) found low levels of parental monitoring predicted early sexual activity for both sexes, and for females also

predicted more sexual partners and less condom use. High spending money in early teens also predicted early sexual activity for both sexes and, for males, having more sexual partners. However, the specific pathways between family relationships, mediating mechanisms and young people's sexual behaviours are complex and require further investigation.

Parent-child communication about sex has been identified as a possible factor mediating parental influence on young people's sexual behaviour. Although the variety of studies indicate there is no simple, direct correlation between parent-child communication and young people's sexual behaviour, there is evidence of several rather complex relationships. Evidence from the US (Kirby, 2003) indicates that if mothers disapprove of teens having sexual relations, if communication takes place early, and if there is a close mother-child relationship, then mother-daughter communication may delay the daughter's initiation of sexual intercourse.

Within the UK, Wellings et al. (2001) found boys who talk to parents about sex tend to use contraception more often than those who do not. However, based on their finding that boys who felt *most* uncomfortable communicating with their fathers were most likely to use condoms consistently, Wight et al. (2006) suggested the relationship between parent-child communication about sex and young people's sexual behaviour seems to be rather more complex than just being positive. Another recent British study (Allen et al., 2007) found that girls' ease of communication with a female parent/guardian about 'private and personal matters' in their early teens was protective against pregnancy by sixteen, although they found no such protection afforded by similar communication between boys and parents, or girls and their fathers. The authors suggested disparities between these findings and other research (e.g. Wellings et al., 2001) may be due to the wording of the question as they did not ask directly about sex and sexuality. Indeed, the issues which young people experience as 'private and personal' may differ, and may or may not include communication about topics such as contraception and pregnancy.

Commenting on the inconclusive results of their aforementioned review, Miller et al. (2001) noted that some of the contradictory results arose from studies using widely

different measures of parent-teen communication (e.g. ever having talked about sex, frequency of sexual communication, number of topics discussed etc). Furthermore, Wight et al. (2006) highlighted the various proxy measures used to investigate young people's 'pregnancy risk' (either of becoming pregnant, or initiating a pregnancy), including age at first sexual intercourse, number of partners, contraceptive use at first sex or consistency of contraception over time. In addition, Wight et al. (2006) pointed to further explanations for discrepancies between findings, including differences in question-wording, types of analysis (cross-sectional or longitudinal), and whether the sample was questioned about current or previous communication.

Furthermore, it is also worth noting that not all parent-child communication about sexual topics may lead to positive sexual health outcomes: Miller et al. (2001: 12) cite a US study (Ward and Wyatt, 1994) which found the communication of negative or prohibitive messages about sex were related to risky sexual behaviour. Therefore, although parent-child communication about sexuality is generally understood to play an important role in shaping young people's sexual behaviours, it still requires further investigation in terms of the contexts in which it occurs and the ways in which it understood by families themselves.

### **2.3 Parent-child communication about sex**

Parent-child communication about sex has received less research attention in the UK than the US, particularly in terms of dedicated studies. Within the UK, questions on communication about sex have been incorporated into larger surveys focusing on sexual attitudes and/or behaviour (e.g. National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL)) or sex education (e.g. Allen et al., 2007), but there has only been moderate direct focus on parent-child communication itself. In this section I will outline the main themes within the literature on parent-child sexuality communication.

### 2.3.1 Parents as a source of sexual information

Studies concerned with young people's sexual learning have commonly invited respondents to identify their *main* source of information about sexuality. Within the UK, recent data from two large surveys indicates a shift in young people's main source of sexual information over time, with schools surpassing friends as the main source for both genders (Currie et al., 2008; Macdowell et al., 2006). Indeed, Scottish data from the 2006 wave of an international study of 15-year-olds showed that school, friends and parents (in that order) were the three primary sources of information about sexual matters (Currie et al., 2008). Both surveys also indicated an increase in the proportion naming parents as their main source, particularly among women, although these proportions were still relatively small.

However, while these surveys establish the *main* source of information, they do not indicate the complex interaction between these different sources. Indeed, while parents may not be the primary source of information for most young people, they are certainly an important source for many, and their information may complement or contradict that from other sources. Furthermore, drawing on two nationally-representative studies in the US, Kirby (2003) identified the distinction between *information* and *influence*, noting that where young people were asked who or what most influenced their actual sexual decision-making, parents were the most commonly identified (38%). This indicates the more pervasive level of influence parents may have on their children than just providing information about sex.

Within the context of widespread controversy over school-based sex education, Kirby (2003) commented that, "the concept of parents as *primary* sexual educators of their children is *politically acceptable*" [emphasis added]. Indeed, most parents report feeling it is their responsibility to discuss sex with their child/ren (Fullerton and Burtney, 2005; Ingham, 2002), although the vast majority also say they want schools to teach sex education (Fullerton and Burtney, 2005; NFER, 1995). A consultation of parents in Scotland (Healthy Respect, 2004) found many did not feel they knew or were told enough about the content and nature of sex education

provided in school, thus making it difficult to support school-based teaching at home. Certainly, parents seem to welcome consultation with schools concerning sex education (Holland et al., 1996; NFER, 1995; Walker, 2001), although Carrera and Ingham (1997) warned the notion of 'consultation' is often understood differently by the two groups, with schools tending to *inform*, through letters and school handbooks, rather than *consult*.

Despite relatively few identifying parents as their main source of information about sex, some young people report wanting more information from their parents. For example, in the NATSAL survey, 33% of men and 40.7% of women aged 16-19 cited their parents as their preferred source of *further* information. This is supported by a recent survey of 2707 young people in Glasgow, most of whom were 14 or 15, which found nearly half (48%) wanted more dialogue with their parents about sex and relationships (FMR Research, 2006). Of course, young people are not a homogenous category; evidence indicates that young people's use of parents as a source of information about sex and sexuality varies across groups, such as gender (West, 1999); age (Powell, 2007) and ethnicity (Coleman and Testa, 2007; Powell, 2007; West, 1999). However, while some young people say they would like to be able to communicate more with their parents about sex in theory, most are generally critical about the sex education they receive at home and their parents' reluctance to discuss feelings and emotions related to sexual relationships (Fullerton and Lee, 2004; Ingham, 2002). Indeed, Walker (2001) found that sex education within families was mainly unplanned, infrequent and not detailed. Therefore, despite the seemingly high value which is placed on 'open' communication about sex within families, Ingham (2002) points to a disparity between parents' attitudes about the importance of providing sex education and their reported actions.

Studies from both the UK and the US indicate a vast disparity between parents' and young people's reports of their sexual communication, with parents consistently reporting more frequent discussions about sex than young people (Brannen and Storey, 1996; DiIorio et al. 1996; Feldman and Rosenthal, 2000; Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson, 2004; Jaccard et al., 1998, 2000; Miller et al., 2001). While parents'

accounts generally pass unquestioned, there appears to be a trend towards suggesting this discrepancy might be due to teenagers under-reporting their parents' talk. For example, commenting on the disparity between findings of two studies, Walker (2004: 243) argued that, "teenager's recall perhaps [...] does not reflect reality in all households". Similarly, when discussing the limitations of their study of young people's perspectives on parent-child sexual communication, Rosenthal and Feldman (1999: 849) noted, "young people's perceptions may not reflect family reality regarding communication". While the ambiguous notion of 'family reality' receives no further clarification, they go on to suggest that the age of the respondents in their study (sixteen), may have obscured the 'reality' of familial communication as older teenagers are keen to underplay parental involvement in their lives. Thus, these analyses seem to suggest the existence of one family truth, which teenagers misrepresent, either knowingly or not, in their accounts of family life. The epistemological implications of gathering and interpreting multiple family members' accounts are discussed further in the following chapter (3.4.1).

### **2.3.2 Barriers to communication**

Significant proportions of young people report very little direct communication about sexuality with their parents, and most young people and parents seem dissatisfied with some aspects of their communication about sexuality (Warren, 1995). Jaccard et al. (2000) found that mothers and their children identified some similar concerns as perceived barriers to their communication including that they would be embarrassed; that their parent/child would be embarrassed; and possibly prying into the child's private life. Furthermore, mothers reported concern about their own lack of knowledge. Mothers' reported feelings of embarrassment decreased as their child got older, although their fears their child would not take them seriously also increased with child's age; thus mothers may feel more embarrassed about talking to younger teens, but may also believe they have a greater impact at this age. Young people also reported concern about their mother being suspicious if they asked questions or initiated conversation about sex.

Parents' own childhood experiences of learning about sex are often cited as contributing to their difficulties communicating with their children (Fullerton and Burtney, 2005; Healthy Respect, 2004). Although parents seem generally determined to improve upon the sex education they received themselves at home (Allen, 1987; Carrera and Ingham, 1997; Walker, 2001), concerns about their own knowledge and skills means many report feeling "ill-prepared to do any better" (Frankham, 1992: 27). Indeed, parents appear to experience a strong sense of social unacceptability related to admitting lack of knowledge (Sex Education Forum, 1999). Walker (2001) suggested the expectation 'to know' may be felt particularly keenly by middle-class parents who relate intelligence to higher social status. Some parents who seem to assess their own personal relationships negatively report concern that efforts to convey messages about healthy sexual relationships may lack credibility (Healthy Respect, 2004). Parents also acknowledge the fear that talking with their children about sex will encourage sexual activity (Ingham, 2002).

### **2.3.3 Gender and communication**

Many studies have highlighted the strongly gendered nature of parent-child communication about sex. The sex of both the young person and the parent are key factors as both report difficulties talking to a relative of the opposite sex (DiIorio et al., 1999; Jaccard et al., 2000; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; Wight et al., 2006). Boys seem less comfortable talking to mothers, but more comfortable talking to fathers than girls (DiIorio et al., 1999). Mothers appear to be the main communicators with young people of both genders, although primarily with daughters, while many fathers remain largely marginal to conversations (Holland et al., 1996; West 1999; Wyness, 1992). In a recent survey of young people in Glasgow, despite nearly half saying they wanted more dialogue with their parents about relationships, just under three quarters (73%) said their father or male carer had either never or 'hardly ever', spoken to them about sex (FMR Research, 2006). Three out of ten males said neither parent had talked to them, or hardly ever spoken

to them, about sex. In light of evidence that young men are exposed to far less sex-related information than young women in schools (Buston and Wight, 2004), this poses pertinent questions concerning where, and indeed the extent to which, boys are enabled to learn about sex.

In a rare qualitative study which gathered fathers' perspectives on communication, Kirkman et al. (2001, 2002) found that fathers struggled with positioning themselves in the discourses of traditional masculinity and the involved father. Furthermore, alluding to dominant discourses of male sexuality, the authors suggested an implicit presumption that mothers can discuss sexual matters more safely than fathers. Walker (2001) argued that fathers seem to abdicate responsibility as they believe that mothers hold better interpersonal skills to be able to communicate about sex. The assumption that women will take responsibility for managing their child's sexuality education reflects broader gendered divisions of 'emotion work' in the home (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993). However, Holland et al. (1996) suggested mothers may collude in marginalising fathers' involvement in family health education thus perpetuating their own role as main carer and educator.

#### **2.3.4 Content and timing of communication**

The different sexual topics which young people and parents report discussing with each other have been the focus of many studies, both quantitative (Carrera and Ingham, 1997; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999), and qualitative (Brannen and Storey, 1996; Holland et al., 1996). Lefkowitz (2002) noted that generally surveys have moved beyond the simplistic measures common in early research in this area (e.g. 'Have you talked with your child about sex? Yes/No'), through expansion of the topics defined as sex-related and also by attempts to measure perceived quality of communication. Rosenthal and Feldman (1999) argued the issues discussed in sexual communication can not be characterised as one domain, but that while some areas, such as sexual safety, were perceived as legitimate for parent-child discussion,

young people did not consider parents as relevant communicators for those topics considered more private, such as sexual attraction or masturbation.

While parents appear to feel relatively comfortable providing 'factual' information concerning reproduction, puberty and pregnancy, they report difficulty discussing sexual issues within an ethical and moral context, such as contraception, abortion and homosexuality (DiIorio et al., 1999; Fullerton and Burtney, 2005; Healthy Respect, 2004; NFER, 1994; Wyness, 1992). Parents may find it harder to discuss how sex works socially as it requires them to depart from a factual script and reflect on their own values. However, even messages that are conveyed regarding so-called 'factual' aspects of sex involve cultural assumptions and values about bodies and sexuality (Teitelman, 2004). For example, West (1999: 534) noted that the reproductive paradigm is a powerful influence in parents' discussions with their children, particularly girls. Therefore, even though some information may be presented as factual, all messages concerning sexuality are located within a values framework and parents may find it easier to discuss issues where values are more implicit than explicit. Parents rarely address issues which construct sex as pleasurable, rather than reproductive, such as oral sex, masturbation and orgasm (Healthy Respect, 2004; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; West, 1999).

Besides the content of discussions, the quality of communication between parents and young people seems to vary enormously. Pluhar and Kurilof (2004) argued that the affective (e.g. empathy, comfort, anger, silence) and stylistic (e.g. interactive versus didactic styles, body language, setting) elements of the communication process may be more important than the content of conversation. Rosenthal et al. (1998) identified different styles of mother-child communication, distinguishing between symmetric and asymmetric communications, suggesting those that appeared to work best involved a match between mother's and children's communication styles.

Holland et al. (1996: 43) found that most parents have an opinion about an age when it is appropriate to talk about sex to their children but are puzzled about how to raise

the subject. Some parents report finding communication about sexuality easier with younger children who often ask questions which can be used by parents to initiate further conversation (NFER, 1994), although this can not always be relied upon (Frankham, 2006). However, older children, who may recognise topics as sexually coded, even if they do not fully understand why, may be more reticent in broaching sexual matters themselves. Therefore, parents may have to look for other catalysts for communication. O'Sullivan et al. (2001) asked daughters and mothers to describe when discussions about sexuality occurred and which cues (if any) prompted these conversations. A number of categories emerged from the data: discussions are initiated at puberty, discussions are initiated when mothers become aware of their daughters' sexual interest, discussions are paced throughout the daughters' childhood, and discussions are postponed indefinitely. Rosenthal et al. (1998) found that most mothers in their study were 'opportunistic communicators' who sought occasions and events to initiate sex-related discussion and used catalysts such as TV, sex education classes at school and events among friends and family. Similarly, Brannen and Storey (1996: 54-55) described how parents use topics that come up at school, on the television and in the newspapers, "as 'hooks' on which to hang a few facts about sex but they rarely seem to get down to what children really want to know".

### **2.3.5 Critiques of existing research**

Studies investigating parent-child communication about sex are widely acknowledged to be "fraught with design problems" (Warren, 1995: 185). This section provides a brief overview of some of the key limitations of past research:

- *Narrow definitions of 'communication'*

Despite claiming to investigate 'communication', the majority of studies tend to limit their investigation to parents' and children's direct talk about sexual topics. However, the mediation of sexual information and ideas between parents and

children appears to operate through far more complex interactions than just direct talk. Indeed, Kirby (2003) has argued:

“Of course, survey data often do not adequately capture the many values about sexuality that are instilled in youth by their parents without any memorable conversations, or without any recognition on the part of the youth that they are internalizing their parents’ values. In numerous ways, parents quietly model important values about sexuality. For example, whether they appear nude or partially nude in front of their children, whether they engage in sexual relations outside of marriage, and how they respond to their children’s siblings or friends who give birth as teenagers undoubtedly affect the values of their children. Children may or may not recognize this modelling.”

One exploratory British study (Joffe and Franca-Koh, 2001) explored the link between remembered non-verbal sexual communication in the home and current sexual behaviours and feelings of sexual guilt. Non-verbal sexual communication was encapsulated via a number of proxy measures, including nudity in the home, affection between parents, signs of parental sexual activity and intimation of mother’s menstruation. They found that the greater the extent of non-verbal sexual communication, the *earlier* the onset of sexual activity, but expression of affection between parents was associated with having fewer sexual partners and lower feelings of aspects of sexual guilt.

However, largely due to difficulties in data collection methods, very little research has addressed the role of informal messages about sexuality that are transmitted via indirect verbal interactions (e.g. jokes), non-linguistic communication (e.g. laughter, blushing, coughing, silence) and the everyday routines of family life (Blum, 2002; Kirby, 2003). Nevertheless, given estimates that as much as two thirds of meaning in communication is conveyed nonverbally (Burgoon, 1985, cited in Lefowitz, 2002), it seems important that studies seek to extend investigation beyond direct talk.

– *Quantitative data*

Most research in this area is based on quantitative data collected via questionnaires, with parents and/or young people responding to a range of questions about the content, frequency and perceived quality of their communication on a Likert scale. For example, DiIorio et al (1999) asked mothers to rate the level of comfort they felt in discussing each of 14 sex-related topics with their children, with items rated from 1 (*'not comfortable at all'*) to 5 (*'very comfortable'*).

While these studies have provided valuable descriptive information, they are unable to capture the richness and complexity of perspectives which individuals express in interviews. Qualitative methods are better suited to explore the meanings that parents and children give to this communication and how they understand the processes themselves. Parents and young people are articulate commentators on the complexity of their relationships, and also have their own theories about their behaviour. Not only do theories of youth and families need to be based on the meanings generated by family members themselves (Gillies, 2000), but lay theorising also has an important place in understanding health-relevant behaviours (Milburn, 1996).

– *Retrospective data collection*

Young people's perspectives on parent-child sexuality communication are often based upon the self-reports of young adults remembering and reflecting upon events that occurred years before (Kim and Ward, 2007; McKee and Karasz, 2006; Rozema, 1986). Warren (1995) suggested that this was an issue of 'convenient subject selection', as it is easier to recruit young adults where parental consent is not required, than younger teens. However, young adults are likely to reflect on their teenage interactions with parents differently at a later stage. Of course, collecting the accounts of any individuals requires them to reflect on their lives, which people interpret and reinterpret moment by moment. However, if the focus of the research

is parents' communication with their teenage children, then there is a case for investigating their *current* experiences of communication.

– *Focus on older teenagers*

Where teenagers' perspectives on their current communication have been sought, the focus has often been on older teens' experiences (i.e. 16-18 year-olds) (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; Somers and Paulson, 2000; West, 1999). Clearly, the issues that are salient for twelve and thirteen-year-olds may be very different from those for sixteen and seventeen-year-olds. Much of the criticism of school-based sex education, from young people and others, warns that it is a case of 'too little, too late' (Buston and Wight, 2002; Hirst, 2004), indicating that the most influential and formative time for communication is *before* teenagers begin to negotiate sexual relationships. However, many parents describe waiting until they think their children are negotiating sexual relationships to talk to them, thus possibly missing opportunities to influence behaviour (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Indeed, a recent study of calls made to ChildLine Scotland found that most young people seeking explanations about the 'facts of life' were between eight and thirteen, although calls were made by children as young as five (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006). Within Scotland, Hosie (2002) has argued for an increased awareness that future sexual health provisions for young people must be based on the actual needs and wants of Scottish young people. Many of the recommendations within the Scottish sexual health strategy (2005) are based on findings from the 2000/01 NATSAL survey. However, as this survey only included young people aged sixteen and over, further research with younger teenagers is necessary in order to explore the particular issues of salience to their age group.

– *Studies based on single perspectives*

The majority of British studies concerned with parent-child communication about sexuality have explored the experiences of *either* parents *or* young people but have rarely attempted to collect data from more than one family member. Quantitative

studies seeking to examine the relationship between parent-child communication and sexual behaviour have focused on young people's perspectives (Allen et al., 2007; Wight et al., 2006), while qualitative research examining the experience of communication has largely concentrated on parental perspectives (Fullerton and Lee, 2004; Walker, 2001, 2004; Wyness, 1992). However, the widely reported lack of correspondence between young people's and parents' accounts of sexuality communication indicates that interpretation of events is a subjective experience. Most studies exploring more than one perspective have focused on parent-child dyads, although these tend to focus on mothers and daughters (e.g. McKee and Karasz, 2006; O'Sullivan et al., 2001), and rarely represent the views of fathers or sons (Kirkman et al. 2001 is a notable exception).

– *Absence of fathers' accounts*

Studies of parental perspectives on sexual communication rarely involve fathers. Miller et al. (1998) noted that to some extent this research focus is understandable as mothers tend to be more involved in parenting than fathers. However, although studies consistently indicate that fathers are less involved in directly talking with their children about sex than mothers, their implicit and nonverbal communication may still play an influential role in their children's sexual learning. Recent evidence that young people's experience of communicating about sex with their fathers was associated with their contraceptive use indicates that fathers' communication with their children warrants further research (Wight et al., 2006).

So far this chapter has provided an overview of existing studies of parent-child communication about sex and their limitations. However, research on parent-child communication about sex and sexuality taps into a number of debates concerning young people, families and parenting. These are considered in the following section, which identifies the broader theoretical influences on the research.

## 2.4 Theoretical starting points

### 2.4.1 Young people and 'growing up'

Over the course of the twentieth century, through the establishment of institutions in the fields of education, juvenile justice and social services, 'youth' emerged as a distinct stage between childhood and adulthood (France, 2007). Furthermore, borne out of the post-war affluence of the 1950s which created new 'youth-centred' markets, the category of 'teenager' emerged in western culture. Weller (2006: 99) commented that, presented lexically, 'teenager' (i.e. a person aged between 13 and 19 years-old), appears relatively value-free. However, the term 'teenager' is now largely recognised within the sociological literature to be a cultural invention (Brannen et al., 1994; France, 2007).

Largely influenced by the work of G Stanley Hall (1844-1924), the psychological literature on youth has tended to represent adolescence as a universally problematic period of emotional turmoil, during which young people become increasingly independent from their parents. However, Brannen et al. (1994) stressed that the concept of adolescence as a time of growing autonomy from family is culturally specific. Indeed, in other cultures, the transition to adulthood is often perceived in terms of developing greater responsibilities towards one's families, rather than detachment from them. More recently, psychologists have questioned the concept of 'storm and stress' as neither a typical nor necessary aspect of teenage years (Scabini et al., 2006). Nevertheless, France (2007) argued these constructions of adolescence as a problematic period are well-embedded within 'common-sense' discourse on youth.

Within much media and policy discourse, teenagers and youth culture have been considered a growing problem threatening the moral order of society. Indeed, Brannen et al. (1994: 2) argued, "public discourses have tended to treat young people as a barometer of social ills – from teenage pregnancy, to increased 'delinquency', drug-taking and violence". Adolescence is often portrayed as a time of risk-taking as

many young people start to experiment with alcohol, smoking, drugs and sex. These constructions of risky teenage years are particularly evident in the enormous body of health-related literature focused on young people. Furthermore, health promotion initiatives focused on youth also tend to foster these constructions. However, as children and young people are excluded from much adult-defined space, their lives are more publicly visible than adulthood. Indeed, recent evidence of rapidly increasing rates of alcohol intake and STIs among the UK's middle-aged (and middle-class) population (ISD Scotland, 2007; Bodley-Tickell et al., 2008) suggest that the various 'panics' surrounding young people's health may be disproportionate.

Despite much discourse about youth culture, the distinction between childhood and adulthood has become less clearly delineated over time:

“Whereas in archaic societies and cultures, most transitions took place by discrete ‘leaps’ and were accompanied by veritable ‘rites de passage’ that signalled a collective wish to mark the passage into a new condition, in modern contemporary society transitions are represented more and more often as being individual, relatively undefined (with respect to both modalities and timing), negotiable, little ritualised and with ample margins of choice. An automatic passage has been thus transformed into a *path of transition*, with its own processes and timing.”

(Scabini et al., 2006: xiii, emphasis original)

Indeed, in the context of continuing economic dependence on parents and the later age at which young people are starting their own families, there has been considerable focus on youth transitions into adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Henderson, S. et al., 2007; Valentine, 2003). But what are the perceived factors which indicate the shift into adolescence? James (1986) argued that the stage at which childhood ends and adolescence begins is both fluid and context specific. More recently, Valentine (2003: 38) highlighted the fluidity of the growing-up *process*:

“This performative rather than biological understanding of ‘age’ means that by acting in a responsible way in a particular space or time children can ‘grow’ in terms of how others regard them; correspondingly their perceived age can also shrink if they behave in a ‘childish way’.”

Weller (2006: 97) argued that the complex transitional positioning of younger teenagers – situated between childhood, youth and adulthood – has been relatively neglected. The boundary transition from childhood to adolescence has been explored in wider structures of the formal and informal education system, particularly in relation to the construction of young masculinities and femininities (Frosh et al., 2002; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Epstein et al., 2003). However, sociological research on young people has received criticism for neglecting their family lives by focusing on youth within public domains, such as schools and peer groups (Brannen, 1996; Gillies, 2000). Studies have explored young people's lives within their family contexts, although these have generally been with older teenagers (Gillies et al., 2001; Brannen et al., 1994). Young people's relationships with their parents are discussed further in section 2.4.3. This section has so far outlined discourses of youth and growing up. In the following section I turn more closely to debates around youth sexuality.

#### **2.4.2 Contemporary feeling about youth sexuality: anxieties and concerns**

Despite a discourse of gradual liberalisation which predominates popular representations of sexuality in popular culture and everyday life, Jackson and Scott (2004: 235) have highlighted “persistent unease about the sexual that sits side-by-side with an acceptance of greater sexual freedom and diversity”. Concerns about changing sexual behaviour, gender and sexual identities have become, “the explicit focus for debates about the current shape and desirable future of society” (Weeks, 1997: 45). These anxieties are exemplified by the controversies surrounding young people's sexuality. In a society where ‘the child’ is constructed as the site through which ‘culture’ is transferred and reproduced, children have come to provide a symbolic representation of the moral order (Butler, 2002; Jenks, 2003; Valentine, 2006). Therefore, as concerns about the future state of society are focussed on ‘the child’, much effort is invested in the construction of childhood as a time of innocence which is separate to, and in need of protection from, sex (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

As the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are seemingly blurred via fashion and the media (Valentine, 2006), social commentators despair at, “the sexualization of childhood from the innocence – and ignorance – of the past to the more worldly wise child of today” (Humphries et al., 1988: 147). However, discourses which construct childhood as a time of innocence that has been ‘eroded’ or ‘lost’, have been criticised as a concern for, “the defence of childhood itself...[an] institution and ideal which exists independently from, and sometimes in spite of, actual flesh and blood children” (Kitzinger, 1997: 166). Not only do sanitised and idealised images of innocence and safety misrepresent the physicality and sexuality of childhood (Walkerdine, 1986), but, furthermore, moral panic about young people’s sexual lives can inhibit actions intended to inform and support them. Indeed, “the fetishistic glorification of the ‘innate innocence’ of childhood”, not only denies children access to knowledge and power, hence actually increasing their vulnerability, but is also an ideology used to stigmatise the ‘knowing’ child (Kitzinger, 1997: 168). Thus, those children who have either become sexual or are beginning to express themselves sexually present a difficult problem for society, and pregnant teenagers and young parents have become scapegoats for societies’ ills (Arai, 2003; Bonell, 2004; Weeks, 1995).

Jackson and Scott (2004: 235) note, “that there is little focus on becoming sexual as a process; rather it is seen as a matter of leaping a chasm between ‘innocence’ and ‘knowledge’”. Therefore, while childhood continues to be idealised, the concept of ‘youth’, which necessarily involves the transition from childhood to adulthood, presents more of a problem. As previously discussed, young people are constructed as a dangerous and socially marginal group subject to influence and, therefore, in need of policing. Sexuality is a key site of this control (Thorogood, 1992; West, 1999), and explains much of the debate about how best to teach young people about sex.

### 2.4.3 Parent-child relationships

Over the past twenty years or so, sociological research on intimate life has tended to frame family as an interactive process, rather than a normatively defined institution. For example, Finch and Mason's (1993) study of kin obligations showed how family relationships were negotiated and contested through practical actions, rather than ascribed membership. David Morgan's (1996, 2002) theorisation of 'family practices', marked a conceptual shift away from 'the family', as characterised by co-residence and biological kinship, towards an understanding that family is something you do, rather than something you are. More recently, Finch (2007: 66) has extended this analysis to incorporate the notion of display, "where the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting 'family' practices." Thus, 'display work' is essentially a communicative process. Indeed, Finch (2007: 75) considers the forms of direct social interaction used to convey the meaning of 'family-like' relationships when she asks: "What is the relative importance of face-to-face interaction and other forms such as telephone calls, emails or text messages?" Socio-linguists have argued that family is enacted through dialogue, for example:

"Families are created in part through talk: the daily management of a household, the intimate conversations that forge and maintain relationships, the site for the negotiation of values and beliefs" (Kendall, 2007: 3).

Others have considered how the rapid expansion of communication technologies (e.g. mobile phones, email, online social networks etc) has increased the possibilities to maintain contact and knowledge of each other's lives from a distance. For example, Williams and Williams (2005) have shown how mobile phones facilitate the negotiation of curfews between parents and teenagers outside the home. While teenagers appeared to feel that mobile phones enabled them greater leverage in their negotiations with parents, they could also be considered a tool for extending parental authority into public space.

These themes of negotiation and control within contemporary parent-child relationships resonate with recent discourse positing a shift towards greater 'democracy' and equality between the generations. The 'pure relationship', which Giddens (1992: 190) argued is available to parents and children, is based around the notion of trust and mutual disclosure: "not just respect for the other, but an *opening out* to that person are needed for the criterion to be met [emphasis added]." In his account, ongoing dialogue is clearly positioned as a cornerstone of democratic relationships. However, while principles associated with the democratic family may resonate with many White middle class parents, it has been argued that they pathologize alternative understandings and practices of working class and ethnic minority parents (Gillies, 2005; Jamieson, 1998). Furthermore, Jamieson (1999: 488) questioned whether parent-child relationships are moving towards equality and disclosing intimacy:

"While empirical research finds parents claiming they want to have closer relationships with their children than they had with their own parents, there is no clear evidence of a trend to democratic 'pure relationships', even among parents and teenage children."

Indeed, Jamieson (1998) synthesised a range of evidence which challenges notions of democratic intergenerational relationships, by drawing attention to the lived reality of inequalities between parents and children. While some of these studies consider the explicit control that parents exert over younger children, others highlight more implicit forms of parental control, and its resistance, in parent-child relationships in the teenage years.

In their mixed-methods study of the negotiation of responsibility for young people's health, Brannen et al. (1994) highlighted the central role of communication in parents' and older teenagers' (15-17) accounts of their relationships. While parents stressed the importance of 'talk', 'discussion' and 'understanding', communication appeared to be used as a means of control through which they maintained knowledge of their children's lives. In contrast, young people's accounts stressed their resistance to parental control via withholding information about their activities. Thus, Brannen et al. drew attention to the conflicting aims of parents and their

children with respect to their communication. Based on their study of with parents and young people (11-16), Solomon et al. (2002: 968) extended this analysis of the conflicting aims of parent-teen communication, highlighting the role of *intrapersonal*, as well as *interpersonal*, conflict:

“...parents and teenagers can hold contradictory values and aims about their relationships which mean that they not only act inconsistently but have incompatible aims which make that inconsistency inescapable.”

Interestingly, although this study explored young people’s changing relationships with their parents in general, the authors highlighted the particular significance of parent-teen talk about growing up and sexuality. Echoing Brannen et al. (1994), Solomon et al. (2002: 975) noted that while accounts of such dialogue were “indicators of emotional closeness”, parents and teenagers also had contradictory goals in relation to their intimate talk, with young people expressing awareness that their parents may have mixed motives in inviting ‘open’ communication about sexuality. Furthermore, despite the apparently high value placed on open communication between parents and children, in practice, the weight of disclosure often seems to rest on children, rather than parents, with some topics, such as parents’ own sexuality, considered inappropriate for mutual dialogue (Brannen et al, 1994; Dermott, 2008; Jamieson, 1998; Solomon et al, 2002).

However, communication is only one of several strategies of control that parents exercise over children and young people with respect to sex and sexuality. Other forms of control may be more explicit, such as curfews, and rules about who young people are allowed to spend time with and where (e.g. banning opposite sex friends in bedrooms). Parental expectations of their children’s behaviour, and the ways in which they convey these to their children, may be shaped by parents’ cultural background, among other factors. For example, Brannen et al. (1994: 194) highlighted cultural and ethnic variation in parental control strategies regarding young people’s sexuality within their sample, noting, “regulation is embedded in cultural norms”. The mobilisation of family honour regarding non-marital sex, and the regulatory power of shame, appeared to be significant in families with parents of

Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin. Where young people from these families were sexually active in the face of these proscriptive moral norms, they appeared to resort to secrecy.

In addition to debates concerning the nature of parent-child relationships, Jamieson (1998) also questioned whether the balance of parenting between mothers and fathers is changing. Western discourses of fatherhood have shifted over the latter half of the twentieth century, from the male breadwinner *ideal* to the construction of fathering as more involved and nurturing (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Dermott, 2003; Valentine, 1997). In this sense, common understandings of what it means to be a 'good father' appear to have extended from emphasis on the provision of financial support, to a focus on spending time with children and involvement in their day-to-day parenting. However, despite radical evolution of the *idea* of fatherhood, actual changes in fathering *behaviour* appear to have progressed to a lesser extent, often referred to as the gap between the culture and conduct of fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; LaRossa, 1997). Although there is some evidence of men's increasing participation in their children's lives, the division of caring responsibilities between mothers and fathers is still hugely unequal, with fathers often only spending time with children at weekends (Yeung et al., 2001), and rarely alone, as do mothers (Valentine, 1997). However, Dermott (2003) has challenged the notion that involved, or 'intimate', fathering must correspond with spending more time with children, arguing that many men consider themselves highly committed and involved, "irrespective of the hours they put in".

Most of the recent explosion of sociological literature on fathers has focused on those of young children, with relatively limited reflection on fathers' relationships with older children (notable exceptions include Brannen et al., 1994; Gillies et al., 2001; Langford et al., 2001). As discussed earlier in this chapter, fathers' accounts tend to be largely absent from studies of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, and particularly from qualitative research in this area. Thus, in addition to children's and mothers' reflections on fathers' involvement in communication, this

research provides rare insights into fathers' perspectives and experiences of communication with their early teenage children.

#### **2.4.4 Conceptualising 'communication' about sex and sexuality**

There is much overlap in the terms and phrases within the largely quantitative body of research on parent-child communication about sex. Therefore, it is perhaps useful to briefly outline some of the nuances in the terminology used in this study and what these are understood to mean. Firstly, 'sex education' is commonly used within the literature to describe the process by which young people learn about sexuality. In its broadest sense, this may encompass the different contexts and sources through which young people might acquire information about sex, such as schools, families, friends and the media. However, Warren (1995: 173) distinguished between sex education and sex communication:

"Education is unidirectional, involving the provision of information in a top-down manner, from expert to novice, whereas communication is bidirectional, involving two partners in mutual dialogue with the viewpoint of both being valued."

The concept of sex communication, or 'communication about sexuality', as a co-creation of meaning about sexual beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours is more useful when trying to understand the complexities of parent-child communication. Moreover, it positions young people as agents in their sexual learning, rather than passive recipients of information.

Contrary to much research which tends to conflate 'communication' with 'talk', this thesis theorises 'communication' in the broadest sense; social actors communicate messages not just through direct talk but also through other verbal interactions and non-linguistic communication. Through their discussion of the role of silence in social interaction, Christensen et al. (2001) challenged the privileging of spoken language in understandings of communication:

“There are no intransitive systems of communication and no intransitive messages [...] every act, every pause, every moment in living and social systems is also a message; silence is communication; short of death, it is impossible for an organism or a person not to communicate.”

(Wilden, 1987, cited in Christensen et al., 2001: 69)

Furthermore, whether verbal or not, the communication of messages may not always be presented directly. In Goffman’s (1959) terms, this is the distinction between that which is *given*, and that which is *given off*. Hendry and Watson (2001: 2) described the process of indirection, in which thoughts are communicated:

“...not directly, straightforwardly or unambiguously, but in a manner which to some degree or another deliberately obscures, hides or ‘wraps’ the message.”

In her analysis of the problems encountered by health workers attempting to introduce knowledge about HIV in India, Lambert (2001) argued that their general tendency to prioritise verbal communication about sex over non-verbal communication was entirely inappropriate. Indeed, indirectness, whether verbal or not, may increase the possibilities of what may be communicated. This certainly seemed to be the case in a recent study of calls made to ChildLine Scotland about sex and sexual health (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006), which found many children used indirect, allusive language to refer to sex.

Thus, while powerful messages about sex and sexuality may be conveyed through direct talk between parents and children, even if parents are not having direct conversations about sexuality with their children, they are involved in sexual communication at an informal level through their everyday talk and actions which, “contain implicit and explicit sexual codes that generate ideas and values” (Wyness, 1992: 90).

Studies within this area often use ‘parent-child communication’ and ‘family communication’ interchangeably. Despite evidence of young people’s (limited) use of extended family members (e.g. aunts, grandparents, cousins) as sources of sexual

information and advice (Power, 2007; Miller et al., 2001), the focus of this research was interactions between parents and children, and so the former is more appropriate.

## **2.5 This study**

This research is a qualitative investigation of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality. The research questions have already been outlined in Chapter One. While qualitative studies have explored communication about sex within other aspects of families' personal and health-related interactions (Brannen et al., 1994; Solomon et al., 2002), this research was solely focused on communication about sex and sexuality, thus enabling detailed examination of the content, contexts and processes involved.

Informed by both the literature on parent-child communication about sex, and also sociological theories of parent-child relationships, the study examined parents' and young people's own theorising about their sexual communication. The study was designed to explore how communication was experienced by different members of the same families in order to enable greater insight into the complexity of familial communication about sexuality. In particular, as their accounts are conspicuously absent from much of the literature on parent-child sex and sexuality communication, I wanted to explore fathers' perspectives.

I was alerted to several themes arising from the literature which I wanted to explore in more depth. These included perspectives on parental responsibility for communication, the negotiation of mothers' and fathers' roles and the perceived legitimacy of parent-child communication about various sex-related topics. The concept of boundaries has been highlighted for its utility in understanding family practices (Gabb, 2007; Jamieson, 2005; McKie et al., 2005). Indeed, I was interested in the perceived limits of communication, as well as parents' and children's accounts of aspects which facilitated communication.

Intrigued by apparent discrepancies between young people and parents' reports of their sexual communication within the literature, I wanted to examine participants' understandings of their communication *processes*, in addition to the content of communication. Thus, while I was keen to investigate their accounts of talk about sex, I also wanted to explore other ways in which information and ideas about sex and sexuality were communicated within families. As much of the research has focused on older teenagers, I was interested in how communication with parents was contextualised within the shift from childhood into the early teenage years.

I will now go on to outline the methodological approach to the study.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach underpinning the study. The chapter is structured around discussion of each stage of the research process, including the research design, recruitment of the sample, data construction and analysis. In line with a 'natural history' approach (Silverman, 2005), the chapter charts the study's evolution by discussing the decisions and dilemmas I faced at each stage.

The broad aim of this research was to explore the processes through which parents and young people communicate with each other about sex and sexuality. In Chapter Two I presented a rationale for using a qualitative methodology for the study. I argued that although quantitative data has been valuable in providing descriptive information about parent-child communication, qualitative methods are most suitable for examining the diversity of meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of family members (Daly, 1992).

In Chapter Two I also noted that the majority of studies of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality have explored the experiences of *either* parents *or* young people, but have rarely attempted to collect data from more than one family member. This is despite evidence that young people's and parents' reports of their communication consistently differ in terms of the perceived frequency and content of communication and reported levels of comfort. Those studies that have sought perspectives from both young people and parents have tended to focus on mothers and children, usually daughters, and rarely represent fathers' views. This research was designed to gather multiple perspectives from individuals in kin relationships with each other in order to unpack how some of the issues relating to communication about sexuality are experienced by different members of the same families.

## **3.2 Research design and methods**

### **3.2.1 Multiple perspectives, divergent realities**

Collecting qualitative data from more than one member of a family allows researchers to explore family processes from a number of perspectives, rather than from that of a sole analyst (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003; Sweeting, 2001). By gathering the accounts of multiple family members, we are able to gain insight into the multiple and divergent 'realities' that exist within families and to explore dynamics of family relationships (Larson and Richards, 1994; Valentine, 1999). Evidently research involving related individuals opens up new methodological, analytical and logistical issues and dilemmas which may not always be relevant for research with sole participants from families. Firstly, collecting, interpreting and representing multiple family members' accounts has implications for the epistemological framework of the research, particularly regarding conceptions of truth, realities and subjectivities (see section 3.4.2). Furthermore, negotiations concerning access, consent, confidentiality and the logistics of interviews also become more complex when they involve several individuals from the same families, as discussed throughout this chapter.

### **3.2.2 Designing the sampling frame**

The research design required at least one parent and one young person from each family to participate. Although other studies of parent-child sexual communication have interviewed parents together (Walker, 2001), I decided to talk to parents separately so they did not feel inhibited by each others' responses (Valentine, 1999). However, I was aware that talking to a stranger about their families' sex and sexuality-related communication could be particularly intimidating for young people and, therefore, suggested they could have a friend or sibling with them, as this may enable those who were less confident to be involved (West, 1999).

As an exploratory study in a particularly sensitive area, I felt it would be unrealistic to attempt to recruit a statistically representative sample. The ultimate aim, therefore, was to achieve a heterogeneous sample of families which might reflect diversity of opinions and experiences. From the outset, I was aware that engaging families in the study could prove particularly challenging; not only did the study design require the participation of multiple family members, but the research topic was highly sensitive. Indeed, the very process of discussing participation required parents and young people to broach the substantive focus of the research – their communication about sex and sexuality – which was selected for investigation due to families’ reported difficulties talking to each other about these issues. It has long been acknowledged within sensitive research that those who agree to participate may have quite different behaviour and attitudes from those who are reluctant (Lee, 1993; Strassberg and Lowe, 1995; West, 1999). In this study, I was particularly concerned that only those families who were comfortable communicating about sexuality might agree to participate, rather than those who experienced it as more challenging. I also anticipated they were likely to have less conservative attitudes towards sex than many other individuals (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999). However, Fry and Dwyer (2001) point to the multidimensionality of motivations individuals may have for engaging with sensitive research, including seeking information and assistance. Parents’ and children’s reported motivations for participation in the study are returned to later in this chapter (section 3.3.1) and have been discussed more fully elsewhere (Lewis, in press), but it is important to note that, just as there may be a range of motivations within families, family members also have varying experiences of communication.

As much previous research on young people’s perspectives involved older teenagers or young adults (see section 2.3.5), I originally intended to interview young people aged 13 or 14. The planned sampling frame (Table 3.1) was structured around two key variables: young people’s gender and class. Gender (both young people’s and parents’) has been identified as an important factor in parent-child communication about sex and sexuality (see section 2.3.3), but as there are significantly more studies

involving girls than boys, I was keen to include even numbers of each in my sample. Social class is also related to sexual health outcomes, with those with lower socio-economic status generally having poorer sexual health (e.g. Johnson et al., 1994), although there has been minimal classed analysis of the British data on parent-child communication. I originally wanted to explore whether and how class might shape parent-child communication, and so I intended to include equal numbers of working and middle-class families in my sample. As a small-scale qualitative study, I anticipated a sample of approximately twenty families would reflect a sufficiently diverse range of attitudes and experiences.

**Table 3.1 Intended sample of families**

	Girls (13-14)	Boys (13-14)
<b>'Working class'</b>	5	5
<b>'Middle class'</b>	5	5

As Edwards et al. (1999) reflect, deciding who to include in a sample involves a number of 'boundary decisions'. Examination of the literature had identified two further structural variables in familial communication: ethnicity and family form (i.e. lone/dual parent). As the implications of family structure for parent-child communication was not an initial focus of my research, I was reluctant to introduce any further variables into the sampling structure due to anticipated difficulties recruiting families. However, although not sampled for specifically, the study information sent to families encouraged a diversity of family forms. As the study progressed, the specific challenges experienced by lone mothers emerged as an important dimension of these families' experiences of communication and, on reflection, it would have been sensible to build family structure into the sampling frame. In particular, the experiences of lone fathers are under-represented. While three fathers had parented either alone or apart from their children's mother, none were currently doing so and thus were unable to talk about their *current* experiences of negotiating sexual communication with their children.

Although ethnicity appears to be a prominent structural variable in the literature on parent-child communication, the Scottish context of this study with a predominantly (98%) White population (Scottish Executive, 2004), meant that unless I purposively over-sampled for families from ethnic minority backgrounds, it was not feasible to include this as an analytical focus of the study<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, while I did not want to exclude ethnic minority families from participating in the study, I decided not to make specific attempts for recruitment, such as the provision of information in other languages. Similarly, concerns about misrepresenting the perspectives of minority groups based on a very small number of cases meant I also decided not to purposively sample for same-sex parenting couples, whose experiences of family communication about sex deserve dedicated study, rather than becoming a small component of a larger project.

### **3.2.3 Sensitising work**

The research questions were formulated in response to familiarisation with the literature on parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, which was outlined in Chapter Two. Before undertaking the interviews, however, some sensitising work was required to inform various aspects of the study, including developing the interview guide and piloting the study information to be sent to families. This sensitising work comprised a series of six discussion groups: two with parents and four with young people. Discussion groups can be effective in encouraging conversation about potentially embarrassing or sensitive subjects (Kitzinger, 1994; McTeigue, 1998), and I felt that at this preliminary stage, it was appropriate to talk to young people and parents in these contexts, rather than in individual sensitising interviews.

All participants for these groups were recruited through a local primary school, although this meant the seventeen children (nine girls, eight boys) involved were all

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<sup>4</sup> If the study had been conducted in a more ethnically diverse area of the UK, this would have been a consideration.

either eleven or twelve, and were therefore at the lower end of the age range (11-15) of young people I intended to interview. Access to the children was negotiated with the head-teacher and parental consent was sought for children's involvement by letter on an opt-in basis. This letter also included a request for parental involvement, although only six parents responded to this, all mothers. The group discussions with young people lasted between thirty and forty minutes, and those with parents ranged from fifty minutes to an hour and twenty minutes. Two of the young people's groups were single-sex, and two mixed.

The discussions were loosely structured around issues I thought might be incorporated into the study. With young people this included talking about the differences between talking to friends and parents about topics related to sex, relationships and puberty; what they considered the challenges of communication to be; and things that might help families talk to each other. Across all the groups, talking with parents about sex was described as embarrassing and uncomfortable, particularly with fathers. Several children recounted stories of awkward instances where a parent had tried to talk to them about sex, or where sexual topics had come up on television while others were present. Girls tended to say they would ask their best friend if they wanted to know something about sex, although they also emphasised the importance of trust in these relationships. Most boys said sex was not something they would talk seriously about with friends, although they indicated that sexualised topics were a source of amusement between peers. There was a general sense across the groups that sex was inevitably an embarrassing topic, and there were few suggestions of things that could facilitate communication with parents. These children seemed more reticent about using sexual words than those in a previous study (Lewis, 2004), which reinforced the importance of heightened sensitivity to children's comfort in individual interviews.

Guided by Alderson (2005), I also piloted the information leaflet for young people which I intended to include in the pack of information sent to families. Following their suggestions, the leaflet (Appendix 3) was modified to include more colour, cartoon characters and a photograph of myself. As I was aware of the younger age of

the children in these groups, at this stage I also attended two local youth groups and talked informally to older young people (aged 14-16) about the research. These discussions were not audio recorded, but notes were taken. Despite the older age range of these young people, the most prominent theme was again the embarrassment they felt about communicating with their parents.

Themes explored in the parents' discussion groups included reflections on their own experiences of learning about sex; parents' and schools' roles in sex education; thoughts about how to raise sexual topics with children and perceived challenges to doing so. All mothers described negatively their own parents' efforts to talk with them about sex, and there was much laughter as they shared tales of their school sex education. All said they wanted their children's experiences to be better than their own but common challenges included knowing when to raise sexual topics. Some mothers seemed to feel adequately informed about what their children were learning at school, while others said they wanted to know more. As in the young people's discussion groups, I piloted the information I intended to give potential participants (Appendices 1 and 2), asking parents to talk about their initial responses to it and any suggestions they might have concerning its modification.

### **3.2.4 Recruitment**

At a very early stage of the project I had hoped families would be recruited via young people themselves, who would approach their parents about participation. I initially scoped interest through local youth groups and schools, although no families were recruited in this way. Three schools were informally approached but all declined involvement, two citing 'research saturation', and another saying they were 'too busy'. Although none commented on the research topic, the challenges facing schools' consultation with parents about sex education may have contributed to further reticence to foster dialogue between myself and families. While several young people seemed happy to chat with me about the research in youth groups, none wanted to get involved in the project if it involved their parents. Other

researchers have reported difficulties recruiting families through children (Seaman, 2002), a finding supported by young people's accounts in the discussion groups conducted prior to the interviews (section 3.2.3), in which most young people said they would prefer to be approached about participation by a parent than a stranger.

Bearing this in mind, I decided it was appropriate to contact parents in the first instance, who would then approach their family members. As I was unknown to potential participants, I was mindful of advice to make an approach through a credible and trusted intermediary (Cree et al., 2002; Nilsen and Rogers, 2005). Other studies have successfully recruited participants through their General Practitioner (Backett, 1992; Holland et al., 1996) and so my initial strategy involved approaching potential participants in writing through their family doctor. In order to achieve a socially diverse sample, I planned to recruit families through two general practices, one located in a relatively deprived area and one in a relatively advantaged area of the city. Although aware this would only provide a crude approximation of socio-economic status, my lack of prior knowledge of the families meant I was approaching them 'cold', and was unable to acquire more accurate information.

I made contact with Dr Brook<sup>5</sup>, a GP in a deprived area of Edinburgh, willing to act as a 'gatekeeper' to families registered at her practice. Following an exchange of emails, I met with Dr Brook to discuss the surgery's involvement in the project. Having been involved in sexual health promotion within the city, she suggested broadening the age range of young people in the sample from 13-14 to 11-15. Her reasons for this were two-fold: 1) she believed many young people in her practice were 'sexually active' before the average age at first sex (16 for both sexes); 2) more pragmatically, in acknowledgement of the low anticipated response rate, broadening the age range would increase the number of families eligible to participate. After careful consideration, I decided to follow Dr Brook's advice.

In order to recruit through general practitioners I had to gain ethical approval for the project from the NHS Lothian Research Committee, which was granted within two

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Brook is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of her patients.

months of submitting my application. Dr Brook then identified eligible families with a child aged 11-15, excluding those she thought inappropriate to contact due to her awareness of recent traumas (i.e. parental terminal illness or death). She wrote a letter of introduction, which was accompanied by a letter from me (Appendix 1) and two information leaflets explaining the research in greater depth, one for parents (Appendix 2) and one designed in an age-appropriate format for young people (Appendix 3). The mailout of letters was administered by surgery staff so I did not see families' contact details until they chose to opt-in to the study. Although I wanted to write to families as a group, Dr Brook wanted letters to be addressed to parents only, although they were asked to discuss the research with their child/ren if considering participation. Reflections on the mediation of information about the study between family members and the decision-making processes concerning participation are discussed further in section 3.3.1 (see also Lewis, in press).

Letters were sent to 126 families with at least one person aged between 11-15 in three staggered mailouts over a six-month period. Response to this strategy was poor, with only nine families (7%) responding. In addition to the sensitivity of the research, response rates may have been affected by the mailouts' coincidence with the Christmas and Easter school holidays. Following the low response from families in Dr Brook's practice, I decided not to pursue this strategy in a more socially advantaged area as negotiating access within the surgery had been a lengthy process and I was concerned about time pressures.

Alternative modes of recruitment were then pursued, including utilising existing networks of contacts. One of my supervisor's ex-colleagues put me in touch with four families, who all agreed to participate. The research was also advertised on a poster (Appendix 4) which I placed in sites selected according to their accessibility for families across the social spectrum, including libraries, community centres, leisure centres and cafés. Adverts were also placed in two local newspapers and messages on community websites. Although the adverts were displayed in places used by young people and adults, all resulting enquiries were made by parents. Following a poor response from fathers to adverts appealing for 'parents' in general,

an extra sentence specifically encouraging their participation was added to the original poster. Male response to this was much higher, suggesting fathers may feel their contribution is both wanted and will be valued if specifically mentioned. Finally, participant families were asked to pass on details of the research to other families which yielded a further four families. In summary, recruitment of the sample was four-fold, and is summarised in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2 Overview of recruitment of sample**

<b>Method of recruitment</b>	<b>Number of families recruited</b>
Adverts	9
Informal networks of contacts	7
Snowballed	4
GP surgery	3
	<b>23</b>

As can be seen in Table 3.2, I recruited three more families than originally intended. This was because these later families had more complex structures than many earlier two-parent ‘original’ families, and I wanted to ensure the sample was diverse. On reflection, however, collecting and analysing data from twenty-three families was challenging, and I learnt an important lesson about the nature of qualitative sample size. A further nine families indicated interest in the study (6 from the GP’s surgery, 2 from adverts and 1 snowball) but were not interviewed, either because they later changed their mind or they responded after the target sample size had been met.

### **3.2.5 The study sample**

Parents and young people (aged 11-15) from twenty-three families were interviewed between November 2005 and June 2006. There was a significant gender imbalance of the thirty-two parents (including three ‘social’ parents) interviewed; twenty-one

were female and eleven male (Table 3.3). The difficulties of recruiting fathers for research on intimate life have been widely reported (e.g. Edwards et al., 1999), and so I was pleased eleven men were willing to participate. Even within this small number, there was diversity of age, social background, ethnicity, religious beliefs and level of involvement in day-to-day parenting. There was also a gender imbalance in the twenty-nine young people interviewed; seventeen were female and twelve male (Table 3.3).

Most parents were in their forties, although just under half the mothers were in their thirties, and three fathers were in their fifties (Table 3.4). Young people ranged between eleven and fifteen; the mean age for girls was thirteen years and five months and for boys twelve years and nine months (Table 3.5).

**Table 3.3 Participants by position in family**

'Mothers'*	21
'Fathers'*	11
Daughters	17
Sons	12
	<b>61</b>

\* These were people in a parenting role, whether that was as a biological or 'social' parent

**Table 3.4 Parents' age by gender**

Age of parent	'Mothers'	'Fathers'	Total
30s	9	0	9
40s	12	8	20
50s	0	3	3
	<b>21</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>32</b>

**Table 3.5 Young people's age by gender**

<b>Age of young person</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Total</b>
11	0	3	3
12	3	1	4
13	7	5	12
14	4	2	6
15	3	1	4
	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>29</b>

Although the research design only required one young person and one parent from each family to participate, I asked all adults living with a young person if they would be interviewed. Seven declined, three of whom were biological fathers, and the others cohabiting partners (two male, two female). Indeed, only three non-biological, or 'social', parents agreed to be interviewed; thus social parents' own perspectives are under-represented in the analysis. This in itself may be indicative of 'social' parents' ambiguous role in this aspect of parenting. Where one parent had declined, I chose not to exclude the other members of these families from the study as the very fact that one parent refused to participate may have indicated tensions over sexual communication within the family. In five families, two young people within the age range expressed an interest in participating and so both were interviewed.

Most participants (n=55) were interviewed individually, although four asked to be interviewed together: two sisters, and a parental couple. One girl asked to be interviewed with a friend, and although I did not interview the latter's family, she has been counted as part of the sample as her talk was analysed. Unfortunately the microphone on the digital recorder failed during one girl's interview. This was

discovered when the audio files were checked shortly after leaving the house and so I quickly made as detailed notes as possible which have been used in the analysis.

The sample included a diverse range of family forms. As some of the families had quite complex structures, I did not want to impose categories (e.g. 'blended family') on them with which they might not identify and so young people's living arrangements have been presented instead (Table 3.6). Eleven young people lived with two biological parents, seven lived with a biological parent and their partner (or in one case, ex-partner), six lived with their biological mother, two lived between two families, two girls lived with their aunt and one girl lived independently from both her parents.

**Table 3.6 Young people's living arrangement by gender**

<b>YP lives with...</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Total</b>
Two biological parents	7	4	11
Biological parent and their partner	3	4	7
Biological mother only	3	3	6
Between two families	1	1	2
Aunt	2	0	2
Lives independently	1	0	1
	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>29</b>

Although I had relatively little control over the socio-economic distribution of the sample, families' backgrounds varied across the social spectrum. I asked parents about their occupations as an opening question, framing this within talk about their everyday lives, but I decided it was inappropriate to ask about families' income when the access negotiations were so sensitive. I was aware parents may feel nervous about being interviewed about their parenting, particularly in an area where many report struggling to communicate with their children. I did not want parents to feel they were being judged or assessed, and I especially did not want them to feel I was making assumptions about their parenting based on their income.

Parental occupations included managerial, professional and manual classifications. Eight fathers and six mothers were employed full-time (although one father was on long-term sick leave), while six mothers and two fathers worked part-time (two of these voluntarily). The eight mothers and one father not currently in paid employment described themselves variously: unemployed/‘on benefits’ (4); ‘housewife’/‘home-maker’ (3); voluntary worker (2) and studying full-time (1).

However, parental occupations only partially represent the multidimensional resources that might impact on families’ socio-economic status. Indeed, other markers might include the area they live in, parental education and educational aspirations for their children. Only one young person was privately educated. Furthermore, families’ socio-economic situation may change over time. For example, although one father identified his family as ‘middle-class’ in their country of origin, they were now living in a deprived area of the city and both parents were in unskilled manual employment. Nevertheless, mindful of the fluidity of social mobility, a crude indication of the diversity of socio-economic circumstances within the sample is presented in Table 3.7, which shows the profile of the sample by deprivation decile. I used postcode data to derive this information from the Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics dataset. Broadly speaking, there was a good spread across the sample, with eleven families in the bottom five deciles and twelve in the top five.

Reflecting Scotland’s population, the sample was predominantly White. However, there was some ethnic diversity: of the 61 individuals involved, six were Black African. One boy’s (participating) mother was White, and (non-participating) father was Black American. Further diversity within the sample included five parents raised outside the UK. Although I did not sample for religion, eight parents and six children talked about their faith in the context of talk about sexual values (see 7.3.1 for further discussion). All self-identified as either Christian or Catholic.

**Table 3.7 Profile of households by deprivation decile**

<b>Deprivation decile (1=most deprived)</b>	<b>Number of families</b>
1	5
2	0
3	3
4	2
5	1
6	1
7	3
8	4
9	1
10	3
	<b>23</b>

\* Data source: Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, [www.sns.gov.uk](http://www.sns.gov.uk)

A small-scale study such as this cannot claim to represent the full range of experiences of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality. Rather, the purpose of this study was to elucidate the processes of communication, and to identify some of the common challenges, in addition to any aspects which parents and children said facilitated communication. In summary, while I did not intend to achieve a statistically representative sample, I do feel able to make some general statements from a sample which was diverse in terms of gender of both parents and young people, social background, family form and with some ethnic and religious diversity.

Preserving the anonymity of the participants has been a significant consideration in writing this thesis. Identifying factors such as participants' names and parents' occupations have been changed throughout. However, as the study involved family 'groups', there is the additional risk that by identifying themselves, a participant could also identify their family members' accounts.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in some cases where

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, it is highly unlikely participants' will read this thesis, but the principle remains.

specific information is relevant to the argument but might identify an individual, and in some cases where accounts are directly linked, these have been anonymised further into generational identities (e.g. ‘a mother and daughter’).

In this section I have described the characteristics of the sample, and reflexively commented on both its strengths and limitations. In the following section I discuss the negotiations concerning families’ involvement in the project, and the processes of data construction.

### **3.3. Data construction**

#### **3.3.1 Engaging families in the research**

Although I asked all parents who indicated interest in the study whether they would like to meet with me, together with their child/ren, to discuss what their participation would involve, only three families chose to have a pre-interview meeting, other parents saying they were too busy or thought it unnecessary. This illustrates potential tensions between researchers’ preferred procedures and participants’ wishes.

In families that chose not to have a pre-meeting, I communicated with parents over the phone or by email, answering questions about what the interview would involve, what sort of questions might be asked and how long it would take. The £20 voucher which families received in recognition of their time was also discussed at this point so I could purchase their stated choice of voucher in advance.<sup>7</sup> Although I always asked parents if their children had any particular queries or concerns, these were rarely reported. A few parents said their child was apprehensive about the interview, but went on to underplay this when I reminded them they could withdraw, saying

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<sup>7</sup> Although monetary payment for research participation is debated among social researchers (see Bushin (2007) for further discussion), I felt it was appropriate to offer participants a voucher in acknowledgement of their time. In a couple of families there seemed to be some conflict over the division of the voucher and, on reflection, it may have been better to acknowledge each participating individual’s time with a smaller amount, rather than £20 as a family group.

they would be 'fine on the day'. On the day of the interviews, I tried to meet with all participating family members together before individual interviews were conducted. This was not always possible, however, since several mothers asked me to arrive when fathers were still at work and children at school, so they could do their interview free from distraction before getting on with other tasks while I interviewed their relative/s later in the visit. In these families, mothers assured me their child/partner had already agreed to participate and, although I later reminded each of them of their right to decline participation before and during their interview, on reflection, this may have been perceived to be even more difficult once their family member had already been interviewed. Therefore, as many individuals' participation involved relatively little discussion with me beforehand, it is important to consider the processes of negotiation *within* families, in addition to those between myself and the participants.

To gain further insight into families' interactions, at the end of the interviews I asked participants to reflect on how their family reached the decision to participate. These accounts, which are discussed more fully elsewhere (Lewis, in press), are relevant to both the substantive focus of the study regarding communication within family relationships and also the methodological concerns over power and negotiation in family processes (Edwards et al., 1999).

Although the aim was to find multiple family members willing to participate, they did not learn about the study simultaneously, as one person (usually mothers) took the lead in communicating information to their relatives and making arrangements with me by phone or email. This parental 'gatekeeper' was in a powerful position since they could choose to withhold information from their family or to acquire the role of mediator, relaying information between the researcher and their relatives. I initially (and naïvely!) envisaged a fairly linear process where the parental gatekeeper would be informed of the research in writing, they would pass this on to their relatives, each potential participant would look over the written information prior to a communal discussion, which would result in a response to me if they were interested in taking part. However, as many parents already appear to struggle to

communicate with their children about sex and sexuality, discussing the research was not a straightforward matter. Inviting families to discuss the possibility of research participation with each other necessarily required acknowledgement of the research topic and these interactions themselves became a mode of communication about sex and sexuality. Indeed, dynamics of parent–child communication about sexual matters were played out from the initial point families were approached about participation and throughout their ensuing communication (or lack of) about the study. Certainly, participants’ accounts suggest considerable variation between families in the ways parents mediated information to their children and the subsequent discussions that took place. For example, although all parents received an information leaflet which they were encouraged to pass on to their child/ren, young people from 15 of the 23 families said they had not seen any written information concerning the study, either the information leaflet, nor any email communication ‘on screen’. Furthermore, a few young people said their parents conveyed information about the research to them in stages, adding extra details *after* they had agreed to participate, as Vicky (14) recalled:

*RL: And did you know what it [the interview] was going to be about?*

*Vicky: Yes, at first they said ‘relationships’ and then they said ‘sex education’ and I was like ‘stop adding in things!’*

Notably, most of these young people were from families recruited via advert and so parents would also have learnt about the research incrementally as it was only possible to give limited details on a poster. Indeed, this reflects common research practice where researchers give further details to those who register interest. However, these data also provide interesting insights into many parents’ discomfort talking about sex openly and the ways they might gently raise sensitive issues with children over time. Certainly, framing initial discussion within the context of ‘relationships’ may have been easier for many parents than starting with ‘sex’. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how this staged learning process may be experienced by young people if they feel the terms of the research they initially agreed to have changed.

While almost all parents were keen to note their child had made a ‘free decision’, often stating that there was ‘no pressure’ to participate, many of the same parents – mainly mothers – also noted their children had initially been reticent and described varying persuasive strategies to encourage them to engage in the research. These manifested in various forms, including insistence that it would be ‘good for them’, was the *right* thing to do and was a *mature* thing to do. Young people also reported variation in the perceived degree of choice they were given concerning participation. As Gelder (2005: 3) notes, encouraging parents to ask their children to agree to an interview “falls short of counting as informed or valid consent by children.” Parents may not share researchers’ perceptions of children as capable of deciding whether to give consent, and they may also have their own agendas for children’s participation. Certainly, while many parents said they were motivated to participate by altruistic reasons (e.g. for the development of research), others indicated that participation in the study provided an opportunity to raise sexual matters with their child.

This section has outlined some of the complexities of engaging multiple family members in the study. Mindful of the interviews as a social situation in which both myself and the interviewees participated, in the following section I discuss how I presented myself to families, and consider my influence on the co-production of data.

### **3.3.2 Positioning myself, being positioned**

Throughout the fieldwork process, I tried to remain aware of the ‘selves’ that I brought to the field (Hockey et al., 2007; Reinharz, 1997), and the impact of these aspects of my identity on my engagement with participants. Despite a large literature alerting researchers to power differentials within fieldwork interactions (e.g. Burgess, 1984), too strong an emphasis on the power of the researcher can obscure the complexity of relations within research (Skinner, 2005). As a middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, university-educated, White woman in her early twenties with a south-east English accent, I was mindful that these identities would affect the process of data construction, some more than others. In particular, I felt the intersection of my youth, gender and marginal status as student (albeit with high-

status potential), were especially influential in my fieldwork interactions and the co-production of data.

Warin et al. (2007) note that both researcher and researched engage in a process of 'mutual positioning' in which they position themselves and each other according to information acquired throughout research interactions. Both make judgements based on immediately visible characteristics (such as gender and approximate age), but these may be altered with disclosure of further information. Hockey et al.'s (2007: 49) Goffmanesque discussion of "impression management" within interview interactions is relevant here. Certainly, I carefully considered what might be indirectly communicated by my clothes, worrying that my generally favoured jeans and trainers might be considered unprofessional by some parents, while a suit would be inappropriately formal, and potentially threatening.

At the outset of the eight-month fieldwork period, I was 23. Although legally an adult, I was also in the same target age range (13-25 years) as some of my participants for certain 'young people's' sexual health services in Lothian. Not much older than some of their children, I was anxious that parents might be concerned about my ability to sensitively handle interviews. Therefore, when talking with families immediately before their interviews, I mentioned that I also facilitated workshops on sexual health in secondary schools, as I hoped this would reassure participants I was familiar discussing these issues with young people. However, while this disclosure did seem to gain me some credibility, I also found several parents deferred to me as an 'expert', asking me what was 'normal' in terms of physical development, in addition to quizzing me about teacher-delivered sex education.

While I certainly never sought to be considered a teenager myself, my proximity in age was useful in terms of communicating with young people in the study, as I felt most assumed I understood what it was like to 'be young'. This was especially evident when young people explicitly distinguished between what we talked about in the interview, and what they felt they could discuss with their parents and/or

teachers. This was not always the case, however; in two interviews, both with young people who had had much contact with social services, I felt I was seen as another in a long line of professionals who asked personal questions and of whom they were suspicious.

Parents' response to me as a researcher in her early twenties seemed to vary; while many talked to me 'as an adult' from the outset, others referred to me – either implicitly or explicitly – as part of 'the younger generation', noting that they were doing the interview to 'help me out with my project'. Only one parent asked whether I had children myself, and I suspect most assumed I was childless. As reported by others (Richards and Emslie, 2000), three girls' parents described using me as an example to their daughters of the benefits of higher education, and in one case the importance of delaying parenthood:

*Mother: When you walked in now I said to her, 'you see, she won't be more than twenty-five, see she's doing PhD studies because she had education, and even if she gets pregnant she can look after her baby, she's not going to be a charity case or on DSS.*

This is one example of how the research interactions themselves became a mode of communication about sex and sexuality between parents and children (Lewis, in press). However, I felt uncomfortable with being afforded this 'role model' status, remaining only too aware of the multidimensional resources available to me across my higher education.

Although mindful of Edwards et al. (1999) reflection on whether we can presume full knowledge and appreciation of meaning even where we share social characteristics with our participants, I anticipated female participants would be easier to interview than males. Certainly, when asked to reflect on their interviews, some mothers and daughters commented on a sense of shared female experience; as one mother commented: '*because we're talking about me and her [daughter], I s'pose I just assume that however we feel you will have felt or feel*'. However, Reissman (1987) warned against an assumption of shared identity which totalises women into a unitary category; indeed, three mothers born outside the UK repeatedly stressed

cultural differences between women; for example, when discussing female sexual respectability, one African mother identified my nose piercing as ‘absolutely unacceptable’ within her culture.

Having read literature on women interviewing men which emphasised female vulnerability in research interactions (Lee, 1997; Warren, 1988), I was initially cautious about interviewing fathers. However, although fathers more commonly described themselves as ‘waffling’ or inarticulate, I found them to be the opposite: reflective on their parenting practice, honest about their perceived shortcomings and engaged with the interview themes. It is possible their candid reflections were because, as a young, female student, I was considered unthreatening. In terms of what we discussed, the main difference between mothers’ and fathers’ interviews was that fathers less commonly disclosed personal sexual experiences (although I did not solicit these from either), which may have been influenced by both my age and gender.

Similarly, although I had initially worried about interviewing boys about such a sensitive area, like Frosh et al. (2002), I found most boys produced lively accounts of their family lives and communication, taking time to consider questions on often taken-for-granted issues, such as gender differences. That is not to undermine the embarrassment that some clearly felt talking about sexual issues with a young woman. Some said it would have been easier if I were male, while some said it made no difference, and others said it was easier that I was female.

### **3.3.3 Negotiating the terms of the interviews**

Consent was conceived as a continual dialogue, rather than a discrete event (Alderson, 2005), which began from the very first point of contact and throughout all further arrangements. Initial negotiations of consent involved careful explanation of the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, including disclosures made by one family member about another, and anonymity. Participants were assured there were no right

or wrong answers and it was fine to say, “I don’t know” or “I don’t want to talk about that”. All participants signed a consent form before we started the interview, and I also checked with them at the end that they were happy for me to use the interview in my study.

Due to the theme of the research, it was imperative that negotiations of informed consent acknowledged my obligation to override guarantees of confidentiality in the case of disclosure of abuse of a *current* child.<sup>8</sup> This was stated on the leaflets about the study (Appendices 2 and 3), and also discussed before the interviews.

Kvale (1996) alerted us to the potential closeness of the qualitative research interview and the therapeutic interview. Although I explicitly said I was not there in a counselling capacity and would not provide any feedback on individual families, I ensured I had information about voluntary and statutory support agencies concerning sexual abuse and assault should participants require it (Cree et al., 2000). I also obtained some leaflets from local sexual health services which I gave parents at the end of their interviews to pass on to children should they wish.

All participants were interviewed in either their own home or that of a family member. I had been clear in the written information and my negotiations with parents about interviewing each participant individually. In most cases, parents went out of their way to ensure I could talk to their child undisturbed and in privacy. However, some parents did also ‘wonder aloud’ what their child had said (or was about to say) in their interview. This did at least indicate awareness that their child was likely to have a different opinion to themselves which they believed they would express.

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<sup>8</sup> Although I responded sensitively to the few mothers who disclosed their own childhood experiences of abuse, no further action was appropriate.

### **3.3.4 Developing the interview guides**

An interview guide was used in all the interviews, with a separate one for young people and parents (Appendices 5 and 6). The initial guides were formulated on the basis of questions raised from my review of the existing literature and themes arising from the pilot discussion groups. However, as the study sought to foreground participants' subjective experiences, they were encouraged to talk about the issues of greatest salience to them, and the guides were not adhered to rigorously. Both interview guides evolved over the course of the project as particular themes emerged from participants' talk, such as communication about young people's physical development. Furthermore, throughout the fieldwork process, I frequently reviewed guides as it became apparent participants found certain questions difficult to respond to or irrelevant. For example, although I originally asked young people to reflect on what it means to be in a family and how their mother or father might see themselves as parents, it became clear these questions were too abstract as they tended to elicit responses such as 'I don't know' or a shrug.

Throughout the interviews I drew on Solomon et al.'s (2002) 'multiple perspective technique', in which participants were encouraged not only to give their own views but also to reflect on the likely responses of other family members to the same question. This proved to be quite revealing in terms of exploring how each family member framed the issues they felt were important and also how far they understood the perspectives of their relatives.

### **3.3.5 Young people's interviews**

The guide for the interviews with young people (Appendix 6) was split into six sections: 1) Family life and relationships; 2) 'Growing Up'; 3) Learning about sex and sexuality; 4) Communicating with your parents; 5) Summary; 6) Reflections on the interview and family's involvement in the research.

As one of the aims of the study was to contextualise communication about sex and sexuality within everyday family life, it was important to gain some sense of families' relationships, daily routines and activities, and so the first section focused on this. Guided by Scott (2000), I tried to pick up on the terms used within each family to define their relationships; for example, whether young people referred to their mothers' partner by name or as 'Dad'. Young people were encouraged to reflect on how their relationship with their parents had developed as they got older, to give some indication of shifting patterns of intimacy and communication within families. I purposefully chose to open the interview with these themes as they enabled us to 'warm up' rather than jumping straight into talking about sex, which many young people might find embarrassing and uncomfortable.

The second part of the interviews was designed to elicit young people's general feelings about getting older and also their perception of themselves in relation to their peers. In order to gain insight into young people's perceptions of contemporary experiences of youth, they were also asked to reflect on how teenage life was similar or different to that of their parents' generation. The third part of the interview moved onto sources of information about sex and sexuality, including questions about whose responsibility it is to talk to young people about sex, puberty and relationships, and an attempt to explore young people's perspectives of the ideal parental role in relation to this area.

The fourth section was the longest, as this encouraged young people to give accounts of their sexual communication with their parents. Topic cards were used to facilitate this section of the interview, and these are discussed in section 3.3.6. As communication was conceptualised in the broadest sense within the study, questions were designed to encourage reflection on forms of communication other than talk. A summary section was used to encourage young people to reflect on their communication overall. I concluded the interviews by asking young people how their families became involved in the research, and also their reflections on the process of being interviewed.

Through my role facilitating sexual health workshops, I was comfortable explicitly discussing body parts, sexual practices and values with older teenagers (16-18 year-olds) in single and mixed-sex groups. However, following the discussion groups with eleven and twelve-year-olds (3.2.3), I was alert to the acute embarrassment younger teens might experience in relation to discussion about sexual matters. I was also aware that young people might feel more embarrassed in an individual interview where attention was focused solely on them, rather than in a group setting. I tried to adopt a friendly, relaxed style in all the interviews, prioritising participants' comfort, which involved sometimes *not* pursuing particular questions or themes where they seemed uncomfortable. This was undoubtedly gendered; although there were some evident manifestations of embarrassment, such as blushing and giggling, most girls talked apparently happily to me about their own bodies and boyfriends, while many boys seemed more hesitant on these areas. However, a few girls also seemed shy talking about sexual matters throughout their interviews, while a minority of boys spontaneously raised topics such as erections and masturbation themselves.

### **3.3.6 Parents' interviews**

Although there were many areas of overlap, there were some differences between the guides for the parents' and young people's interviews. Additional themes explored in parents' interviews included reflection on their parenting; their own experiences of growing up and learning about sex, and communication with their partner (if applicable) about raising children and sex education.

Parents were encouraged to reflect on their own teenage years and experiences of learning about sex in relation both to children's lives today and to their own parenting practices. While parents were explicitly asked to reflect on their own sexual learning, some also raised and returned to these themes spontaneously. For many, there was a sense that the construction and reconstruction of memory was a common part of their practical reasoning (Scott, 2000). However, a minority noted

they had been ‘remembering’ in preparation for the interview, indicating this was not considered a common feature of their ‘sense making’.

In these three sections I have described the development of the interview guides, and outlined the general themes explored in the interviews. In the following section I reflect further on the co-production of data, and the limitations of interviews as a means of generating accounts of sensitive communication.

### **3.3.7 Constructing accounts of private and sensitive communication**

Attempting to investigate aspects of personal relationships which may be experienced as private and possibly even taboo is challenging. Twigg (1999: 382) discussed the methodological complexities of studying the private:

“...the nature of the social encounter restricts the methodology, effectively limiting it [...] to interviews, the technique by which the respondent is most able to control the access of the researcher and draw a veil across certain subjects.”

Indeed, despite guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, social norms and expectations continue to shape the interviews by influencing what both researcher and participant feel able to discuss face-to-face. Furthermore, in this study, as it was recognised that communication about sexual matters, and its avoidance, is embedded in families’ everyday lives, there was a methodological problem concerning participants’ ability to report on these issues. This raised the question of whether interviews were the most suitable method for researching parent-child sexuality communication, or whether alternative methods might be more appropriate.

Recent critiques of the predominance of interviews in qualitative research include Silverman (2004: 361) who challenged, “the argument that observational or other naturally occurring data are ‘unavailable’ in the supposedly ‘private’ sphere of human interaction (e.g. in domestic life).” Within the field of this study, Lefkowitz (2002: 48) noted the emergence of observational studies which video-record parent-

child conversations about sex in laboratory settings. In addition to recording the substantive content of dialogue, observational methods enable measurement of verbal cues (e.g. accepting or encouraging comments), paralinguistic features (e.g. tone of voice, pauses, laughter) and non-verbal behaviours (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions, nodding, hand gestures etc). While there is undoubted value in investigating aspects of communication beyond talk, these studies rely on observers' interpretations of these interactions, rather than participants' own accounts. Furthermore, despite trying to create an 'authentic' conversation, the participants' awareness of being recorded undermines claims to be 'naturally-occurring' data.

Other researchers have used mixed methods to generate accounts of sex education and parent-child sexuality communication. For example, in their study of young people's media-related sexual learning, Bragg and Buckingham (2004) note that their diverse methods, which involved asking young people to keep diaries, in addition to individual, paired and group interviews, produced a range of ways of writing and speaking about the research topic. Although I initially considered asking parents and young people to keep some form of 'communication diary', I decided against this approach for several reasons. As the study was framed by an understanding of sexuality communication as embedded in families' everyday interactions, I thought diaries were unlikely to engender written accounts of indirect or non-communication. Evidence from survey data indicates that many parents and children perceive sexuality communication to be a low frequency event. As such, diaries would have to be kept over a long period in order to ensure accounts of specific discussions or encounters. Even if diaries were only kept for a week, the time commitment involved in writing a daily diary may have prevented families from participating. Furthermore, aware of multiple pressures on family members' time, I did not want research participation to resemble homework for either parents or young people.

Despite recognising the considerable limitations involved in inviting participants to give verbal accounts of potentially unarticulated interactions, I chose to individually interview parents and young people as I felt it was important that they described their experiences and feelings regarding communication in their own words (as opposed to

the more directive statements used in questionnaires). In addition to enabling me to probe for further details, the nature of semi-structured interviews enabled flexibility for participants to discuss those issues of most salience to them. As Jamieson argued (1999: 10), “Stories always present a particular view rather than everything that could be said.” Indeed, the data generated in the interviews were *accounts* of communication, and thus were inevitably structured in order to make claims about young people’s autonomy and independence, family togetherness or conflict, and parenting skills.

Although I was initially concerned that the interview method would privilege description of direct dialogue, at the expense of accounts of implicit communication, this was not the case. Despite very rarely explicitly asking participants to reflect on the different ways they expressed their views and feelings to each other, implicit communication was woven through participants’ talk, including reflection on their relatives’ body language, and spontaneous interpretations of the meaning of laughter, silence and glances. The various modes of sexuality communication which participants described are outlined further in Chapter Seven.

However, although participants described a range of modes of communication, I soon found the ambiguity of their constructions of sexuality militated against a nuanced understanding of the different issues about which they communicated. For example, parents and young people frequently used vague phrases to refer to sex and sexuality, such as ‘the nuts and bolts’, ‘the birds and the bees’, ‘that side of things’, ‘stuff like that’ and, most commonly, just ‘it’. This ambiguity almost certainly reflects much of the communication that goes on between parents and children. Indeed, I regularly considered what participants’ communication with me told me about their general ways of communicating in their families. However, I wanted to explore the different topics and issues participants were referring to when they said they had, or had not, communicated about sex, in order to explore how they might talk about these aspects differently, or how they might conflate them. Therefore, in order to stimulate more detailed reflection on the content of their communication with each other, I decided to use a set of topic cards listing different issues relating to

sexuality (see Appendix 7). This list of issues was generated via a combination of topics defined in surveys on parent-child sexuality communication, issues raised in previous interviews and my own ideas about themes which may or may not be important to young people and parents, which were informed by my experience of facilitating sex education classes with young people in schools.

Rather than putting participants 'on the spot' by asking about each topic one-by-one, I tried to minimise potential discomfort by handing them the set of cards to manage how they wished. The only guidance I offered was to ask them to say if they had ever communicated with their family members about any of these topics, to say something about what they communicated about and how they felt about it. Several young people asked for clarification of the meaning of a few cards (e.g. 'desire', 'self-esteem' and 'contraception'), suggesting that the vocabulary I used may not have been age-appropriate.

Participants managed the task in a range of ways. Some participants silently flicked through the cards sorting them into piles or spreading them out into groups of self-devised categories (usually topics that they had and had not discussed), and then proceeded to either explain these categories without prompting, or I asked them how they had decided what to put where. In some cases I asked about specific cards, but I also tried to remain sensitive to non-verbal manifestations of embarrassment or discomfort (e.g. blushing, lack of eye contact), and did not pursue these enquiries where participants seemed uncomfortable. Other participants responded to each card as they flicked through, sometimes stating just 'yes' or 'no' to indicate whether they had discussed each topic, at other times offering more detailed description of particular conversations, or reflections on the difficulties of dialogue, as this extract from one mother's interview illustrates:

*Mother:* [picks up 'what it's like to really fancy someone' card]  
*Probably not, maybe I covered it a wee bit, like they'll ask me about how I met [current partner] or how I met [ex-husband] and I will say, like I will talk about what it was like, but again I can probably be much more factual rather than talk about the emotional kind of side of it.*

*RL: Do you find that easier, the sort of facts?*

*Mother: I s'pose it's just where I'm at, I s'pose if I felt like we were madly in love then I would be able to talk from that place but at the moment I just, it's quite hard to think about that kind of thing.*

In addition to generating rationalisations of (non)-communication, the cards also stimulated accounts of varying levels of comfort communicating with different family members. For example, parents sometimes commented that they had discussed a topic with one child but not another, while young people often differentiated between either their parents and friends, or their mother and father, in terms of what they would discuss with each, for example:

*Boy: [flicks through cards and stops at 'people who are gay or lesbian'] I wouldn't talk to my Dad about that, I've talked to my Mum about that once, people that I knew at school and just sort of like spoke to them.*

*RL: Was it ok talking to your Mum?*

*Boy: Aye, I was like fine cos I'm like comfortable wi' her [laughs]*

*RL: But you wouldn't want to talk to your Dad? =*

*Boy: = No, cos Dad would probably get the wrong idea, if someone started talking to Dad about all these things about homosexuality he'd pick up the wrong idea about it.*

As with many topic-card initiated accounts, this extract continued into a longer recollection of the particular conversation the boy had with his mother about people he knew who had recently 'come out' at school. Thus, the cards often generated accounts of communication which were rooted in specific examples. Descriptions of specific incidents also included accounts of implicit communication, for example:

*Mother: [picking up 'condoms' card] Yeah she'll know what they are, when we went to see [name of rock band] they was all blowing them up and floating about on our heads so I know she seen them.*

This interview aid had several advantages. Firstly, this was an opportunity to gather some data regarding parents' and young people's perceptions about the frequency, initiation, content and quality of communication. As this idea evolved from my experience in earlier interviews, it was only used from the tenth family onwards and, even then, I decided not to use the cards in some interviews where participants raised

many of these topics themselves. In this sense I prioritised a contextual decision within each interview over achieving a comparable dataset. The cards were never intended to be a systematic method of data collection, but rather simply as a tool to enable particular issues to be raised in a potentially more comfortable way and also to provide a crude indication of the areas of convergence or divergence of perspectives within families. This information is presented in Appendix 7.

Secondly, the cards encouraged reflection on a broad range of issues, including those which seemed to be rarely discussed within families. Where participants said they had *not* talked about a topic with their relative/s, their rationalisations for this were as illuminating as their accounts of communication. For example, one of the topic cards was 'masturbation', which initiated a few parental accounts of the perceived boundaries of appropriate communication which would probably not have occurred otherwise (see 7.3.3). Furthermore, the cards enabled participants to discuss topics they may have felt unable to raise. For example, very few young people raised the issue of condoms themselves, but its inclusion in the topic list meant some pointed to it and described their communication, without having to say the word aloud.

There were also some significant limitations to this method. As I determined the list of topics used as prompts, these did not reflect *participants'* constructions of sex and sexuality. However, participants were asked to indicate the most important issues for parents and children to communicate about together *before* the cards were used, and so I got some sense of their own understandings of sex and sexuality first. Using the cards also had the danger of reducing the notion of sexual communication to discrete episodes of learning, rather than reflecting the very messy, gradual process it appears to be. A further disadvantage of using the topic cards was the danger of making parents or young people feel they were inadequate communicators if they had not discussed many of the topics (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1998). Finally, in practical terms, as the interviews were conducted in a range of rooms around people's homes, there was not always a table nearby to lean on, and so cards were sorted on sofas, beds, the floor and balanced on participants' laps. With twenty-one cards in total, this meant they sometimes seemed a little unwieldy. On balance, however, the

exercise stimulated many accounts of specific incidents and conversations, and also enabled discussion about topics participants may have found difficult to raise themselves.

It is likely that some participants were reluctant to report communication in the interview if this meant they would be asked to talk further about it. For example, one mother gave a lengthy account of a recent discussion with her son about pornography, yet he did not mention this conversation at all. In part, this may have been because it would require implicit acknowledgement of his sexual arousal. Other parents also mentioned incidents which their children did not discuss, and vice versa, suggesting that these silences were commonplace, and will have contributed to the divergence in representations of their communication within the interviews.

A further layer of complexity within participants' accounts was the ambiguity between the general and the personal. For example, when I asked parents if they had communicated with their children about various topics, such as contraception, a frequent response was to tell me their opinion on that topic, or what they thought parents and young people *should* say to each other about the matter. However, it was sometimes difficult to gain a sense from their accounts of the extent to which they had tried to convey their thoughts to their children. Similarly, young people more commonly talked about what they knew and thought about various topics, rather than describing communication they had with their parent/s on these matters. Indeed, many parents and young people seemed to struggle to qualitatively describe their sexual communication with each other, possibly indicating either a lack of acknowledged communication, or perhaps reflecting how it is experienced as a messy, gradual process, rather than a set of discrete topics and episodes.

This section has explored the methodological complexities of constructing data about sensitive communication using in-depth interviews. In the following section I discuss the analytical process, including the various choices I faced when interpreting and representing the accounts in this thesis.

### **3.4 Data management and analysis**

After leaving each household, I immediately downloaded the audio files to check the recordings and wrote fieldnotes about the interaction. Due to the limited budget, I transcribed all fifty-eight interviews myself. Although time-consuming, this enabled me to familiarise myself with the data and annotate the transcripts with my initial thoughts and reflections, which became an important early stage in the iterative process of analysis (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). All interviews were transcribed in full and verbatim, including indicating Scots dialect where used (see Glossary, pp ix). Laughter, whispered speech, tones of voice and significant pauses were also noted. Once transcribed, I listened to interviews a second time to check the transcripts for accuracy. During the early stages of data analysis, each transcript was read through several times, with further notes made in the margins as I began to develop a sense of emerging themes within the data. I often flicked between transcripts as ideas were sparked off and connections made between the interviews.

A computer-aided qualitative data analysis package, NVivo (version 6), was used to facilitate coding the transcripts, and I entered the themes which had emerged from these early readings into the computer. Guided by Bazeley and Richards (2000), I kept a daily journal of everything I did in NVivo, which was useful to refer back to, not least when writing this chapter! Lofland and Lofland (1995: 192) distinguish two stages of coding: initial and focused. In the initial stages, I created numerous codes as I marked anything of interest. Segments of text were often coded with multiple codes indicating different themes, and I quickly built up a large number of very specific codes which became confusing to move between. I then moved onto a more focused stage of coding where I examined the codes I had created. By this point, some which had seemed important in early interviews, no longer appeared so significant when considered across the whole sample, while others were merged together. Major themes which had much text assigned to them required more 'fine-grained analysis' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 191), and were divided into sub-categories. Throughout this process I used 'brainstorm' diagrams to help make

connections within the data, and wrote explanatory 'memos' about the themes in NVivo as my thoughts developed. In addition to thematic memos, I also wrote a memo for each family where I recorded any significant issues or thoughts about their communication, in addition to factual information, such as ages, parental occupations and other household members.

My research questions certainly informed the coding as I was particularly alert to accounts of parent-child relationships, the content and process of communication, and participants' descriptions and interpretations of the boundaries of communication. For example, I knew at the outset that parent-child relationships would be a broad theme, but participants' extensive talk about different aspects of these relationships meant I was able to refine this code further as concepts of closeness, conflict, change and continuity became evident. Furthermore, parent-child relationships were often discussed in the context of talk about other family relationships, such as siblings, couples (and ex-partners), grandparents and extended family, and so I subsumed the code on 'parent-child relationships' into a broader theme of 'family dynamics'.

However, while the research questions provided a starting point for coding, other themes emerged from the data as I moved back and forth between the transcripts. For example, talk about young people's physical development was common across the sample, and eventually became the basis of Chapter Six. As I had not originally intended this to be a focus of the project, it was not until I examined my initial codes that I realised how significant a theme this was. By grouping these initial codes together, I saw overlap between some, and also potentially new sub-themes, such as the management of physical development, which I then tested by returning to the transcripts.

Having coded the data, I used a 'code-and-retrieve' approach (Buston, 1997), to generate reports of the themes, which themselves became the focus of further analysis. In producing these coding reports, I sometimes used the generation and gender attributes to generate separate lists of what young people and parents, or

mothers and fathers, for example, had said. I used a combination of deductive and inductive analysis (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003b). The more deductive analysis involved comparing responses to some of the questions I asked everyone, such as patterns of closeness within families, in addition to thematic analysis of issues which I was already sensitised to through my review of the existing literature. The more inductive analysis involved searching for recurring themes, meanings and concepts both within and across the accounts. Interviews were continuously read with not only themes, but also different levels of comparison in mind: as individuals; as family 'clusters' and also by gender and generational standpoints.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 67-8) discuss the challenges of moving between themes and the original data, noting, "keeping both parts and whole in mind is not easy". Indeed, I struggled with the concept of breaking the transcripts down into codes and then combining these into themes, as I felt this inevitably meant the complexity of families' everyday lives was lost. Therefore, I often referred back to transcripts to maintain a sense of the context within which the data were constructed. Furthermore, throughout the analysis, I continued to read whole transcripts to keep myself immersed in the original data (Bazeley and Richards, 2000).

To avoid 'anecdotalism' (Silverman, 2005), I was careful to comprehensively assess the whole dataset, looking for evidence of deviant cases which challenged my interpretations, rather than just searching for data which supported them. I selected illustrative quotations, making sure to clearly state those that reflected typical, majority views and highlighting those that were minority perspectives. On many occasions, I have presented more than one extract, either to reflect contrasting views across the sample, or to indicate a particularly commonly expressed viewpoint.

### 3.4.1 Twisting the analytic kaleidoscope: interpreting and representing multiple perspectives

The biggest challenge I experienced when interpreting and representing the accounts was contending with numerous potential levels of analysis. In their illuminating discussion of analytic approaches to the accounts of multiple family members, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003a: 19) argued that various analytic choices yield different forms of knowledge; indeed, “each twisting of the analytic kaleidoscope brings different issues into focus”. I initially felt overwhelmed by the multiple possibilities for interpreting the accounts: should I take individuals or family groups as the unit of analysis? Was I looking for similarities and differences within or between families? Should I focus in more detail on a selection of families, or concentrate on patterns across the sample? Would focus on structural positions of gender and generation run the risk of asserting a ‘fixed’ identity on these groups? Certainly, I spent much time considering how to make sense of the diverse perspectives constructed in the interviews.

I began from an understanding that there are multiple, and potentially divergent, realities within family relationships and experiences of communication (Larson and Richards, 1994). The study was designed to enable family members’ perspectives to be considered alongside each other, and I initially focused analysis on how far family members constructed similar or divergent realities, expressed in similar or different themes, concepts and language forms (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003a). I was mindful of Warin et al.’s (2007) reflection that apparent convergence between accounts does not necessarily suggest a ‘family reality’. By examining their accounts side-by-side, I gained a sense of the complexity of each family’s codes of interactions, but I became wary of using these to create aggregated ‘family accounts’, which might have enabled comparison *between* families, but were at risk of indicating a coherent overall story of each family’s communication. At one stage, I considered focusing analysis on a few families, which would enable more intensive examination of their relationships and interactions with each other, and greater consideration of their own personal biographies. However, after much deliberation, I

decided not to prioritise in-depth case studies of particular families in the thesis. In part, this was due to my previously-discussed concerns about the preservation of anonymity (3.2.5). However, I also struggled with tensions between providing detailed cases of specific families and presenting a range of data which might lack the richness of context it would have had in a family case study yet better reflected patterns across the sample.

Having initially focused analysis on parent-child interactions within each family, I later compared generational standpoints across the sample as a whole. A further level of analysis sought to acknowledge that individuals' accounts were clearly structured by gender. Despite interviewing families from across the social spectrum, social class did not emerge as an important differentiator of participants' accounts. That is not to say it is not relevant here, but that it was not present in discourse. As such, social class did not emerge as a focus of the thesis, although I have highlighted the few points where class differences were more marked.

Writing about individuals' accounts of parent-child communication involves a complex series of reconstructions between the researcher, the participant and the reader (McCormack, 2004). Knowledge constructed through this process is recognised as "being situated, transient, partial and provisional; characterised by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings" (ibid: 220). Although I was committed to prioritising participants' own understandings and meanings, this thesis is ultimately *my* story, constructed from the vantage point of my 'birds' eye view' across the accounts (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003a; Warin et al., 2007). Through the analytic process, I have learnt a fundamental lesson about the huge amount of data generated through qualitative interviews. At times, I have found it challenging to work with such a large dataset, and have had to choose which themes to focus on in more detail, which only summarily and which have been left out completely. In representing the data, I was mindful of the scope offered within a doctoral thesis to present a less 'tidy' narrative than that which might be suitable for other audiences, such as policy documents. Therefore, rather than presenting an overall story, this

thesis attempts to convey the complexity and messiness of families' everyday lives, relationships and communication.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described the 'natural history' (Silverman, 2005) of the research. I have offered some reflections on the processes of data collection and analysis, particularly focusing on the process of gathering and interpreting accounts from multiple members of the same families. I have also reflected on how I have shaped the construction and interpretation of the research. I will now go on to discuss the findings from the study.

## **4 YOUNG PEOPLE, 'GROWING UP' AND SEXUAL LEARNING**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter contextualises parent-child communication about sex and sexuality within the broader dimension of the transition from childhood to teenage years. In Chapter Two I discussed the emergence of the category of 'youth' over the twentieth century, as the transition from childhood to adulthood became less well-defined and more individualised. I wanted to explore the transition from childhood to teenage years within my sample, to understand what parents and young people felt about this stage of life and the significance it held for them with regard to their sexual communication. Much of the data presented in this chapter was stimulated by my questions about 'growing up' (see Appendices 5 and 6 for the interview guides), although these themes were also raised by participants themselves. The first two sections of this chapter outline parents' and young people's constructions of early teenage years and their understandings of 'growing up'. Participants' perceptions of changes between the experience of being young today and in parents' generations are then discussed, and the implications these may have for intergenerational communication are explored. The chapter concludes by considering parents' reflections on their own sexual learning, and how their parents' approaches are implicated in their own parenting practices.

### **4.2 Parents' images of 'teenagers'**

In Chapter Five, I examine participants' reflections on the changing dynamics of their parent-child relationships in more depth. This section explores constructions of 'teenagers' within parents' accounts, as these were often invoked in their talk about communicating with their children. Shona Young was one of a small minority of parents who said teenagers got a 'bad press', commenting: '*I think on the whole they get a bad deal in terms of everything in the world.*' However, although a third of

parents spontaneously remarked how nice their children's teenage friends were, parents very rarely talked positively about teenagers *in general*. Indeed, dominant constructions of teenagers in parents' accounts – uncommunicative, moody and sullen – were narrowly framed and almost entirely negative.

Almost all participants of both generations seemed to sway towards behavioural understandings of 'teenagers', rather than an age-based definition (i.e. 13-19). Indeed, young people who were under thirteen identified themselves, and were sometimes described by their parents as 'teenagers', such as Rosie (13), whose mother, Elspeth Crozier, said: '*I've thought of her as being a teenager for quite a long time really, since she was eleven she's been showing distinct teenager signs*'. Similarly, eleven-year-old Ricky's mother, Tracey Gibson, described her son:

*Tracey: He's not a child anymore – he has still got these childish aspects where he's goin' out to play an' all that, but he's getting a bit more responsible and he's startin' to go onto the teenage side, which is good, and I think we've actually passed, where normal kids go into bad teenage years, I think he's already done that which I'm quite glad of.*

As Tracey illustrates, nearly all parents seemed to believe it was normal for young people to behave 'like a teenager' as they grow up. Indeed, as reported elsewhere (Brannen et al., 1994: 41), an expressed sense of inevitability surrounded common understandings of the teenage years, with many parents anxiously noting they were anticipating the onset of challenging behaviour at some point in the future, if not imminently:

*Murray: The kind of traditional teenage rebellious thing or whatever happens to kids' hormones [...] y'know, it will come, teenagers will do all they kind of things and rebel and all that stuff, so I'm, I'm kind of expecting it.*

*Caroline: You just want to keep in touch with them, and what they're thinking, what they're feeling and I s'pose that's gonna change and y'know you want those communication channels to keep open and you feel that through the teenage years that's not gonna be the case and he'll be lying in his bed till twelve o'clock and moping about.*

As reflected in Caroline's quote above, many parents seemed to feel teenagers were uncommunicative. Indeed, in addition to anticipating future problems, a large minority of parents reported current difficulties talking with their teenage children, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Richard: Well at the moment it's kind of a bit more difficult cos Vicky's been a bit less communicative and a bit more like a teenager I s'pose.*

*Paul: The stage he's at now it's difficult to get a long serious conversation [...] Tom can't think more than five days ahead, he's a teenage boy, all hormones and guitar...*

As seen in these extracts, parents seemed to feel teenage behaviour was a temporary stage which young people would eventually move beyond. Further to parents' constructions of teenagers as inattentive and unable to concentrate, there was a sense that teenagers were 'moody' and unreasonable. In many families, these relatively fixed images of teenagers appeared to be mobilised in parent-child interactions, such as young people being told to 'stop acting like a teenager', and parents conveying these constructions to their children in talk about growing up. For example, Ronnie Bell recalled a conversation with his son, Evan (13) where he told him:

*Ronnie: You're gonna have a whole range of different feelings and moods when you're an adolescent and sometimes it's gonna be bloody hell for Mum and I to deal with you, because we won't get any reasoning from you whatsoever.*

A large minority of parents seemed to have relatively rigid ideas about teenagers' emotional development. For example, Brenda Innes remarked that teenagers did not have the capacity for empathy:

*Brenda: Well they sort of become less aware of things, it's not a self-centred thing, they've done all that research about their brains, they show teenagers pictures of people happy and sad and they can't bloody tell the difference, their brains aren't wired up right yet...<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> These negative constructions of teenagers are further perpetuated by media reports of psychological studies which filter into popular consciousness due to headlines such as, 'Teenage brain lacks

Although he appeared to recognise teenagers could experience intense emotion, one father, Paul Wicker, also seemed to suggest that love was the preserve of adults, and that teens may be ill-equipped to deal with strong feelings:

*Paul: I s'pose from an adults' point of view it's like, well you're fifteen, you can't be falling in love [...] it may not in many cases be quite as permanent or as long-lasting as the emotions you feel when you're older, but it's just as bloody intense, and perhaps they're less able to deal wi' it...*

While a majority of parents grounded their negativity about teenagers within talk about their own children, many seemed keen to absolve them from responsibility for their 'teenage behaviour', by drawing on biological discourses, such as Brenda's description of teenagers' undeveloped brains above. In particular, hormones seemed to be understood as an accepted and acceptable cause of behaviour which parents found challenging. Interestingly, although about a third of young people talked about feeling emotional or 'moody' within the context of teenage life, only one boy actually mentioned hormones himself when recounting a conversation with his mother about puberty. Why then, were hormones so prevalent in parents' accounts of teenagers when they were absent from those of young people themselves? As indicated previously, one of the main ways in which parents talked about hormones was their perceived role in changing children's behaviour:

*Christine: He's nearly fourteen so he's just a teenager and he's very hormonal and so I just give him his space [...] I notice now he's getting more aggressive like with his answers and just his actions and things so that's just his hormones I think, but I still see there's this little softie there inside him, I still see traits of my little boy...*

In this extract, Christine suggested Ben's (13) aggressive 'teenage' behaviour was caused by his hormones, although she seemed keen to note this was not the 'real'

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empathy' (2006) (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14738243>) and 'Teen brain: it's all about me' (2006) (<http://www.webmd.com/content/article/127/116598.htm>)

Ben, her 'little boy'. Like other parents, Christine stressed continuities in her son's personality. By differentiating Ben's behaviour from his 'self', Christine appeared to prioritise Ben's mind, locating the essence of him there, rather than in his body. Other parents commonly alluded to this Cartesian separation of mind (rational) and body (irrational) to explain and excuse behaviour they reported finding difficult; for example, Dawn Hall said of her son, Robbie (13): *'I'd say since he's started high school it's been a bit o' a struggle cos he has changed, obviously his hormones'*. Indeed, parents appeared to consider hormones as the trigger for teenage behaviour to such an extent that ideas about what it meant to be teenaged seemed to be conflated with notions of being 'hormonal' within many parents' accounts. Nevertheless, although most parents appeared to blame teenage behaviour on hormones, a minority suggested other explanations. For example, Jeremy Eliot reflected on the possible causation of his daughter, Lucia's (13), recent 'bad' behaviour, noting that while it may be *'a natural reaction'* (i.e. hormonal), it could also potentially be due to social pressures to behave in particular ways:

*Jeremy: The last year or so she's become, and I'm sure it is, y'know, hormonal, it's a bit of a teenage attitude she suddenly picked up when she became a teenager, and I've often wondered about that actually, whether that is a natural reaction or whether it's a way she thinks she ought to act because she's a teenager and with peer pressure to behave like that the way she sees other people behaving.*

While a majority of parents referred to hormones as stimulating 'stroppy' or 'moody' behaviour, a further minority talked about a sense of uncontrollable sexuality. These parents also invoked dualist ideas that hormones might make children 'lose their minds' and act on sexual urges. Parental constructions of hormonal teenagers as sexually uncontrollable appeared to be strongly gendered; while a small minority of mothers said they worried their sons' hormones may make them sexually predatory, more commonly, fathers expressed concern their daughters' hormones would make them over-emotional, unable to control their bodies, and thus vulnerable to male sexual advances, as reflected in the following quotes:

*Mike: If it's a daughter you worry about her being sexually too advanced for her years and getting led astray [...] I just would like it to happen at a very steady, controlled pace, y'know, and I think with her it probably will, but once her hormones start raging around who knows?*

*Don: I do trust my daughter, but I know from the experience of my sisters that children thirteen, fourteen, whatever, because they're growing up, they're so vulnerable, they're vulnerable to a smooth talker [...] [if] she's feeling particularly unhappy at the time, or maybe just she's having her hormones racing everywhere, and along comes Mr Guy on the White Horse, y'know? Sir Galahad.*

As illustrated by these extracts, hormones were frequently described as 'racing' or 'raging' around teenagers' bodies. This common language appeared to evoke hormones as both aggressive and dominant over other – more rational – faculties, and thus was complicit in constructing images of teenagers' behaviour and sexuality as unruly. Furthermore, hormones were often described as 'kicking in', indicating a sudden or unexpected impact on teenagers, rather than a gradual change. For example, despite describing a currently close relationship with her daughter, one mother remarked:

*Diane: I shouldn't get complacent about that because that could all change, the minute her hormones really kick in she might decide, 'I'm not talking to that old cow anymore, y'know I'm telling her nothing.*

The idea that their children could potentially be transformed overnight seemed to be the cause of widespread anxiety for parents and hormones tended to be regarded as one trigger for this metamorphosis.

In contrast to their largely negative constructions of teenagers, parents talked more positively about the process of growing up. Although not mentioned at all by young people, the concept of boundaries was relatively common in parents' talk about parenting their growing-up children. About a third of parents, mostly mothers, discussed the importance of 'setting firm boundaries', although there was also talk about the teenage years as a time where young people 'tested the boundaries'. Indeed, many parents, particularly mothers, talked about growing up as a dynamic

process, noting that their child appeared to shift between 'childishness' and maturity. These parents seemed to hold competing images of their child in their head, as reflected in the following extracts from two mothers' interviews:

*Shona: I still think she's very young, even although she's nearly fifteen, in some of her conversations you think 'oh she's quite mature', but I still think she's actually quite childish.*

*Kim: I see him as a real boy-man, y'know [laughs] sort of half-breed, so the soft porn that I found, y'know there it is in his room beside the teddy-bears kind of thing, and I think in terms of both what he is and what he needs he's both a boy and a man, he will sometimes display incredible maturity and insight, y'know he'll remember his keys, keep his phone going, he'll do all those sort of fairly responsible things [...] and then sometimes he'll really show himself up as a child, or that bit will come to the fore.*

This section has examined parents' constructions of teenagers, and the implications of these images for their perceptions of communication with their teenage children. But what did young people have to say about the experience of growing up? The following section now turns to young people's talk about their early teenage years.

#### **4.3 What does 'growing-up' mean?**

When asked how they perceived themselves, almost all young people, including those under thirteen, identified themselves as 'teenagers', and to a lesser extent 'young people', with only two girls (both 13) calling themselves children, and none saying they were adults. Young people often defined teenagers in terms of either no longer being children, or not yet adults (and sometimes both), as reflected in the following quotations:

*Ben (13): I'd say [I'm] a teenager cos I'm smart enough to realise not to do stupid things like a child but I'm still not up there enough to be classified as an adult cos I still do some silly things.*

*RL: Right, like what sorts of things?*

*Ben: Just like um not being mature enough, just mucking about with my mates and stuff in a way that adults wouldn't, yeah.*

*Georgie (12): I would say I'm a young person.*

*RL: And what does that mean?*

*Georgie: A young adult, not a child but sort of a teenager, yeah.*

*RL: And is being a teenager different to being a child, or is it much the same?*

*Georgie: Get more responsibility, you have to be more mature, sensible.*

Unlike parents, young people rarely talked about teenagers in negative terms, although they did express awareness of negative discourses, with most stressing themes of increasing independence, maturity and responsibility in relation to teenage life.

Evidence from the accounts suggests a variety of different meanings associated with the term 'growing up'. A major understanding of 'growing up' referred to young people's physical development, or puberty, which will be explored further in Chapter Six. While 'growing up' was generally characterised as a process of much change, understandings of this process itself were also dynamic and apparently evolved over time. For example, Angus Scott (11) explained how his understanding of 'growing-up' had changed as he grew older, moving from a definition solely based on height, to incorporate other aspects of development: *'it [growing up] used to mean getting taller when I was younger, that was the only thing it meant, but now it means a whole load of different things'*. Young people's nuanced understandings of the multiple meanings of 'growing up' are reflected in this extract from Rosie Chapman's (13) interview:

*Rosie: It [growing up] means like growing through puberty to me, and like developing but also it means like doing more adult things, like maybe going out with a boy or kissing a boy or going out with your friends on the weekend like without your parents or having a job and you feel more independent, like since I've started high school I've become way more independent...*

As reflected in this extract, the transition from primary to secondary school was described as a significant event across the accounts, with both generations appearing to conceive it as an important milestone in the move from childhood to teenage

years. Although I asked about school within the context of talk about friends and formal sex education, the significance of the primary-secondary transition spontaneously emerged from participants' own talk about 'growing up'. Indeed, young people, as well as parents, often contextualised accounts of their development within a comparison of their time at primary school with that at high school.

A major theme across the accounts of 'growing up' was the concept of 'normality'. Indeed, both parents and young people commonly talked about young people's behaviour and their physical, emotional and sexual development in terms of what was considered 'normal'. These normative assumptions were often framed within the concept of 'naturalness', such as Julia Robson's reflection on her privacy as a teenager: *'I was a lot more secretive then about what I was doing, which is probably natural'*. In stating this was 'probably natural', Julia appeared to imply this was a regular part of teenage development which most young people experience. While young people regularly talked about the importance of privacy in relation to their communication with their parents, they did not talk about becoming *more* private as they grew older. The following sections examine some of the common understandings of growing up in young people's accounts.

#### **4.3.1 Growing up is ... being more independent**

For many young people, an important aspect of growing up appeared to be an increasing sense of independence, and acknowledgement of this by parents. For example, Sarah Kerr's friend, Laura (13), noted: *'you get to do more, you get to go more places'*, while Harriet Pieterse (14) said *'you get more in charge when you're older'*. Young people described a range of activities that they could engage in now they were older, including baby-sitting, being alone at home without an adult, travelling on the bus alone, staying overnight at friends' houses and watching films rated '15'. Growing up appeared to be both acknowledged and brought about through this independence; for example being given a key to the house in recognition of growing up, but it is also *constitutive* of growing up itself. Many young people

also talked eagerly about the age-restricted activities that they could not (legally) participate in at the moment, but which they were looking forward to doing when they were older, particularly driving, drinking alcohol, going to nightclubs and watching films classified '18' in the cinema.

Many young people said their increasing independence was one of the most positive aspects of growing up. Increased independence was mostly described in terms of ongoing negotiation between parents and children, although one girl, Natasha Maxwell (14), who seemed to feel especially restricted by her age, talked about independence within an age-based legal discourse:

*Natasha: When you're with your family it's like you're stuck in a hole that you cannae get out of cos it's like they're the ones that watch you and tell you what to do and that but when you turn sixteen you can like dae what you want.*

#### **4.3.2 Growing up is ... becoming more mature**

One of the main discourses of 'growing up' was the concept of maturity, which was mentioned by over half the participants from both generations. For many young people, 'maturity' appeared to be strongly related to behaviour, as Angus (11) explained when he described differences in children's and teenagers' behaviour:

*Angus: It [growing up] means kind of maturing in another way, erm, you behave kind of more adult when you're kind of growing up I s'pose.*

*RL: And what does that mean? What is behaving adult?*

*Angus: Erm, like well there's kind of behaving teenager which is kind of slouching like that and I don't know, not being young, not running around and screaming.*

In this extract, Angus strongly evoked a contrast between the embodiment of childhood and teenage years, with the former described as less regulated than the apparently affected 'slouching' of the latter. Indeed, self-control appeared to be an important component of maturity, as Adam Turnbull (14) noted: *'When you get more sort of mature [...] you don't tend to get hyper very easily, or you don't, you*

*can sort of keep your composure a lot better*'. However, while the development of self-control appeared to be an important aspect of growing up, young people across the sample also talked about how their behaviour differed across contexts. Boys in particular talked positively about becoming less compliant with teachers and regulations in school, as Robbie Hall (14) explained:

*Robbie: I know like this sounds a bit daft but I've come to think it now I was a bit like of a geek in primary, like I never ever got in trouble like at all, I just done everything I was told and I was a bit chatty but that was it, now I think I'm a lot like, I've changed a lot.*

Indeed, it could be inferred from boys' accounts that they experienced competing constraints on their behaviour; while parents and teachers expected them to be 'well-behaved', they described 'laddish' interactions and 'mucking about' with other boys. Although tensions over young masculinities and schooling emerged spontaneously as a strong theme in boys' and their parents' accounts of their lives, limited space means this can not be more fully explored in this thesis (see Frosh et al., 2001).

For a minority of young people, maturity appeared to be related to thinking about the future, such as Daniel Quinn (15), who said that growing up meant:

*...kind of getting a grip of what you're gonna do when you're older [...] when you're a kid you don't really think about that but when you become a teenager you realise that you need to work on stuff for later..*

A few young people talked specifically about focussing on their school-work, as Beth Turnbull (12) explained:

*RL: So if I say 'growing up', what does that mean to you?*  
*Beth: Mmm, just like getting more mature and getting different, y'know like second year [inaudible], like at primary you can maybe like muck about a bit like in your classes and that but now you need to get kind of serious cos you get exams and all that so you need to work hard.*

Maturity was commonly invoked in young people's responses to my question about how they saw themselves in relation to their peers. Boys often said they found other

boys more immature than themselves, although this may have been tied up with how they presented themselves to me, a young woman. Most girls said they felt at the same stage as their female friends, although they also often asserted that girls were generally more mature than boys. A minority of those young people who reported feeling more mature than their friends appeared to rationalise this by experiences such as parental alcoholism, the death of a close family member or parental divorce/separation, as Hannah Wicker (15) explained:

*Hannah: I think I'm more mature than a lot of other teenagers, especially some teenagers haven't been through this thing [parental divorce] and can't talk to parents and stuff.*

Thus experiencing and surviving family change appeared to be one way through which these young people accounted for 'growing up'.

#### **4.3.3 Growing up is ... having less fun?**

While most aspects of growing-up appeared to be viewed positively, young people also talked about developing inhibitions and an increasing sense of being restricted by social and behavioural norms as they grew older. For example, Laura reflected on the differences between herself and her younger sister:

*Laura (13): My wee sister's not bothered about doin' things in front of people, like we were walking along the road the other day and she just started singing and dancin' in the middle of the road and we were just like, 'oh I wish I was younger and I could do things like that and not be bothered about doing silly things', yeah but now it's all about what people think of you and their impression of you and stuff.*

*Harvey (11): I'm excited I'm going to be growing up but I'm scared that I might not do things right or might do the right things at the wrong time or the wrong things at the right time.*

A sense of increasing responsibilities and reduced opportunities for fun was echoed in approximately half the young people's talk about growing-up, as these extracts illustrate:

*Tom (13): You're more mature and you don't have as much fun when you're older, it seems like cos you have to like get a job and stuff so it doesn't seem that fun, so you change a lot and you don't get as much fun.*

*Lorna (14): The thing is wi' you growing up you think you should do this, you should do that, you shouldn't do that, but when you were like ten years old you didn't have as many rules and regulations as you do now.*

In combination, the extracts in this section illustrate the complexity of feelings young people expressed about growing up. While a few seemed to feel entirely negative or entirely positive about getting older, the vast majority expressed a mixture of thoughts, anxieties and hopes related to growing up. 'Growing up' appeared to be understood by parents and young people as a complex interaction of physical and emotional development, passing key milestones, changing tastes and changing dynamics of relationships with parents and friends.

So far this chapter has explored participants' understandings of growing up in relation to the younger generation of the sample. The following sections now turn to parents' experiences of growing up, beginning with participants' reflections on the differences between contemporary teenage life and that of their parents' generation. Parents talked about their own teenage years in response to my questions, but also in spontaneous reflections throughout their interviews. For many parents, I got a sense that these reflections were significant for how they made sense of their own lives on a regular basis, although a few said they had been 'remembering' especially in preparation for the interview. In general, young people only tended to reflect on their parents' teenage years in response to my questions.

#### 4.4 Growing up now, growing up then

When asked to reflect on their own childhoods and teenage years, approximately half the parents described these times in largely negative terms, tending to attribute this to a variety of factors such as being bullied at school, poor relationships with their own parents, parental illness and death, domestic violence and sexual abuse. While most of these parents appeared to downplay their negative experiences to their children, a few young people expressed awareness of their parents' unhappy childhoods, such as Evan Bell (13), who said, '*sounds like my Mum had a bad relationship with her Dad and that*', and Lucia Elliot (13), who stated, '*my mum usually didn't tell her mum about stuff because she was sort of scared of her parents and they weren't very supportive*'. Despite their personal experiences, however, most parents appeared to agree that being a young person today was harder than in the previous generation, a finding which echoes other research (Brannen et al., 1994). Rationalisations offered by parents included a perception of increased educational pressures, the intensification of bullying and 'gang cultures', and a general sense that contemporary life was riskier than before. Although many parents commented on the relative increase in material wealth of their current families, compared to their families of origin, there seemed to be a general consensus that, even though they had fewer possessions when they were younger, they also had more freedom than their own children. Vicky's (14) mother, Brenda Innes, clearly articulated this when she commented:

*Brenda: I think she definitely gets a bit more money spent on her than I ever did but I don't think she's getting the same freedom. I remember being out, y'know in the summer holidays, out from the morning, maybe not even coming home for my lunch, back for my tea, whereas I think if she was going out like that I would just be like, 'where the hell is she?'*

*RL: Why do you think there's a change?*

*Brenda: I don't know, I think it's just because we've all become scared to let our kids go anywhere.*

When asked to reflect on their parents' teenage years, however, many young people said it was better to be a teenager now. Seemingly contradictorily, this was also often framed in terms of increased freedom, as illustrated by the following quotations from young people's interviews:

*Gemma (15): I think it's more easier to be a teenager nowadays, you've got more money, more freedom, more things to do nowadays than they probably had, my grandparents were very strict and my Mum and Dad never really got to do anything compared to me.*

*Rosie (13): I think I'm much freer than they were, like I have much more freedom to do what I want and go out at nights and just during the day and where I go and what I wear, like how I dress and how I wear my hair, and how, just how society sees you.*

As young people's knowledge of these perceived changes appeared to be acquired through talk with their parents about their teenage experiences, it is interesting that both generations seemed to feel their own youths were the most free. However, closer analysis of participants' talk about freedom indicates differing understandings of the term. Indeed, young people appeared to locate their understandings of increased freedom since their parents' generation in terms of more activities targeted for young people (such as under-eighteen night-clubs), greater tolerance of teenage relationships, different dynamics of parent-child relationships and more opportunities for freedom of expression. Parents, on the other hand, located their perceptions of teenagers' reduced freedom within a discourse of increased risk, noting that they had more knowledge of their children's lives than their own parents had of theirs.

Indeed, most parents seemed to feel their own childhoods were 'simpler times', although we must be alerted to romanticisation of the past (Coontz, 1992). Certainly, the experiences of the three mothers who disclosed childhood sexual abuse would challenge notions of the past as a time of safety and innocence. Nevertheless, the perception of increased risk was a narrative threaded through most parents' accounts in this study, echoing other research (Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004; Scott et al., 1998; Valentine and Holloway, 2001). Tied up with the notion of reduced freedom and perceptions of increased risk, several parents said they played a greater role in transporting their children between social events than had happened in their own lives. Many parents also talked about the dangers of children being in public space, with most appearing to allude to the perceived threat of paedophiles and external sexualised risk, although only a small number of parents explicitly stated this. While parents living in more affluent circumstances seemed to worry about their children

being outside the house in *general* terms, parents living in more disadvantaged areas tended to locate their concerns within their *local* neighbourhoods, such as this mother:

*Joan: I'm not really keen on them going out too late at night cos there's been a lot of problems in Oakhill [...] there's been shooting and everything and I don't want them wandering about.*

Statements about the 'riskiness' of today's society were often made within the context of news stories concerning child abductions, violent sexual attacks and increasing rates of teenage pregnancy and STIs, which appeared to exacerbate parents' anxieties for their children's safety (see also Stace and Roker, 2005). For example, Judith Elliot commented: '*sex is so different from when I was seventeen, I think so many things have changed because you have to be so aware of the consequences of having sex*'. Parents commonly talked about the increasing sexualisation of contemporary society, both in terms of more explicit representations of sex within the media and also a general perception that teenagers were having sex at a younger age and with a greater number of partners:

*Sheila: Nowadays there's so many things that are explicit or whatever and I think they're gettin' it kinda in one sense chucked at them so it's nae wonder so many people are sexually active and things at a younger age when they're gettin' all this.*

A minority of parents appeared to challenge this predominant narrative, however, by providing alternative accounts of sexual behaviour in their generation's youth. For example, one father emphasised *continuities* across the generations, rather than differences, when he talked about his own teenage years living in a relatively poor area of the city:

*It was the 80s, people were pretty promiscuous, y'know people experiment at that age and I'm no' under any illusion it's changed now, it's not!*

Furthermore, Shona Young seemed to feel the increasing visibility of teenage pregnancy was more significant than changes in young people's sexual behaviour:

*'teenage pregnancy, I mean it's been around since day dot but it's just not been in your face'*. For the most part, however, parents emphasised difference between the experiences of contemporary youth and their own teenage years. The following section explores the implications of this widely perceived difference between the generations for parents' and young people's communication with each other about sex and sexuality.

#### **4.4.1 'They wouldn't understand': Perceptions of generational differences**

Approximately half the parents and young people explicitly talked about the dynamics of intergenerational communication, which many seemed to feel impacted on what they talked to each other about concerning sex and sexuality and how they talked about it. As will be discussed further in Chapter Seven, young people commonly said they would not want to talk to their parents about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, often citing a perception that parents were unable to understand or empathise due to their generation. For example, when asked to reflect on the best part of his communication with his parents, Tom Wicker (13) commented:

*Tom: They know, they've been through it, some of the things they've been through so you've got good advice sometimes, other times you've got really bad advice.*

*RL: What do they give you bad advice about?*

*Tom: Like relationships and stuff like that.*

*RL: Why's it bad?*

*Tom: It's just totally the exact opposite, it's like what they'd do back then and that's the exact opposite of what you'd do nowadays.*

*RL: So it feels a bit out-of-date?*

*Tom: Aye.*

On the one hand, Tom appeared to value his parents' experience, noting that this could form the basis of 'good advice' regarding certain (undefined) topics. However, Tom also seemed to assess the quality of their advice as variable, suggesting that they did not understand the dynamics of contemporary teenage relationships, which he, and many other young people, seemed to believe had changed from their parents'

youth. A minority of parents themselves seemed to agree with this, such as Sarah's (13) mother, Sandra Kerr, who described feeling unable to 'sit down and talk about sex' with her daughter because, 'I don't know the full extent of the ins and outs of it all, I'm not up there, I'm not with it or whatever'. A few parents also commented on a perceived change in codes of sexual interaction and dating from their own youth, with Debbie Baxter expressing guilt that her advice to her son to ask out a girl he liked had backfired because, 'girls are so different these days'. However, while a minority of parents said interactions between young people had changed over generations, a further minority appeared to emphasise similarities:

*Janet: See the thing is, when they're that age, they dinnae think that we were that age once, they just dinnae think that anybody older could possibly understand and I think the hardest part o' that is gettin' them to realise that their parents are only people, I was the same age as her once, I was goin' through the same things as her but they seem to think that they're the first ones to go through it, y'know that nobody else can understand, nobody else has went through it – 'oh it was different then!' – it's no' different then, the time might've been a different date but the people and the story – they're still all the same, and if she were to realise that Mum's not just Mum, Mum was once a young girl, and I tried to explain that to her, that I was once a young lassie went through all these things then they might see you as a bit more human and might take advice a bit more like they would from friends.*

There was also a sense from the accounts that the boundaries of sexual acceptability were perceived to be generational, with parents described as more 'easily shocked' by explicit sexual content and imagery, particularly on the television, for example:

*Rosie (13): Sometimes it's almost like I'm the adult and she's the child because I'm kind of used to seeing that kind of stuff and talking about that kind of stuff, it's like normal nowadays, I mean not like really, really hardcore porn or anything but like stuff like that on the telly's kind of normal, whereas she finds that kind of stuff like really shocking.*

Rosie's comments reflect a general feeling amongst many young people who seemed to find it difficult to acknowledge their parents' sexuality. Interestingly, Rosie infantilizes her mother here, identifying her perceived shock as child-like. However,

when parents talked about the representation of sexual values on the television, (or indeed in other arenas), which made them feel uncomfortable, they prefaced their remarks with comments about feeling ‘old’, ‘middle-aged’, or in one father’s words sounding ‘like a sixty year-old’, when he was in his early forties. For example, Julia Robson remarked:

*Julia: It gets on my nerves y’know, that there’s so much sex and violence and all that, and I’m not a big prude or anything, although I think I am, I’m getting worse as I get older!*

Thus, in addition to many parents’ reflection on a historical trend towards greater sexual liberalisation over time, these parents described a biographical shift in their own responses to sexual content, implying that sexual conservatism comes with age.

This section has outlined participants’ reflections on the implications of differences between the generations for their communication. The following section now turns to parents’ reflections on their own experiences of being parented and learning about sex.

#### **4.4.2 Parents’ own experiences of being parented and learning about sex**

The majority of parents described their childhood relationships with their parents as more explicitly hierarchical and stricter than their perception of those with their own children. Although parents tended to rationalise this as ‘how things were then’, rather than being critical of their parents personally, most seemed to want to distance themselves from these approaches, placing emphasis on the more democratic relationships they were trying to achieve. However, while most appeared to claim change from their own parents’ approaches, a minority also acknowledged the transmission of parenting across generations, as these two mothers commented:

*Sheila: My Mum was always around when I was younger and I think the family values that you learn from your own parents obviously stick.*

*Shona: I would've said my mum was the best mum in the world [...] there's not a day goes by I don't think, oh what would my mum have said and what would she have done?*

One father, Richard Innes, expressed the complex legacy of his parents' behaviour on his own parenting practices:

*Richard: Well, there's a lot of ways you follow the same patterns, although there's a lot of other ways paradoxically you kind of try to do the opposite, things you feel you missed out on and stuff like that you make sure you try and put that in there, like the family I came from wasn't touchy-feely at all so I made sure Vicky got hugs when she was younger and stuff like that.*

All fathers specifically talked about the impact of their own fathers on their approach to parenting. Several alluded to a perceived change in meanings of fatherhood across the generations, such as Derrick Scott:

*Derrick: The kind of male role in those days was to provide the cash and sit about of an evening and not communicate very much, certainly working class families [...] I think my mother was the main parent in that respect.*

Over two thirds of the fathers described being raised in working-class families and some men appeared to blame long working hours for their poor relationships with their fathers. Thus, these fathers talked about the importance of spending time with their own children, and more than half reported efforts to enable this by modifying their working patterns. An expressed determination of many to approach fathering differently was illustrated by one father who remembered his own father working from dawn to nine o'clock at night:

*Father: Cos my dad was never around, I just decided that I always wanted to be around, particularly in the early years of my children's childhood y'know, I wanted to see them walk and make their first steps and first day at school, first tooth and all these kind o' things, I just felt that was really important, so first five years o' both their lives I stayed at home part-time and worked part-time.*

Others who had not grown up with their biological father reported feeling unclear about a father's role as a result, for example:

*Father: My father died when I was quite young so there's all sorts of elements of I don't know what being a father's all about.*

*Don: I do appreciate that not having a father has influenced my life, I developed a kinda toughness eh! [...] I've been influenced because I don't know how to be a guy parent, I never learned.*

Fewer doubts were expressed about motherhood, even among those mothers who said they did not have a positive mother figure when they were growing up. However, popular constructions of mothering as a 'natural instinct' may have precluded disclosure of anxieties about motherhood in the interviews.

Without exception, parents described their childhood experiences of learning about sex and sexuality as inadequate. As in the discussion groups (3.2.3), parents often used humour to recall their perceived teenage ignorance in relation to sex. Despite the twenty-five year age range of these parents, the British-born parents' stories of their formal school-based sex education were strikingly similar; most described a heavy focus on biological information, often explained in terms of animal, rather than human, reproduction. All evaluated their school-based sex education negatively. In terms of communication with their own parents, again parents universally described this negatively. A minority recalled a very basic level of information imparted in hushed tones and with much embarrassment and awkwardness on both parts. On the rare occasions where sexual topics were reportedly broached, participants, particularly men, referred to a clear gender segregation of parental communication with children about sexual matters, for example:

*Murray: I think probably the least source of information would have been my parents, y'know, I think again it's a kind of generational thing [...] it's like dad's kind of old West of Scotland male thing, y'know, that's women's things, guys don't talk about that kind of stuff, don't do feelings, y'know [laughs] this is Glasgow!*

This extract indicates the intersection of gender, generation and also the location of these norms culturally. Most parents, however, said sexuality was simply never discussed with their parents, as these two extracts illustrate:

*Terry: It [sex] wasnae spoken about wi' my mum and dad, it just wasnae [...] if I had an issue I'd go and see my brother rather than go and see my dad.*

*Dawn: As much as we were really really close, me and my Mum never ever spoke about sex and things.*

*RL: Why do you think that was?*

*Dawn: I think my Mum's very old-fashioned in that way, she was very sorta, her and me Dad were very private with things like that and we never really spoke about it.*

Again, parents were keen to distance themselves from their own parents' approaches towards communicating about sexual matters with their children:

*Paul: I don't remember ever having conversations about growing up or sex or girls with my parents [...] so probably my approach to bringing up Hannah and Tom has been, it can't not have been affected by how I was brought up cos I look back to see what I didn't get and make sure they do get it.*

*Shona: Cos my family was absolutely awful, even though my mother was very young and all that she never told us about anything, absolutely nothing, even if anything come on the TV my mother would switch it over, so I vowed that if I ever had children or whatever that they wouldn't be ignorant the way I was about things, and I think knowledge is power.*

Therefore, parents' own experiences of being parented and learning about sex appeared to be one aspect of how they accounted for their own parenting practices. Nevertheless, although parents seemed keen to claim change from their own parents' approaches, the significant tensions which young people and parents report in the following chapters indicate that parent-child communication about sex and sexuality persists to be a challenge for many families across generations.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored parents' and young people's views on teenage life, and the implications of this period of growing up for their communication about sex and sexuality. Parents' images of teenagers as uncommunicative, moody, emotionally unsophisticated and sexually uncontrollable, appeared to influence their anticipated perspectives about communicating with their children. However, most parents seemed to consider 'teenage behaviour' inevitable, yet temporary, and used biological explanations, particularly hormones, to emphasise that it was not their child's fault. While parents seemed keen to stress continuities in their children's personalities, most young people remarked how much they had changed in recent times, both emotionally and physically. Many young people identified themselves as 'teenagers', although their understandings of this category seemed more positive than their parents. This resonates with Solberg's (1990) reflection that children play an active role in negotiating the different meanings ascribed to their age. Young people expressed complex feelings about getting older, noting that their increasing independence was accompanied by a growing sense of responsibilities and restrictions. Parents appeared to acknowledge that their children needed increased independence and privacy, but they also seemed to perceive contemporary life as riskier and more sexualised than before, and so struggled with negotiating this. There was a perception among both parents and young people that things had changed from parents' own youths, and this could be a barrier to communication, although young people valued their parents' experience. Although parents universally assessed their own parents' approaches to sexual communication negatively, these were nevertheless their benchmark for their own parenting.

## **5 PARENTING YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In Chapter Four I focused on parents' and young people's understandings of the early teenage years, arguing that perceptions of this period as a time of increased independence and privacy have implications for their communication with each other about sex and sexuality. This chapter now shifts focus to the experience of parenting young people in their early teens. In Chapter Two (2.2), I noted that the quality and 'connectedness' of parent-child relationships have been identified as an important dimension of parents' influence on young people's sexual behaviour. I also outlined sociological debates concerning the nature of parent-child relationships in recent times; while some emphasise a shift towards greater democracy (Giddens, 1992), others stress the endurance of hierarchical relations and parental control (Brannen et al., 1994; Jamieson, 1998). Thus, this chapter considers participants' reflections on the evolution of their relationships with each other during the early teenage years, with particular focus on how their sexual communication is shaped by these changing dynamics. The latter section considers perspectives on parental responsibility for young people's sexual learning, with particular focus on the division between parents and schools, and mothers and fathers.

### **5.2 Parent-child relationships**

#### **5.2.1 Patterns of 'closeness' within families**

In order to gain a sense of their family relationships, all young people were asked if there was anyone whom they felt particularly close to in their family 'at the moment'. Working within a multiple perspective approach (3.2.1), parents were also asked to reflect on their child's likely response to this question which enabled perceptions of family relationships to be compared both between and within families.

I phrased the question in terms of 'closeness', rather than intimacy, as this seemed to be the terms within which most participants, especially young people, understood their relationships.

Young people's understandings of 'closeness', in the context of these interviews at least, largely seemed to be based on who they felt they could talk to about personal matters. Most young people said they were closest to their mother, such as Beth Turnbull (12), who said this was because they had, '*kind of like started talking about some stuff*'. Beth appeared here to be referring to talks with her mother about pubertal changes. Significantly, all of the small minority who said they were not close to their mother no longer lived with her, and all said they would definitely not talk to her about sex. For example, one girl whose parents were divorced said of her mother, '*we've not got the bond like we should have [...] cos she walked out, cos that thing at the back of my head will never go away, I'd never want to speak to her about it [sex]*'. However, her mother painted a rather different picture. Contrary to wilfully leaving her children, she described protracted efforts to gain custody of her children, a detail absent from her daughter's account. Apparently keen to emphasise the closeness of their relationship, the mother commented: '*out of all o' my children, she's the one that I can pick up the phone and go and talk to her about anything [...] in some ways she's like a sister*'. These contrasting accounts remind us both of parents' and children's divergent experiences of their relationships (Larson and Richards, 1994), and of what each might have invested in their representation. Nevertheless, despite the marked disparity between their accounts, each used their account of communication about personal matters to describe their relationship.

Most mothers identified themselves as the family member their child would say they were closest to at the moment. Fathers also tended to (correctly) guess that their children would say they were closer to their mother, indicating that mother-child relationships seemed to have a special status as particularly intimate within families. Only three young people said they felt closest to their father, one of whom was only intermittently in contact with his mother. However, two girls' fathers thought their

daughters would specify them as their closest relative, including one of the non-British born parents, who remarked:

*Father: With [daughter], it's great, it's very rare in our culture for the girl child to be so close to the father, it's very very rare, but with her that's the case, she's actually more close to me than she is to her mother.*

This daughter and her mother both appeared to agree with her father's description of the relationship, and as many others also did, the girl framed her understanding of intimacy through communication: *'I'm closer to my Dad [...] I talk to my Dad, I'd talk to my Mum but we talk different topics, totally different topics'*. However, although she said she talked to her father more than her mother in general, the girl differed from most other young people as she reported feeling less close to the parent with whom she talked most about her physical development and sexual topics (her mother). Nevertheless, this family's reports of their relationships reflected the majority of families where there was apparent agreement between parents' and young people's accounts of patterns of closeness.

There only appeared to be disagreement in a minority of families about who the young person was closest too, such as the Kerrs, where Sarah (13) and her mother, Sandra, both identified her mum as the person she was closest to, while Sarah's father, Mike, seemed to believe she felt closer to him because, *'sometimes I get the cuddle before she goes to bed and her Mum doesn't get one'*. This apparent misperception between father and daughter may stem from different understandings of intimacy; whereas Sarah again framed her close relationship with her mum through their communication, Mike seemed to read Sarah's physical affection as an indication of closeness.

A few young people seemed reluctant to name a particular family member, tending to say they were equally close to both their parents (and sometimes siblings too). A further minority mentioned other relatives instead of a parent, including Tom Wicker (13), who said that although he got on well with all his family, he felt closest to his sister, *'cos I tell her a lot'*. In this sense, it was not certain whether young people felt

close to someone *because* they talked about personal matters or whether they were able to talk because they were already close. Either way, communication about personal and sensitive topics appeared to play a significant role in young people's understandings of intimacy within family relationships.

Although on the whole participants described close relationships with each other, particularly between mothers and children, they also reflected on the changing dynamics of their relationships in recent years.

### **5.2.2 Changes in parent-child relationships over time**

When asked about any changes in their relationships 'over the past couple of years', the main finding overall was that young people tended to describe their changing relationships with their parent(s) in positive terms, while parents appeared to present a more mixed picture. Furthermore, while a minority of parents, mostly fathers, reflected on the impact of their own changing personalities over the lifecourse of parenting, the majority of parents' talk about changing relationships appeared to be attributed to young people's development. Young people, on the other hand, appeared to cite both their own and their parents' developing personalities, in their explanations of changing relationships.

Both generations most commonly said they spent less time together nowadays than when children were younger, and many noted this had reduced their opportunities for talk; for example, Adam Turnbull (14): *'I probably don't spend as much time with my Mum now as I used to, I probably don't talk that much to them either'*. On the whole, most seemed to agree the impetus for spending less time together stemmed from young people's choice to spend more time either alone or with friends. While young people largely seemed happy spending less time with their families, most parents seemed to want to spend more time with their children, such as Evan's (13) father, Ronnie Bell:

*Ronnie: I had a lot better relationship with him when he was in primary school, we used to kind of do more things together [...] now it's like this huge battle, this huge challenge to kinda try and get precious time with Evan now, because he's got other things, other places to be and people to be with.*

As Ronnie noted, usually spending less time together was described as having a detrimental effect on parent-child relationships, especially by parents. However, one boy, Fraser Vaughan, reflected that, as he had started to spend more time out of the house, this had had a positive effect on his relationship with his father:

*Fraser: It's probably made it better, cos if I'm in a lot I just like annoy him, like just as a joke but he gets quite annoyed with me so then I go out, but now that I'm out quite a bit I don't annoy him which makes him in a better mood when I come back in.*

Many parents framed their changing relationships with their children within a discourse of loss, talking not only about the loss of time together, but also about their struggles to adapt to their diminishing control over their children's lives, as Robbie's (14) mother, Dawn Hall explained:

*Dawn: I think to be honest I've kinda like lost him in a way [...] as he's getting older, in one sense it's great cos we're still close and we're good friends and I can chat with him but other times I miss having him as being a wee boy that I was able to tell him to do this, do that, we're doing this, we're doing that.*

Robbie appeared to experience his mother's reduced control positively, noting: *'like my Mum's changed a lot as well, she's being a lot more free [...] it's like she trusts my judgement and I think I like that feeling'*. Several parents commented on a growing sense of distance from the closer relationships they enjoyed with their children when they were younger, as reflected in the following extracts:

*Jeremy: I feel sometimes that the good relationship I've got with Lucia, I'm beginning to – I have on occasions felt it strained, and I've felt her getting cooler towards me, which is upsetting.*

*Mary: He [Dan] went through a phase where it was kind of pushing me away, a wee bit cold, a wee bit kind of hard y'know? But actually he's much more affectionate now [...] whereas Nathan's now hitting the place where there's a definite distance and a definite separation where all these things are kind of uncomfortable, he doesn't talk and so I think that's hard.*

Mary Quinn's talk about the evolution of her relationships with her two sons reflects a general sense among parents' accounts that this 'separation' was part of an ongoing process. Indeed, although many parents expressed sadness that their children seemed increasingly aloof, with a few becoming tearful in the interviews at this stage, this detachment seemed to be understood by most to be a normalised part of 'growing up'. For example, Kim Franklin described finding it '*emotionally quite difficult*' dealing with her son, Luke's (13) 'separation' from their formerly close relationship, noting: '*you have to kind of remind yourself that actually that's natural*'. However, while Kim consistently attributed their reduced time together and increasing 'detachment' to her son, Luke suggested this was instigated by his mother, noting: '*she's got like more detached like to me, so less close than we were before*'. When asked how he felt about this, however, like many young people, Luke seemed more content with the changing dynamics of their relationship than his mother, remarking: '*I think it's a good thing*'.

A significant minority of parents explicitly remarked on increased conflict with their children in recent times, such as Georgie's (12) father, Don Leslie, who noted:

*Don: I find most of the time we're in conflict and I dinnae like that, it really hurts me [...] it's very rare where we dinnae have a day where there's no' something that's an issue, and that's kind of hard.*

Parents seemed to largely lay the blame for this on their children's 'moodiness', although those children who also reported increased tensions tended to say this was due to their parents' over-involvement in their lives.

A further dimension of loss within parental accounts of their changing relationships with their children referred to reduced physical expressions of intimacy and

affection, such as hugging, kissing and holding hands, particularly when in public, although also within the home. Although rarely reported by young people, this was commonly mentioned by parents, indicating its significance in their experiences of their relationships with their children:

*Caroline: It gets to a point where he's quite embarrassed in front of friends so last night we went for a walk and if we were in the back lanes he'd hold my hand but if there was a danger of seeing anybody or being seen by anybody then he'd drop my hand.*

*Mary: I think I still like to baby him and he's not wanting that anymore, things like affection, y'know I would always kind of want to give him a hug and y'know at the moment he's just kind of [laughs] 'leave me alone', and that's quite difficult actually.*

As reflected in the extracts above, withdrawal from physical intimacy was most commonly reported in relation to cross-gender parent-child relationships. The ongoing negotiation of bodily boundaries between parents and children, particularly fathers and daughters, will be explored further in Chapter Six.

Interestingly, young people were more likely than their parents to say they 'got on better', or were closer to them than before, such as Lorna Young (14) who said: '*I mean I think me and ma mum are much closer*'. In making these assertions, several young people alluded to a period of time where the relationship had been more fraught. Sometimes a change in family circumstances was attributed with bringing parents and children closer together, such as moving to a new town, a new baby, or parental separation or divorce. For example, one girl described getting on better with her parents since they had separated:

*Daughter: My mum's really fun, she's a lot happier after they separated, I like spending time with my mum [...] and my dad's been a lot more fun than he used to be, he's less strict now.*

However, following a divorce or separation, six young people no longer saw a parent with whom they had previously had contact, and so family change did not always appear to bring parents and children closer together.

About a quarter of young people said there had not been any changes in their relationships with their parent(s) over the past couple of years, such as Harvey (11) who remarked, *'it's really just the same'*. All except one of these children were younger (11-12), or had described themselves or been described by their parents as 'young for their age'. More than half of these young people's parents also did not report any change in their relationship, although almost all seemed to feel this would happen in the future. Again, the sense of inevitability amongst these parents that their relationships with their children would change sooner or later suggested this was largely understood to be a 'normal' part of teenage development. Despite much talk about changing relationships and increasing independence from parents, most parents and young people still seemed to feel close, although the meaning and expression of closeness may have changed. In addition to talking about changing dynamics in their own families, parents also commonly reflected on changes in parent-child relationships across generations, which are now considered in the following section.

### **5.2.3 Parents' shifting conceptualisations of parent-child relationships across generations**

As outlined in Chapter Four, many parents remarked on the authoritarian style of their own parents, and expressed a desire to have more 'democratic' relationships with their own children; for example, Debbie Baxter noted, *'my parents were very clear about children's role which was not as equal partners, I think I've tried to make it more equal'*. Open and honest communication appeared to be highly valued in their conceptualisations of the evolution of parent-child relationships. As reported in other research (Brannen et al., 1994; Scott et al., 1998), this emphasis was most evident within middle-class mothers' accounts:

*Sandra: I was never allowed to go out or I had to be in at a certain time, I'm completely different with the kids, y'know, so long as we talk about and trust each other and they don't lie, that's the one thing I've always said to the kids, 'whatever you do, no matter what, please don't lie to me'.*

*Julia: I didn't talk to my Mum the way that I talk with Francesca [laughs] I tell her everything about everything whereas with my Mum I wouldn't have talked to her about boys and things like that.*

A small minority of mothers invoked the 'rhetoric of friendship' (Gabb, 2007) when describing their relationships with their children, such as Christine Johnson, who said she and Ben (14), were '*basically best mates*'. However, a further small minority of mothers appeared critical of the apparent blurring of generational boundaries between some parents and children, as illustrated by the following extract:

*Brenda: I know some people with their daughters they're like best pals, y'know y'see them in the pub together and they borrow clothes, they're like flat-mates more than mum and daughter and I'm no' wanting that, I am her mum, there's a hierarchy, I don't want to be her best pal but, I mean I can talk to my mum about lots of things and I'd like to think that eventually we'd be a bit like me and my mum cos I'm quite happy with that relationship.*

As discussed in Chapter Four, Brenda used her own relationship with her mother as an aspirational benchmark for her relationship with her daughter. Like a few other mothers, Brenda stressed the importance of maintaining a generational 'hierarchy', although she did not seem to feel this precluded talk and disclosure within parent-child relationships. However, parents' talk about the various ways in which they monitored their children's activities emerged spontaneously as a strong narrative threaded through their accounts, and was in tension with their emphasis on friendship-like relations. Considering the identification of parental monitoring as an important factor related to young people's sexual behaviour within the literature, the following section outlines parents' talk about this aspect of parenting.

#### 5.2.4 Parental monitoring and supervision

Perceptions of their children's increasing privacy and independence seemed to be considered a 'normal' part of 'growing up' by many parents. For example, one mother identified the development of, '*a secret world which your parents know nothing about*' to be a key aspect of 'growing-up':

*Debbie: I think they're allowed to have that, I don't think parents need to know everything [...] I mean, as a parent you want them to be happy, you want them to be okay, you want them not to be in danger, but sometimes you're probably better off not knowing I think.*

However despite stating that parents do not need to have full information about their children's lives, Debbie later noted she would be likely to compromise her son's privacy by reading his diary, if he were to keep one. Indeed, assertions of their children's right to privacy were in tension with parents' desire to know about their activities, often framed by parents as a form of care. For example, Celia said of her daughter:

*Celia: If she's going anywhere I'd like to know who she's going with, what time she's coming back at, she should phone home at intervals, I don't want to know her business but I just want to know she's safe'.*

Mobile phones appeared to play an important role in keeping parents informed of their children's whereabouts, although several parents questioned their children's maturity when they forgot to take their phone or did not have the battery charged. This could, of course, be an indication of young people's resistance to parental intrusion into their private spaces (Williams and Williams, 2005).

Most parents, particularly mothers, seemed to feel it was reasonable to pursue knowledge of their children's lives, such as Diane Dixon, who said of her daughter, Kirsty (13): '*I mean I think if she had a boyfriend I would really want to know, there's a sort of controlling part of you wants to know what's going on*'.

Many parents described a strong sense of community among parents of primary-aged children, established through involvement in their children's shared activities, as Ronnie Bell noted:

*Ronnie: You're in a kind of comfort zone in terms of primary school, you build up really good relationships with the parents, you trust them, you know their kids.*

As parents lost these trusting relationships with their children's friends' parents following the primary-secondary transition, this appeared to have implications for their knowledge about their children's activities, and parents had to rely on other ways of finding out information about their lives.

Parents described using a variety of strategies to acquire knowledge about their children's lives. Parents commonly said children actually offered information about their activities, a finding which supports Stattin and Kerr's (2000) emphasis on the role of child disclosure in parental monitoring and supervision. Others described asking their children direct questions, although some young people reported finding this intrusive. Parental investigation, such as looking through children's personal belongings and checking their text messages, was a further dimension by which a minority of parents described finding out about their children's activities, such as Paul Wicker, who said he had '*a rake through*' the phone of his daughter, Hannah (15), although he felt this was, '*not morally wrong, but perhaps not the done thing*'.

Mothers and young people from a third of the families described varying levels of parental monitoring of young people's use of the internet, including setting up passwords on their accounts and enforcing a daily time allowance. Mothers seemed to have two main concerns regarding the internet: the amount of time children spent on it and the perceived sexualised risk of strangers in chatrooms. Two mothers also alluded to the availability of pornography on the web, although neither reported discussing this with their children. In particular, MSN Messenger, an internet based instant messaging service, was mentioned by several girls' mothers as they were

unsure who their daughters were chatting to. While one mother had forced her daughter to go through each contact stating how she knew them, others tended to see this as an opportunity to demonstrate their trust for their children:

*Sandra: Sometimes as a parent you feel as though you should be questioning what's going on, you read about that they could be chatting to this that and the other and y'know you just trust them, I trust my daughter that she is chatting to a friend.*

*RL: Is there anyone there that she actually doesn't know in person?*

*Sandra: No, they're all friends from school, but if you just happen to look over it's a no-go area, that's her private little world and y'know, which you just accept, she's thirteen and that's part of their thing [laughs].*

Although I did not ask about curfews, young people often raised these themselves, indicating these were an important factor shaping their everyday lives. The times children reported being allowed out until were more strongly delineated by class than age, with children from more socially deprived backgrounds generally being allowed to stay out later than those from more socially advantaged areas, who were sometimes not allowed out on their own at night at all. As the fieldwork period stretched from November to June, there also seemed to be a seasonal effect, with many referring to differences in their summer and winter curfews. Although most young people said they wanted to stay out later, a few also seemed to identify curfews as a form of parental care; for example, within a discussion about how her father differed from her friend's parents, Georgie Leslie (12), who lived in one of the poorest areas of the city, commented:

*Georgie: He cares about us as well, he's no' gonna let me out till eleven o'clock at night so he's obviously – the latest I go out is about eight, half eight, and sometimes in the summer if I'm lucky nine and like he doesnae allow me to go out smoking and drinking and taking drugs and everything.*

Overnight stays at friends' houses appeared to be an issue for a minority of parents, with two girls' mothers expressing concern about sexually predatory fathers and

brothers, while parents of both girls and boys described anxieties about their children drinking alcohol.

Thus, although some mothers stressed friendship-like relationships with their children, parental monitoring and supervision of young people's activities appeared to be quite widespread, if less explicit than in former years. Parents also appeared to feel relatively informed about their children's relationship status, as discussed in the following section.

### **5.2.5 Parents' knowledge of their children's relationships**

Although many parents said they did not know everything about their children's lives, most also appeared to feel fairly assured that they knew whether their child was involved in a romantic or sexual relationship. Over half the young people disclosed in their interviews that they had a boyfriend or girlfriend (either current or past), although these disclosures were unsolicited, and others may have chosen not to tell me. All these young people's mothers referred to these relationships in their interviews, although an overwhelming majority did not seem to think these involved any sexual activity beyond kissing:

*Elspeth: I don't think she's not contemplating touching somebody else or being touched, I think that's going to be a while yet, so I feel - I hope I'm right - but I feel that I'm sort of up-to-date with the stage that she's at.*

Parents expressed a diverse range of attitudes about the prospect of their children's sexual activity. Fathers commonly said they anticipated difficulties managing their feelings about their daughters' future sexual relationships, as illustrated below:

*Jeremy: When she's going to have a boyfriend, I mean that's going to be a difficult time for me definitely [...] I know that when Lucia starts going off with a boy [pause] that's fine cos it's natural but it will be a bit difficult.*

*Mike: I'd be a bit uncomfortable at this age to be honest yes, I'm gonna be uncomfortable if she's twenty-two and she's got a boyfriend but that's natural isn't it?*

In the latter extract, Mike clearly identified his discomfort as 'natural', suggesting tensions over boyfriends were part of normalised understandings of father-daughter relationships as girls grow up. His reflection that he would find his daughter's relationships difficult even when she was a young adult, resonates with Hockey et al.'s (2007: 155) discussion of the tensions between age-based sexual identities and the permanence of generational identities. A few girls also alluded to an expectation that fathers would find their sexual activity challenging, as Laura (13) explained when describing her father's response to her older sister's boyfriend staying overnight in their house:

*Laura: Obviously it's kind of normal for your dad to feel awkward about it because he's always like, 'oh they better not be doing this, they better not be doing that'.*

However, while most fathers expressed concern that their sons practiced 'safe sex', they did not seem to anticipate the same difficulties dealing with their sons' relationships (both current and future). Interestingly, no mothers expressed similar sentiments about their daughters' future relationships, and only one, Caroline Scott, reflected that she was likely to experience difficulty with her son, Angus's (11) relationships, jokingly noting: '*I think I'll just hate any girlfriend that he has*'.

Parental expectations of when their children were likely to start having sexual relationships appeared to be strongly delineated by class. Most parents, including those whose children were fourteen and fifteen, seemed to feel it was unlikely their children would have sex in the near future, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Richard: I mean it's hard to say at the moment, she's not in a relationship now, it obviously might be a bit different once the reality of relationships impinge so it doesn't seem that close at the moment if you see what I mean?*

*Diane: I know that there are a lot of school-kids out there having sex but I s'pose I think well, I didn't so mine won't.*

Like Diane above, some middle-class parents alluded to other children who were likely to have sex young, either explicitly or implicitly indicating this was classed. For example, this may have been what Sheila Turnbull was suggesting when she said her daughter, Beth (12) was 'a long way off' needing information about contraception. She further commented: 'but obviously there's certain people in our society who need that information at the age she's at cos that's where some people are'.

About a fifth of parents, all from families living in the lowest three deprivation deciles (Table 3.7), appeared to expect their child would have early sex, and also seemed to consider the chance of getting pregnant or getting a partner pregnant in their teenage years a realistic possibility, for example:

*Don: I would be quite prepared to put her [daughter] on the pill at fourteen or something, and I'd much rather do that and she made a mistake than she got a baby or worse, illnesses, diseases, and I wouldnae be happy with it – don't get me wrong – and I'm no' condoning it in any way but I'm just being realistic, I dinnae want her pushing a buggy at fifteen, sixteen-year-old.*

*Tracey: When he does go on to have sex, which even though he's eleven now, there will be a peer point where his friends an' all that, about the thirteen to fifteen range, where they'll be interested in starting all that and there'll be girls there that'll be willing...*

These parents tended to express resignation to what they seemed to feel was the inevitability of their child's early sexual activity, although they mostly also reported more direct communication with their children about contraception than middle-class parents (see further discussion in 7.3.1).

Although young people said they did not talk to their parents about boyfriends and girlfriends, parents described a variety of indirect ways in which they acquired knowledge about their children's romantic and sexual relationships. These included being told information on the 'family grapevine' by other relatives, particularly

siblings, and overhearing their children's conversations, as reflected in the following quotation:

*Paul: I think he's possibly - from overheard conversations - he seems to take the normal teenage route of asking his mate to ask his mate to ask her to go out wi' him, and then being dreadfully dismissive of it when it goes wrong, 'ah I didn't like her anyway'.*

A further minority of parents alluded to a perception of highly sensitised non-verbal knowledge of their children, often referred to as 'body language'. For example, Dawn Hall said she would know if Robbie (13) had sex as she could 'read him like a book', while Mary Quinn reported the following exchange with her son:

*Mary: We've actually had a conversation were he was like, 'y'know, if I did have sex with somebody, what would you say?', and I said, 'well I'm gonna know it anyway by looking at your face, I think I'm gonna know.'*

Another parent, Joan MacKay, described interpreting her eldest daughter's recent behavioural change as an indication she might be in a relationship:

*Joan: Well I'm not really sure [smiles] but I think she's got a boyfriend actually.*  
*RL: How have you got that impression?*  
*Joan: Well, normally Jade would just be in joggers and t-shirt but she's started to dress up a bit and put make-up on and put the straighteners on her hair and things like that, she's changed a bit.*

As young people themselves were neither asked by me, nor generally talked, about their sexual experience (or lack of), it is difficult to comment on how far most parents' apparent confidence in their knowledge of their children's sexual activity was warranted.

This chapter has so far outlined parents' and young people's accounts of their relationships with each other in the early teenage years. I have argued that despite a reduction in explicit parental control, parents retain knowledge of their children's lives through a variety of measures, and most appeared to feel relatively confident in

their knowledge of their children's relationship status. The following section examines participants' talk about parental responsibility for their children's sexual learning in greater depth.

### **5.3 Conceptualising parents' roles in young people's sexual learning**

There appeared to be a number of competing tensions within notions of parental responsibility for their children's sexual learning. Firstly, when asked who was responsible for communicating with young people about sex and sexuality, all parents, and many young people, said this was the role of adults. A minority of parents alluded to an idealised notion of collective adult responsibility to ensure young people were informed about sex and sexuality. However, one father, Paul Wicker, implied he would be suspicious of an unrelated adult talking to his daughter about sex:

*RL: Who's job do you think it is to talk to young people about these things?*

*Paul: Er, simple answer is everybody's, erm the practical answer is if I found some bloke on the street talking to Hannah about sexual politics I think I might be a bit, 'what's your name, son?'*

Thus, this extract highlights a general tension between idealised and actual practices of sexual communication. In Chapter Four, I noted that nearly all parents said they wanted their children to be more informed about sex than they were at the same age, but parents' visions of their personal role and responsibility for achieving this appeared to vary. The following two sections consider talk about the perceived division and negotiation of parental responsibility at two levels; between parents and schools, and between mothers and fathers.

### 5.3.1 Parents and schools

The accounts indicate mixed feelings about the relative advantages and disadvantages of learning about sex and sexuality at home and at school. A minority of parents and young people expressed preference for schools to take primary responsibility for talking to children about sexual matters. For example, Fiona Armstrong (12), suggested that large groups in school were preferable to more direct one-to-one communication with parents, while Harvey (11) said he would prefer to learn about contraception at school as it was 'less embarrassing' than talking to his mother. Sarah's (13) father, Mike Kerr, seemed happy to take a more 'backseat' approach with his children:

*RL: Where do you think most of her information has come from?  
Mike: Well the actual basics, the nuts and bolts of it from school to start with so that gives you a head-start [...] it's all been on a plate which is good I guess, I've never had to sit down and tell them about the birds and the bees or what-not, I think they knew that from a very early age through school.*

However, Mike's wife, Sandra, seemed more critical of parents relinquishing responsibility for their children's sexual learning to schools:

*Sandra: I feel as though parents get let off easily about sex because we feel as though the schools are handling it, right? I don't think it should quite be like that, I mean parents shouldn't just sit back and think, 'oh right, that's a role for the schools', y'know? We've got off with it lightly cos the schools are doing so much.*

Nevertheless, although she said she wanted to talk to her children herself, Sandra went on to describe insecurities about her own knowledge about sex. A few mothers echoed these concerns, including Mary Quinn, who noted that schools were likely to be 'more well-informed' and better able to direct young people to sexual health services than parents.

Participants from both generations appeared to acknowledge the importance of school-based sex education for those whose parents may feel unable or not want to talk with their children about sexual matters. For example, Hannah Wicker (15) remarked:

*Hannah: At school there needs to be a lot more in sex ed cos some parents can't talk to their kids like that, they're like old-fashioned or older parents, so there needs to be a lot more sex ed.*

Several parents seemed to agree:

*Kim: I think it's really important that schools do sex education cos kids are going to get bits and pieces from their parents at different ages but not necessarily a comprehensive picture or a biological picture all in one, some parents will do it, some parents won't, parents will have different amounts of knowledge about things kids want to know about [...] I think it probably has to be formally taught to ensure that the knowledge is there.*

*Julia: I mean it is the role of a parent but not every parent's gonna do that, every parent's so different and you can't just assume that a parent's going to do it.*

However, while most parents seemed to feel school-based sex education was necessary, many, and particularly mothers, appeared to feel it was *primarily* their responsibility to talk to their children about sex and sexuality, as these extracts reflect:

*Elsbeth: I mean I think it was a good idea that they have it [sex education] at school, but I don't think it should take the place of my role...*

*Caroline: I s'pose I haven't thought a lot about what the school should be doing because I hope that in the home we can cover anything that Angus wants to know about or even ask ... I think the responsibility lies with the parents and the family foremost.*

*Sheila: I can see where the school has a role but at the end o' the day I think we're responsible for what our children learn and what we go on to teach them.*

Many parents seemed to consider their role and that of the schools as complementary, with a few noting that school sex education had prompted further discussion at home. Generally, most parents tended to position school-based sex education as suitable for providing 'factual information' (i.e. about physical development, reproduction, contraception and sexual health services), while they seemed to see themselves as providing the moral framework for their children's sexual development:

*Peter: There is a sense that there's what's in the realm of fact and what's the sort of realm of relationships, and I see absolutely no problem - probably best - that they find out facts through the formal education process but the whole issue about relationships and everything else, that's what they should be picking up from us and that's what I s'pose they should be learning through, I don't know, observation and what's going on around them...*

*Debbie: I think when they're teenagers, you've just got, I think what you've got to do is give them the moral, y'know the kind of moral walls if you like, give them the grounding and hope, just hope that it will stick.*

About a third of parents and a larger proportion of young people were critical of school-based sex education, with particular criticism of a perceived lack of focus on particular aspects of sexual relationships. For example, Angus Scott (11) seemed to imply that there should be more attention on the physicality of sex:

*At school they only give you the basic stuff, they don't give you the more what actually happens, I mean they say generally the stuff that happens but they don't give you very much information, they don't give you anything really.*

A minority of parents indicated that there should be more focus on the emotional aspects of relationships, as Tracey Gibson explained:

*Tracey: School sex education's rubbish, it really is, it doesnae explain to kids all the emotional aspects an' all that, it's just about sex, ken [...] I do think school's have a responsibility, I think they should be more open than they are, I think the way they teach sex education is absolute garbage, y'know, they need to not just show*

*the clinical view of it, they also need to deal with the emotional bit.*

However, while these participants talked about how to improve school-based sex education, a few parents seemed to feel there was a limit to what schools can offer in terms of sex and sexuality education:

*Paul: ... sex education, the physical side, the respect for the other person in the relationship side, and the emotional side, how to deal with it, which is a huge huge subject and I don't think you can teach that in school.*

*Janet: I think it's got to come from the home, cos if they listen to anybody as teenagers it's only the parents [...] I cannae imagine like a teacher tryin' to educate her [daughter] like about sex education, they can show you sex education and this is this and that's what happens but it's more than that, it's all about the emotional stuff that they need to bring in wi' that and I think that can only come from the home.*

Although many young people appeared to find it awkward or uncomfortable talking to their parents about sexual matters, some identified advantages of parent-child communication, compared to school-based sex education. For example, Adam Turnbull (14) seemed to suggest that communication about sexual matters was most suitable within the context of caring parent-child relationships:

*RL: So who do you think should talk to young people about sex and growing up?*

*Adam: Er, well the main part of it's the parents, cos they are more sort of like, they're sort of like looking after you...*

Several other young people, noted teachers could not provide the individual attention that parents could:

*Ben (13): It'd probably be better with your mum or your parents cos a teacher's got twenty other kids so...*

*Lucia (13): Well they [teachers] have like so many people to teach and um they can't really just concentrate on you, and your parents can because they don't see like other children every day and you're just like the only child in the house.*

A few young people also said they found it hard to ask questions in a classroom context (although many young people appeared to struggle with this within their family too):

*Beth (12): ... like you might understand it more from your mum or like you could ask questions to your mum but you might be embarrassed to ask questions at school an' that, in front of all the class an' that, like private stuff an' that.*

Approximately half the parents said they were unsure about the sex education their children received at school, particularly in terms of the content, as Sandra Kerr noted: *'I actually don't know how much sex education is given to kids, I don't know, I just assume it's all happening, they're being taught and they know'*. A few parents remarked on their children's reluctance to talk about their sex education lessons at home, with Julia Robson noting:

*Julia: ...she tells me sometimes what they've done but not in great detail which is probably a failing on my part for not asking her enough, d'y'know? I mean we may have had something that I'm forgetting about but we haven't got much sent home really, no.*

Indeed, several parents commented on the lack of dialogue between school and home, such as Joan MacKay who remarked: *'well there's programmes with sex education in school but I don't know actually what they're saying, they don't tell us'*. A few parents recalled receiving a letter from the school that sex education was due to be taught, but only one parent described feeling that the school had genuinely consulted parents, which resulted in the curriculum being modified. As parents generally reported minimal knowledge of their children's sex education lessons, it may be that their negative assessments were partially rooted in their own experiences.

This section has explored participants' perceptions on the division of responsibility between parents and schools. While the important role of schools was acknowledged, participants seemed to mostly see this as complementary to, rather

than replacing, parents' roles. However, while parents' roles were widely considered as important, there appeared to be significant tensions concerning the perceived division of responsibility between mothers and fathers.

### 5.3.2 Mothers and fathers

While many parents remarked that *ideally* both mothers and fathers should share responsibility for talking to their children about sexual matters, in practice mothers seemed to do most of the work in terms of broaching conversation about sex and sexuality and answering children's questions on these topics. On one hand, there was an apparent assumption across most accounts that, due to some sense of shared experience, parents and children of the same gender should be able to communicate more easily about sex and sexuality-related topics. For example, reflecting on communication with her daughter, Julia Robson, noted: '*it's easier with the female things, isn't it, when you've gone through it yourself?*' All the girls, and fewer boys, said they preferred communicating with a same-gender parent, who largely seemed to be perceived to be more informed and more able to empathise:

*Honour (15): I think mothers need to talk to girls, cos they have experienced some of the stuff so they really need to tell the girl what growing up is all about cos they know what it is, but if the person is a boy then the fathers have to talk to their boys cos fathers know everything about growing up being a boy.*

*Lucia (13): Yeah, I talk to my Mum probably more than my Dad because, yeah, it just feels more comfortable because when you like need help with something you can't really ask your Dad cos he doesn't really know much stuff and your Mum, well she knows more.*

*Tom (13): I like talking to my Dad more cos he's a guy, it's a bit awkward talkin' to my Mum about all that stuff, anything to do with sex and stuff, it's quite awkward.*

*RL: Why's that?*

*Tom: Cos she's a woman so it's quite weird.*

These gendered tensions were particularly expressed in relation to discussion about young people's physical development, which is explored further in the following chapter. However, although many participants expressed a sense that gendered experience equipped parents to talk more comfortably with children of the same sex, a small minority of parents also reflected on tensions between same-sex parent-child dyads, particularly fathers and sons. This was evident within the Baxter family, where Debbie commented on the tension between her husband and son, describing regular arguments since the latter had moved to secondary school: *'yeah, two men in the house [laughs], it's quite competitive sometimes'*. Evan also talked about friction between him and his father, noting that he 'got on better' with his mum. Ronnie expressed a sense of frustration at watching Evan go through similar experiences from his own youth, and wanting him to 'make the right choices'. However, although he expressed a desire to talk to his son about 'growing up', he also noted that Evan and Debbie had 'a better relationship', and so anticipated Evan would go to his mother about any concerns:

*Ronnie: I think we do have a responsibility between the two of us, and I think again Debbie's got a better relationship in terms o' Evan being able to kinda go to her and ask about y'know stuff like that and again that's interesting because he knows as well that as a kinda young guy, I've kinda been through some of that as well, and I think there'll come a time when hopefully it's easier to share that but, y'know I think he chooses, I think he would choose Debbie to kinda discuss, if he did have any concerns about it.*

In this sense, the quality of Evan's relationship with his mother appeared to be more important than talking to his same-sex parent. However, Ronnie seemed to imply that their shared gender may become more important over time. Other boys valued the closeness of their relationship with their mothers over same-gender experience, such as Harvey (11), who noted that even though he felt embarrassed talking to his mum about puberty, he would still rather talk to her than his father with whom he had sporadic contact: *'I'd prefer to talk to my Mum since she's been living here with me and I'm like closer to her'*.

Although the majority of men seemed to play a more backseat role than their female partners, rationalisations for this appeared to differ culturally. Fathers born in the UK tended to explain their lack of communication, particularly with their daughters, due to their relative lack of knowledge, experience and skills compared to their female partners. However, nearly half said they would talk to their children if family circumstances changed, for example:

*Mike: Obviously when it comes to talking about things like periods and what-not I'm not qualified to do that [laughs] cos I'm not an expert meself so fortunately, I mean I would have to if Sandra wasn't there but that hasn't arisen so I've never even thought about it.*

That these fathers expressed willing to communicate with their daughters if their female partners were not available is reminiscent of Finch and Mason's (1993) concept of 'legitimate excuses'. However, the three parents who grew up in African countries enabled comparison of cultural norms of father-child communication:

*Father: It's actually a culture thing. I'm not supposed to discuss sex with a girl.*

*Mother: Y'know in my country it's [sex] a taboo topic? In my country, men don't talk about sex with children.*

These extracts indicate that it appeared to be openly understood within these cultures that fathers should not speak to their daughters about sexual matters. Thus, conceptions of what could and could not be discussed seemed to be more explicitly delineated in these families. That is not to say that many British-born fathers and daughters experienced the boundaries of acceptable talk any less rigidly, but rather that these understandings may be more implicitly acknowledged.

There was a strong discourse within accounts across both generations and genders, of mothers' suitability for sex and sexuality-related communication with children. As reported earlier (5.2.1), most participants said young people were closer to their mothers than their fathers. Furthermore, in three quarters of the two-parent families, parenting appeared to be organised according to traditional gender roles, with

mothers described as providing most of the everyday care for children, and being more involved in their daily lives than fathers:

*Peter: I think there is a sense that [pause] y'know making sure of their school life, social life everything else, there is a sense that that's what Diane does and y'know the running joke is usually, 'Dad doesn't know what's going on' and 'duh, Dad, did you not know that', and I can't deny that.*

Within many of these families, narratives of work were prominent in accounts of fathering, with fathers generally described as being less involved with their children than when they were younger, accounting for this partly through work pressures, but, as discussed earlier (5.2.2) also a distancing from the more intimate father-child relationships of previous years. In a small minority, however, the trend was reversed with fathers reportedly spending more time with their children in recent years:

*Caroline: Y'know I've always felt like the main carer for Angus and Derrick was a little bit on the periphery, but that's changed more recently which I'm really pleased about [...] y'know he's been more available for Angus and has been out a bit more with him, so there's been a shift and I think quite a good one cos I think at this age they need to have chats with their dad and not just focus on their mam all the time.*

Overall, however, fathers were presented as more difficult to talk to than mothers. Several men who did not participate in the study were described by their (ex)partners and/or children as having big 'hang-ups' about sexual communication, although as I did not interview these fathers, either because they were no longer resident in the household, or they refused, I am unable to represent their perspectives. However, many of those interviewed described difficulties talking about sexual topics. Both mothers and fathers appeared to collude in a discourse of poor male communication:

*Jeremy: The old adage of men are not very good communicators at the best of times but talking about their family relationships is probably a taboo within anything else and talking about sex education is as much of a taboo as you could possibly get.*

*Diane: I don't think, well I'm not saying Peter wouldn't [talk to their sons about sex], I think he would probably rather I did and I*

*think I would probably prefer I did because I tend to think I do things better.*

However, a small minority of fathers rejected these traditional stereotypes, such as this father, who had children of both sexes:

*Father: I know people still have the kind of view of that the Dad will do the son and the Mum will do the daughter but I dinnae see it as there's any reason fo' it to be like that, y'know, I just think if you're educated enough and you can give the correct information it doesnae matter who it's comin' from, whether it be your Mum or your Dad, whether you're the daughter or the son, and I would say I've kind o' given as much information to both o' them on the same level as required, or as initiated – I have quite a lot of open discussions about contraception and pregnancy and sex wi' my daughter.*

Many mothers talked about the importance of their children hearing about sex and sexuality from a male perspective. Jane Armstrong, for example, described encouraging her husband to talk to their daughter about relationships: *'I've said to him separately, 'your perspective is really important cos that's how she'll learn about it'*. Perhaps tellingly, the importance of mothers' roles in speaking to children were rarely justified, indicating that it may have been taken-for-granted that women should be involved in this aspect of parenting.

Lone mothers in particular appeared to consider fathers' involvement in their children's personal relationships and sexual development to be very important. While this was sometimes framed in terms of fathers talking to their children about sex and sexuality, mothers also seemed to allude to a more abstract influence fathers may have on their children's lives; for example, one mother said:

*Mother: Not necessarily the nitty-gritty stuff but maybe more about feeling good about being a woman and the attractiveness of women, I don't know, maybe it's just the relationship with the Dad, maybe it doesn't have to be spoken things [...] I s'pose she misses out on that – that has worried me in the past, her future relationship with men – is that going to be affected by the fact that she doesn't have a Dad around?*

Although this mother seemed to feel fathers may be less involved in directly talking to daughters about 'the nitty-gritty stuff', nevertheless she seemed to consider father-daughter relationships important for the development of positive female sexuality. Her daughter also spontaneously reflected on how her future relationships may be affected by not having grown up with a father:

*Daughter: Sometimes I don't know what it'll be like living with a man as well, sometimes I think it'll be quite nice if I was the Mum and had children but sometimes I think that'd be a bit weird.*

*RL: Is that because you've not had your Dad around?*

*Daughter: Yeah, it is but I think it'd be nice to have like a man in the house and stuff when I'm older.*

Another lone mother appeared to feel her daughter's experience of being fathered had affected her personal relationships and presumed sexual behaviour:

*Mother: She's got a father, but if he'd been a lovin' carin' father she wouldnae be lookin' towards all the males all the time to supply her wi' that love and care, y'know, but she's got this big attachment that she wants to be loved by these boyfriends [...] if she'd had that influence from the father and that input from them that encouraged them to do something with their life first then they wouldnae all be runnin about wi' relationships being the most important thing in their life!*

Lone mothers with sons expressed concern their sons were missing out on 'male-male time', which they seemed to consider important, even where they did not assess their own fathers' or their children's fathers' parenting positively:

*Mother: My Dad was never a great Dad that done things with us or took us places, d'y'know so but [pause] I don't know whether it bothers him [son] but I sometimes think I would like him to have a male figure in his life, like a male role.*

*Mother: Sometimes I feel awkward about sexual things, I don't find it awkward communicating with him on a day-to-day level or talking about emotions but I do sort of see quite a lot that his responses to issues and things are going to be him growing up as a boy and particularly being a teenage boy which seems to be such a different experience so yeah, I feel quite awkward about it I s'pose [...] with some of the sexual things I think that because men have*

*very similar experience and y'know, I would hope that a male parent might be able to more easily talk about that, somebody that's been through the same things, though I don't think that his Dad would actually do that.*

Thus, although mothers were often critical of men's perceived lack of responsibility, fathers' involvement was considered significant, both in terms of talking directly with sons about sex and their bodies, and in terms of a more abstract male influence for daughters.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter started by noting complexities in participants' talk about their changing relationships; on one hand, they tended to stress closeness, particularly among mothers and children, but there was also a sense of withdrawal from the intimacy of earlier years. Indeed, discussing their changing relationships appeared to be a particularly emotive issue for many parents, perhaps because it acknowledged that children were becoming more independent.

In the context of talk about the riskiness of teenage life, it seemed that middle-class mothers' emphasis on friendship-like relations with their children were in tension with parents' urge to monitor their children's lives. Indeed, parents described the complex strategies they used to maintain knowledge of their children's activities, and most seemed confident in their assessments of their children's personal relationships.

While both parents and young people acknowledged the role of the school in sex education, most seemed to feel this was secondary to that of parents. However, there appeared to be significant tensions within accounts of mothers' and fathers' shared responsibility for communicating with their children, including presumptions of gender-based empathy and a pervading discourse of female suitability for communication.

## **6 MANAGING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHANGING BODIES WITHIN FAMILIES**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As mentioned in Chapter Four, young people's physical development was a major component of both generations' understandings of 'growing up'. While not initially a major focus of this research, the communication and negotiations concerning young people's changing bodies emerged as a key mechanism through which ideas about sex and sexuality were implicitly communicated between parents and children. Thus, this chapter examines participants' talk about the surveillance, acknowledgement and negotiated management of young people's changing bodies.

In Chapter Two (2.4.1) I noted that young people's physical development is more individualised in western cultures than others where pubertal transitions are culturally mediated through various rites of passage. Quantitative research on parent-child communication about sexuality regularly confirms that puberty is one of the more commonly discussed areas between mothers and children, but this is rarely contextualised within an understanding of the meanings of physical development for parents and young people, nor their wider negotiations about bodies within families.

### **6.2 Bodily signs: growing older, 'growing up', growing sexual?**

When asked to describe what 'growing up' meant to them, over half the parents and young people mentioned bodily changes. The different meanings associated with young people's physical development appeared to be important for how their changing bodies were acknowledged within families. Generally, it seemed to be easier to communicate about changes which were understood in terms of getting older or 'growing up', rather than those imbued with meanings of developing sexuality. While this appeared to be the case in relation to both boys and girls, as

later sections of this chapter focus largely on the management of girls' bodies, this section mainly focuses on boys.

Young people described a range of feelings about the physical development of their bodies, with some appearing excited, some anxious, and others expressing ambivalence. For those who appeared keen for their bodies to develop, these changes seemed to be intimately linked to the psychosocial developments discussed in Chapter Four, for example:

*Nathan (12): ... it made me feel a bit like I was growing up and like I wasn't like eight anymore, like that this is me changing into like getting more responsibilities.*

Indeed, these young people talked about aspects of physical change as signifiers of their development:

*Adam (14): I was like eager to have hair under my arms. That was the one I was sort of eager for, cos it's like the way of saying 'hey I've hit puberty!'*

Like several other young people, Adam seemed keen for his physical development to be recognised by his parents, as he remarked that this might lead to being, in his words, 'treated older', which he specifically defined in terms of later night-time curfews. However, Adam also noted he had not talked to either of his parents about his bodily changes, nor wanted to, and so presumably expected his development to be tacitly recognised and acknowledged.

Bodily changes seemed to have a gradient of visibility, with some (e.g. growing taller, voice 'breaking'), more evident than others which young people seemed to have more control over choosing to disguise or disclose to parents (e.g. spermarche (first ejaculation) and menarche (first menstruation)). Girls' disclosure of menarche is explored further later in this chapter (6.5.2). Parents talked about noticing their children's changing bodies, with some interpreting this as a cue for initiating discussion about sexuality. A small minority described finding evidence of these

transitions, such as pornography, which they appeared to interpret as an indication their sons were masturbating (see 7.3.3). In addition to parents' tacit observations, a large minority of young people were reported to draw their parents' attention to their changing bodies, by verbally informing them about their physical development, and in some cases by showing them, as these parents described:

*Christine: He's aware of what's going on and he often makes jokes about it, 'oh look how hairy my legs are getting!', and stuff so he's at ease with himself.*

*Father: He wants to be a teenager, he's always talking about being a teenager, and this morning for instance he was proudly coming to get [mother] to feel his spots on his face, his adolescent spots, he's just got some little granules on his face, and of course he was lifting up his arms so she could sniff his armpits [chuckles] 'I'm sweating all the time!', he announced.*

In the first extract, Christine suggested Ben's explicit acknowledgement of his leg hair was indicative of his apparent comfort with his physical development. Similarly, in the latter extract, this father appeared to suggest his son's apparently proud demonstration of his spots and bodily odour, indicated he was excited about growing up, and that these physical changes were an important component of his understanding about being teenaged, a status he seemed to want acknowledged by his parents. However, there seemed to be a distinction between physical changes considered appropriate to convey to parents, and those that were not. For example, this same father also described feeling unsure how to respond to his son's apparent ease discussing erections, an indication of sexual maturity which was reportedly not discussed in other families:

*Father: ...he's talked about getting an erection and so on, I've not seen his erections so [laughs] I mean I'm sure he would want to demonstrate it but er I don't know how much interest should I show in these things.*

Although it is difficult to say whether his son really would want to demonstrate his ability to attain an erection to his father, nevertheless, the latter's apparent uncertainty about 'how much interest' he should show in this development,

suggested he felt torn between efforts to maintain a climate of openness, while being mindful of perceived boundaries of appropriate contact between parents and children.

One father, Paul, described his son's apparent ease discussing his changing body:

*Paul: He wants a line of pubic hair that goes up to the belly button, and I were discussin' that wi' him, it's a very weird discussion to have with your son, but cool! He brought that up, he was talking about the fact he's getting hairs under his arms, and he's quite happy to come and tell me he's doing this, he's growing up into a man, [as if addressing Tom] 'that's not a man, I'm not hairy, I'm not a hairy person', some people are, some people aren't.*

In this extract, Paul suggested Tom's conception of male development was based on the significance of hair growth, both pubic and underarm. Certainly, ideas about masculinity and hairiness pervaded about half of the boys' accounts, with most talking positively about their development of body hair. In particular, the growth of sufficient facial hair to require shaving appeared to be considered a rite de passage for most boys, and an event which parents noted their sons were eagerly anticipating, even though few reported direct discussion of this. However, Paul reported questioning his son's version of masculinity by drawing attention to his own relative hairlessness, despite his status as a mature adult male. Paul's description of their conversation as 'weird' implied it touched on the boundaries of 'normal' and appropriate communication between parents and children, although his assertion that it was 'cool' suggested he was comfortable with such intimate discussion. It is important to note that while parents' reports of these casual comments and conversations with their sons may seem in tension with some boys' assertions that they did not discuss their bodies with their parents, this may be due to their different understandings of what counts as discussion or talk, which are explored further in the following chapter (7.4.1).

Although no men discussed this themselves, there appeared to be a perception among some mothers that fathers found it difficult to deal with their daughters' menstruation as this signified their developing sexuality. For example, Sheila Turnbull described

the difficulty she felt her husband had in acknowledging their daughters' development:

*Sheila: I think the day one o' the girls starts her period or something I think John'll just not be able to deal wi' any o' that, it's hard for him to see the girls growing up y'know? I think John is horrified by a lot o' things, it just signifies that they're gettin' bigger and he maybe just wants them to stay as wee tots, he cannae deal with them maturing or whatever it is, y'know.*

This section has explored the variety of understandings of young people's physical development, noting that where it is understood in terms of developing sexuality, this may make its acknowledgement between parents and children more difficult than where it is understood in terms of 'growing up'. I have also indicated the different ways in which physical change is communicated within families, both through young people directly informing parents, and via parental observation. In the following sections I now turn to examine participants' accounts of these discussions in greater depth.

### **6.3 Am I normal? Young people's body-related anxieties and mothers' reassurance**

When asked to reflect on the most difficult aspect of their sex and sexuality-related communication with their parents, many young people spontaneously said the hardest part was talking about their physical development. One factor limiting communication appeared to be finding the words to talk about bodies. A few young people described difficulties they had using bodily vocabulary which might have sexualised connotations with their parents. For example, Kirsty (13) said:

*Kirsty: The tricky thing is like talking to her about like a penis [giggles] and stuff or like a vagina [giggles] like I don't like saying that to my mum.*

Similarly, Ricky (11) said he could not talk to his mum about his body because he did not feel comfortable saying 'dirty' words to her, while Rosie (13) reported difficulty asking her mum questions about her body, noting '*you just can't bear to say it, like what it is but then you know, I mean like I know I'll get a decent response but just I find it embarrassing myself having to say it*'. Bodily vocabulary was not just a problem for young people; even where parents said they valued 'plain speaking', they seemed to struggle with finding language with which they were comfortable:

*Tracey: You've basically got to speak bluntly, you've got to call everything what it is, there's no point giving it silly names an' all that, y'know, if it's ken a willy, a penis, whatever, there's nae point callin' it summit silly, I've always hated the word vagina [laughs] it's horrible, I don't know, it just doesnae sound right, I don't know why, what dae I call it? Er, I dinnae call it anything actually [laughs] I dinnae ken what I call it.*

This extract reflects a general silence around female genitalia across the accounts, resonating with Hirst's (1994) assertion that boys are likely to have a much more extensive set of terms for their genitalia than girls.

However, although many young people said they found discussion about puberty awkward or embarrassing, nevertheless, this appeared to be largely understood as a *legitimate* topic of communication between mothers and children, particularly daughters. Indeed, most young people reported some level of communication with at least one of their parents (usually mothers) about their physical development. A few young people distinguished between parts of their bodies they were comfortable discussing, and those they were not. The latter seemed to be those most markedly invested with sexual meaning. For example, one boy commented:

*Son: ...most things I would [talk to mother about], like to do with me like and my body, not like that [gestures at genitals] but err, like asking her, cos I found a lump on my like on my nipple and she took me to the doctors and it was fine but I'm just glad I could talk to my Mum about that sort of thing.*

As did this boy, a majority of young people described mothers' ability to help them if they were experiencing difficulties with their developing body, such as late or painful menstruation, unexplained lumps or rashes, acne and other undisclosed 'problems'. Indeed, talking about bodies in terms of 'problems' seemed to be considered more legitimate than discussing bodies in abstract; young people generally only reported seeking conversations with their mothers if there was a perceived 'problem'. Crucially, young people noted that mothers were more likely than friends to be able to help them manage these problems, and that they trusted their mothers to be discreet about any embarrassing bodily issues.

A further way mothers seemed to share the management of young people's developing bodies was by purchasing related products for their children, such as face and body-washes, razors, deodorant and sanitary products. However, even asking for products could prove embarrassing for young people, as this required acknowledging their physical development. Indeed, girls' reported communication with their mothers about sanitary products ranged from discussion about the pros and cons of different varieties to Vicky Innes' (14) comment that, '*you just chuck 'em in the trolley and don't say anything*'. For Georgie Leslie (12), the responsibility for purchasing her own hygiene products appeared to exemplify her understanding of her growing maturity and independence:

*Georgie: I've become mair mature.*

*RL: Yeah, how's that?*

*Georgie: Erm, like sorta preparing my own stuff.*

*RL: Like do you mean food?*

*Georgie: No, I mean like deodorants and shampoos and stuff cos I used to share them, but like now I buy my own stuff and that sorta thing.*

Although Georgie noted she bought these products with her monthly allowance from her parents, she appeared to be unusual in choosing and buying them herself. This seemed to be in keeping with Georgie's strong sense of ownership over her body, which she indicated when noting: '*this is my body and no-one can tell me what I can do with my body*'.

Although a significant minority of young people expressed excitement over their changing bodies, a larger minority expressed some level of anxiety, while others were reluctant to discuss their physical development at all in the interviews. Where young people did acknowledge bodily concerns, these tended to be described as past, rather than current anxieties. An overarching theme appeared to be concern about whether they were 'normal'. This discourse of normality was invoked in many parents' and fewer children's accounts, with expressions of concern that young people's bodies were out of sync with their peers' development. For example, Lorna Young (14) described talking to her mum about her period:

*Lorna: I kept asking ma mum, 'am I weird because I haven't started and all my friends have, am I weird?', I just kept saying 'am I weird, am I different?', and she's like, 'no this can happen tae anybody', and I was like that, 'but it's meant to follow the mum!', and I get quite upset about it.*

This extract reflects the commonly reported dialogue between mothers and daughters concerning menstruation, which is discussed further later in the chapter (6.5.2). However, while mothers were reported to provide reassurances about what was 'normal' in terms of height, weight, acne, teeth, developing breasts and menstruation, there was hardly any reported communication concerning what was 'normal' for young people to experience in terms of the physicality of sexual feelings and arousal.

It is important to note that these anxieties about their bodies were expressed by, and in relation to, boys as well as girls. In particular, almost half the boys said they were too short or 'skinny', seeming to aspire to 'hard', muscular bodies. As previously discussed, although many boys appeared excited about developing bodily and facial hair, for one boy, this seemed to have been a major cause of anxiety and is an interesting case to explore in greater depth. Although he did not talk about this himself, his mother described how she felt he had found puberty difficult to deal with, particularly the development of body odour and hair on his legs, face and underarms: 'he didn't like the fact that he was changing at all, he just did not like it, he thought he was a freak'. Having physically matured at an earlier stage than his

peers, he developed a clearly visible moustache. His mother's perception of his self-identification as 'a freak', suggested he considered his body to be abnormal. Indeed, this appeared to have been communicated to him by others:

*Mother: He was getting quite a lot of slaggin' from people on the bus, complete strangers would say 'ha ha, he's got a moustache!', so he would get quite upset about this, and he hated it...*

These comments made by people on the bus indicate the regulation of perceived bodily norms in public, as well as in more private contexts. The boy's mother recalled how his moustache had been a thorny issue within the household, as he sought her permission to shave it off, but she initially refused, feeling he was too young to do so. By seeking her permission, he appeared to relinquish some sense of control and responsibility for his body to his mother, an example of the ways in which young people's bodies are contested within families. However, his apparent angst over his facial hair became so severe that he confessed to his mother he was feeling suicidal, indicating the extreme distress that boys can also experience over their bodies, in addition to the more well-documented anxieties of girls (e.g. Bordo, 1993). Nevertheless, discussion of boys' changing bodies seemed to be largely skirted around within many families, as the following section will now discuss.

#### **6.4 Discussing boys' changing bodies: taboo topics**

Communication about bodies appeared to be clearly gendered. Every girl said she preferred to speak to either her mother or another female relative about her body, rather than to her father, or other males. Furthermore, all mothers with children of both sexes said they found it easier to talk to their daughters than their sons about bodily matters. However, the people who boys preferred to speak to were less clearly defined; more boys than girls said they did not want to talk to either parent about their bodies, as illustrated by this passage from Tom's (13) interview:

*Tom: I'm not talking to my parents about how my body changes cos that's just weird.*

*RL: Why?*

*Tom: Cos they're my parents.*

*RL: But why?*

*Tom: Well I don't really need to cos you get it in school.*

*RL: So you don't want to talk to them?*

*Tom: No.*

Later, when asked if his parents had ever tried to talk to him about his body, Tom remarked: *'if they have I've probably not listened, I just kinda blank those moments out'*. Tom's insistence that he actively discouraged communication about his body with his parents is interesting in light of his father's recollection of a conversation where Tom talked apparently comfortably about his pubic hair. However, Tom may have been reticent about reporting bodily discussion with his parents in a wider context, such as the interview, in which this might be identified as inappropriate, strange or even 'wrong'.

A few other boys did seem to want to discuss their bodies with a parent, but said they found it easier to talk to their mothers than their fathers, for example:

*Adam: Yeah, puberty stuff, even though Dad's a guy he would still get uptight about it. I think he's more sort of like that's a private sort of thing that's to be kept to yourself [...] Mum's more relaxed about that stuff.*

Nevertheless, even though Adam said he did not feel he could talk to his own father about his body, he also noted that, hypothetically, it would be good to be able to talk 'man-to-man' about 'guy stuff'.

As discussed in the previous chapter (5.3.2), many participants seemed to collude in a discourse of mothers' responsibility for communication with daughters about sexuality, particularly in relation to puberty and bodies. This produced mothers as the most qualified to speak to girls 'from personal experience', and relieved fathers from involvement due to 'lack of experience'. However, only two fathers appeared to have assumed similar responsibility in initiating discussion with their sons about

their physical development. The few accounts of interaction between fathers and sons tended to be described as jokey banter, rather than the cosy, intimate chats some mothers and daughters described. For example, Nathan (12) said his father teased him about growing 'pubes', while another father reported:

*Terry: We did chat probably maybe when he was about eleven and that, 'this is gonna happen' and 'oh your voice sounds different today' [...] one day my partner says to me, 'Terry, can you hear his throat? It's really croaky', and I was like, 'nah, it's just that his balls ha' dropped', y'know and Fraser kinda had a wee chuckle about it and it developed into a bit of a conversation...*

This extract illustrates both the ongoing parental surveillance of young people's bodies and also the use of humour as a communication strategy between fathers and sons. This latter theme is explored more fully in the following chapter (see 7.4.3).

A few parents seemed to imply that there was less reason to communicate about their son's bodies than their daughters'. For example, while Sandra described *needing* to talk with her daughter about periods and bras, she remarked on her and her husband's response to their son's puberty:

*Sandra: I don't think we talked about it much about his body changing, no not a lot I'd say, that was maybe private to him and we didn't, we just let these things happen and gave him his space and his privacy and let him get on with it really, don't think there was much, there hasn't been any conversation about it.*

Most mothers, however, did seem to feel that there should be some discussion with boys concerning their bodies. A large minority described trying to prompt their male partners to talk to their sons, although most seemed to feel they had not fulfilled this role at all, as Tracey explained:

*Tracey: I asked him [husband] to talk to him [son], cos bein' a man, he knew mair about it being a man, but nah, so I ended up doin' it [laughs] he just couldn't dae it, y'know, I don't think he knew where to start to be quite honest.*

It is perhaps significant that several of these fathers declined to be interviewed, and so, unfortunately, their perspectives on the challenges of communication are absent from this thesis.

Many mothers described assuming responsibility for talking to their sons, either through fathers' lack of willing, or if they were parenting alone. These mothers discussed the difficulties of communicating about male physical development, again often drawing on a lack of experiential knowledge of male bodies, for example:

*Sheila: A couple of times I've said to Adam that there's certain things where I've never been a boy so, the emotional side o' it or just even the physical feelings that you feel when your body's changing, I've never experienced as a boy so I can tell them what I think, y'know I can tell him textbook things or things that you can read, but I can't actually, whereas I can say to her [daughter], 'well when you've got your period you'll get a sore stomach', y'know different things like that whereas with a male's experience, I've never experienced that.*

*Kim: Well as a female single parent I just genuinely didn't know like, y'know with foreskin whether you're meant to wash under it or not [...] I didn't know what he should do.*

Like others, these mothers strongly positioned themselves as un-knowing about male bodies, which Kim seemed to feel was exacerbated by her position as a lone parent. However, another lone mother noted that her anxiety about speaking to her son was much worse than the communication itself:

*Dawn: That was one of the things I dreaded, I thought I'm never going to be able to speak to Robbie about these things.*

*RL: What was it that made you worry?*

*Dawn: Just talking about his hormones changing, about him growing up, growing hair, y'know having to learn to shave, I think just sorta discussing it, that's what concerned me, I used to think, 'oh I'll be too embarrassed', but I'm not at all.*

Nevertheless, although Dawn appeared to have found communication easier than anticipated, she still seemed to feel Robbie missed out by not having a father to talk to, as did the other lone mothers with sons.

Although some parents, particularly mothers, talked about the challenges of discussing puberty with their sons, overall, there was much less reported communication about boys' bodies than girls. Having explored discussion relating to boys' bodies, I now turn to participants' accounts of the communication and management of girls' bodies.

## **6.5 Managing girls' bodies**

### **6.5.1 Negotiating bodily presentation**

Many parents appeared to perceive a range of different risks associated with how their children's bodies were presented to the outside world. Parents' concerns about their children's appearance were clearly gendered, with ideas about masculinities and criminality featuring prominently in parents' spontaneous talk about their son's clothing. This reflects recent discourse in the media and public policy conflating 'hooded youth' with 'the demise of society', which has focussed much attention on young people's clothes, particularly those of boys.

However, these fears did not feature in parents' accounts of anxieties in relation to girls' appearance, which seemed to be focussed on sexualised risk. In many families, the presentation of girls' bodies seemed to be a contested area between parents and daughters. Ideas about 'appropriate' sexuality appeared to be implicit within discussions over girls' appearance, particularly in public space. Make-up was described as a particular source of tension between fathers and daughters across generations, as Vicky's mother, Brenda Innes, recalled from her youth: *'When I started to hit my teens I wanted to go out more and maybe wear make-up and everything and my Dad and I kind of fell out a lot over it.'* One father, Jeremy, described his response to Lucia (13) wearing make-up, noting he, *'hated it to start with'*:

*Y'know it was your little girl who is disappearing and you see her the same as you see any other girl out on the street looking a bit less innocent than you know her, so it's hard, it's a very very difficult thing.*

Jeremy's reaction draws on a discourse of childhood innocence, as he seemed to feel the make-up was potentially misrepresenting his 'little girl' to the outside world. Although not stated explicitly, presumably Jeremy's concern was centred on men's judgements of Lucia, something which a further father seemed to feel very strongly about:

*Father: She's racing through her childhood, she cannae wait to be an adult, I mean I just recently stopped her wearing make-up, I was allowing her to do it and her behaviour was atrocious [...] and also I have to look at it from the perspective of how maybe guys will look at her, they're not seeing this wee twelve-year-old, nah, the make-up made her look older and so they're obviously looking at her older, and her behaviour's older, but she's no', she's twelve so I had to just pull her back and she doesnae like that at all, she doesnae like being twelve.*

This father's ban on his daughter wearing make-up could be understood as an attempt to re-differentiate the blurred boundaries between childhood and adulthood. However, he also described his daughter's resistance to his regulation, as she gradually started to wear make-up again, rushing out in the morning so he would not see her. This suggests the girl's face became a contested site between her and her father, as they had differing ideas about how she should present herself. The same father also described a further disagreement about his daughter wearing thong-style underwear which he seemed to feel were sexually provocative, describing them as, 'a sign to older guys that sorta, 'I'm grown up'".

These concerns about the sexualisation of girls' bodies were not only held by parents, as girls themselves seemed aware of how their appearance could represent them as older than they were. About a third of girls, such as the one above, seemed to aspire to looking 'more grown up', and reported being pleased when they were mistaken for being older than their real age. However, a further minority described receiving unwanted male attention in public and actually appeared to self-regulate

their appearance to resist being sexualised. For example, Francesca (14) reported feeling uncomfortable when men stared at her on the bus or the street, and described modifying her clothing as a strategy to avoid being looked at sexually:

*Francesca: I don't ever wear skirts or anything, or I wouldn't wear vest tops around the place, I like to make sure I'm properly dressed cos otherwise I just feel uncomfortable cos I wouldn't want people to be looking at me and stuff.*

Francesca's use of the word 'properly' suggests a notion of sexual respectability, which she seemed to interpret as not showing too much of her body. However, this self-regulation of her appearance also seemed to be contextual, as she described feeling comfortable wearing more revealing clothes in situations she considered appropriate, such as at sleepover parties: '*I don't mind it if I'm having fun and I'm just with all my friends*'. Similarly, one girl described the 'pros and cons' of developing large breasts at an early age, noting that while she could get into cinemas to watch films she was not legally old enough to see, she was also stared at by older men:

*Some bits are a bit weird now, cos like I sometimes, it depends if I'm wearing stuff, I get old guys and stuff staring at me which I don't like.*

Although it was difficult to tell from her rather vague description of 'wearing stuff', whether she felt these clothes were revealing, nevertheless, she clearly linked this unwanted male attention to the presentation of her body.

Notions of appropriate appearance did not just seem to differ between generations and gender but also cross-culturally. Three of the non-British born mothers expressed particular objection to the apparent social acceptance of clothes which revealed women's bodies. For example, one mother who grew up in another western European country identified distinctions between social norms in the two countries, noting:

*I don't know if it's a British thing, but I don't see it so much in my culture, is that you see an awful lot of cleavage, business women do, girls do when they go to parties, and I think people give away their bodies much more here in this country, and I say to her, 'it's totally unnecessary to show your body to let other people see your boobs or how beautiful your legs are', so that's a very important thing that I try to teach her.*

Similarly, an African mother described talking to her daughter about appropriate clothing:

*The black child has culture conflict, you understand? So I tell my children, 'if you think it's ok because you want to be in the culture to wear an outfit up there [gestures to top of thigh], it's not culture, it's about morals, are you comfortable with all your body hanging out because of fashion, it's freezing, you are naked y'know, so I tell her, 'if the weather is nice, think about it, dress properly'.*

Thus both these mothers appeared to mediate ideas about female sexual morality and respectability to their daughters through discussion of clothing. The latter mother suggested notions of appropriate bodily presentation were culturally specific, noting that this may lead to a 'culture conflict' for young people influenced by multiple cultures with different norms. Her daughter appeared to value her mother's opinion on clothing, and seemed to have internalised these notions of respectability, noting of her mother: *'she's always right, like say I'll wear something, she'll bring something else that will go better with it – I don't really wear short skirts'*. However, a further non-British born mother noted how her daughter appeared to resist the cultural norms of the country where she spent her early childhood, where it was unacceptable to wear anything revealing in front of men, and particularly in front of one's father:

*One day last year we went to a swimming pool and then she put on the swimsuit and I said, 'don't you be shy? See your father!', and she said, 'everything's alright, I'm all in my pants, I'm all in my bra, so what?'*

Thus parents' and daughters' dynamic negotiations concerning the presentation of girls' bodies appeared to intersect with standards of appropriateness which were shaped by gender, generation and culture.

### **6.5.2 Menstruation and breasts**

All girls reported some direct discussion with a parent about both menstruation and their breasts. One reason for this acknowledgement may be that some form of action is required as related items need to be bought, such as sanitary products and bras. Communication about menstruation and bras was clearly gendered, with all the girls in the sample saying they preferred to talk to a woman, rather than a man, about their physical development. In a couple of cases where girls were not living with their mothers during pubertal change, the role of other female family members was important, such as aunts, grandmothers and older sisters.

Menstruation is an area which illustrates the shared responsibility for managing bodies between mothers and daughters. The onset of menarche appeared to be a significant event for most girls, and at the time of the interviews, three quarters reported having started their periods. Those yet to start all expressed concern about this, and all reported discussing these anxieties with their mother, with three noting they did not feel comfortable talking about this with friends. These girls' mothers echoed their daughters' concerns about 'being late', despite none of the girls being older than the 'normal' age-range within health information literature. For example, Sarah's (13) mother, Sandra noted:

*Sandra: She's told me that lots of her friends have started their periods now and I'm thinking, well she must feel as though she's behind them and I s'pose I'm a little bit concerned about that and I don't know whether I should be or not cos we're back to the stage of I never sit down and talk with any of the mothers so I don't really know whether that's ok or not ok.*

In this extract, Sandra expressed confusion over pubertal norms, noting that her lack of communication with other mothers exacerbated this. Again, girls appeared to draw on a discourse of normality, with those at either end of the spectrum reporting associated anxiety at being out of sync with their peers. For example, two girls who said they had started much earlier than their female peers talked about the difficulties of managing periods in primary school.

In most girls' families, mothers reported assuming some level of responsibility for helping them deal with their periods. Generally mothers and daughters reported having discussed menstruation with each other prior to the onset of menarche. Many mothers expressed awareness about a reduction in age at first menarche over time, and several seemed to feel that prior knowledge about menstruation protected girls from negative experiences, as Joan MacKay commented: *'better to tell them first than y'know, not to get up in the morning and say 'oh my god, what's happening?'* Although about half said it had been embarrassing at first, most seemed fairly happy about this communication, with several noting it was one of the easier sexuality-related topics to discuss. This is interesting in light of evidence that communication about aspects of boys' physical development indicative of sexual maturity, such as erections and wet dreams, seemed to be generally avoided. Possible explanations for this disparity will be explored further in Chapter Nine.

A few mothers seemed to feel communication had been facilitated by a general sense of openness about their own menstruation over the years, such as Julia Robson, who said:

*Julia: I don't feel that it's really been that big a deal – she's always seen my periods, y'know when she's been coming into the bathroom the whole time, there hasn't been that privacy so it hasn't been a shock to her system completely.*

Within all girls' families, there appeared to be an assumption girls would tell their mother when they started their period. However, while most girls said they were relatively comfortable discussing periods *in general* with their mother, more than

half described this initial disclosure of their *own* menstruation as difficult or embarrassing, such as Vicky (14):

*Vicky: I just went 'Mum', she went 'yes?', 'I've started' [mimics fighting off a hug] 'eugh no, what? I'm fine'.*

*RL: So did you not kind of want a hug?*

*Vicky: No, I was just like 'why?', and then my Dad just kind of found out cos I was s'posed to be going swimming that day but I couldn't so he was like 'why?' and I was like 'shut up!'*

*RL: Did you want to tell your Dad or?*

*Vicky: No.*

*RL: Why's that?*

*Vicky: I dunno, I s'pose it's just embarrassin'.*

Despite her apparently affectionate response, Vicky seemed to find her mother's acknowledgement of the event uncomfortable, withdrawing from physical contact. Like most girls, she also appeared to find it awkward communicating about her period with her father; indeed, many other girls noted it was not just direct communication with their father that was embarrassing, but they did not even want him to be informed when they started their periods, presumably as this would also indicate their physical development to him. On one level, it may be that girls find it difficult to tell their parents they have started their periods due to concerns about acknowledging their sexual maturity. Furthermore, a few girls also expressed difficulty using the vocabulary of menstruation, which they seemed to feel was embarrassing, while two parents alluded to the practical negotiations over washing soiled underwear and bed-sheets, which may have been an additional concern for girls.

Once girls' periods started, some had difficulty adjusting to the management of their bodies and looked to their mothers for help. For example, Jane recalled a recent incident where she felt her daughter, Fiona (12), '*had not considered the logistics*' of menstruation when agreeing to stay overnight at a friend's house:

*Jane: ...she said, 'yeah, I'll stay overnight, no problem' and would've said 'fine goodbye', until I called her back and said, 'so what're you going to do about the fact you've got your period?', she says, 'oh, I hadn't thought', and I said, 'so shall we pick you a bag, shall we get you a change of clothes, shall we get you sanitary towels?', 'yeah, yeah, you deal with that', but she hadn't thought it through at all – there hadn't been anything in her head!*

Fiona's apparent relinquishment of responsibility for managing her period to Jane was echoed by other mothers who reported having to remind their daughters they were menstruating when they wanted to go swimming. A further two girls had experienced some difficulties relating to their menstruation, and both their mothers appeared to have played an active role in helping them seek medical attention, accompanying them to doctors surgeries and hospitals.

Many female participants reported mothers and daughters shopping together for a first bra; indeed, girls appeared to value their mothers' knowledge above their friends', as Lucia explained:

*Lucia (13): Well I think it'll [bra-shopping] be fun with my friends but I think my Mum would probably be the best one cos she's had experience and stuff and your friends, well they've just started.*

In most cases, shopping for bras appeared to be initiated by mothers, rather than girls themselves, suggesting not only that girls' bodies were under surveillance, but also mothers' apparent sense of responsibility for maintaining and regulating them. Although girls mostly seemed to expect their mothers to help them manage these changes, there also appeared to be boundaries erected around mothers' knowledge of girls' bodies. For example, the process of being fitted for a bra appeared to cause some anxiety, as this required an element of nudity:

*Sarah (13): I didn't really want to, I was nervous about going in the changing room with a woman [laughs] with my top off [...]  
RL: And did your Mum go in the changing room with you?  
Sarah: Nah, I just feel more comfortable sometimes getting changed on my own and stuff like that.*

*Francesca (14): ... like with my period I don't mind talking to her about that at all but when I started getting bras I found that quite embarrassing, like I don't mind my Mum seeing me in my bra but I don't like my Mum seeing me not in my bra.*

In the second extract, Francesca compares communication about menstruation with interaction concerning her breasts, noting the former was more comfortable than the latter, possibly because it did not require her to reveal her body. Some mothers appeared to be sensitised to their daughters' discomfort concerning nudity, such as Francesca's mother, Julia, who noted: '*she was probably a bit worried that she'd have to stand there with nothing on*'. Nevertheless, mothers seemed to feel it was important their daughters were measured by a trained bra-fitter, thus privileging 'expert' knowledge of girls' bodies above their own or their daughters'.

As previously discussed, there seemed to be an 'etiquette of silence' between fathers and daughters concerning pubertal transitions (Laws, 1990, cited in Hockey et al., 2007: 168). However, in a rare exception, one father described taking his daughter to buy her first bra in response to observing her non-verbal cues:

*Father: I suggested it, she was sittin' pretty uncomfortable always movin' the top an' all that and you could see her maturing and developing and I thought, she needs to have a proper, supporting bra.*

This father seemed to position himself as taking on the responsibility he felt his ex-wife had shunned, noting that as a father, he was putting '*his neck on the line*' by taking her bra-shopping. Certainly, his reported experience in the shop indicates the strength of normative perceptions of gendered responsibility for particular aspects of parenting:

*Y'know it's like people lookin' at you as if you're doin' something extremely wrong, er y'know that you're behaving in a manner that you shouldn't be, it's no' your job, why are you doing that, why are you here? [...] the shop obviously had difficulties wi' that because they've obviously never had a man coming in and doing that, it was always the mother, but I needed to put me as a man back for the benefit o' my daughter.*

As I did not interview his daughter, I was unable to gain her perspective on this experience. However, the father's perception of the shop staff's behaviour suggested he felt a sense of suspicion surrounding his relationship with his daughter, and his motivations for being involved in this task. While the staff may well have acted unprofessionally, it is also possible that his own anxiety about how his accompaniment of his daughter would be interpreted could well have compounded his feelings of being under suspicion. Indeed, fathers' concerns about the appropriate boundaries of involvement with their daughter's development, particularly the corporeal aspects of this, may well be a barrier to communication and an active role in helping their daughters manage their development.

Several girls described the notion of talking to their fathers about periods as 'weird', suggesting normative pressures concerning boundaries of communication across genders; for example, Gemma Nixon (15) commented, '*it's just not something you tell your Dad*', while Kirsty Davidson (13) remarked, '*if you're a girl, you don't talk to your dad about stuff like periods or growing up.*' Certainly, all but two girls' fathers also seemed keen to avoid the topic, with Kirsty's father, Peter, encapsulating a general consensus when he commented: '*It's not my department!*' Several factors seemed to play an important role in delineating communication about menstruation by gender. Firstly, many girls and their parents rationalised their gendered communication within an empathetic discourse noting that, having never experienced menstruation, men were unqualified to discuss it. Secondly, several mothers also seemed to draw on a genetic discourse when discussing menstruation with their daughters, speculating about when they would start and whether they might experience stomach cramps or heavy flow, as these two mothers illustrate:

*Judith: I talk with Lucia about periods because sometimes she gets a headache and they say that Mums and daughters get the period at the same time which is fascinating and she very often gets headache when I get my period, and then I'll say, 'oh Lucia, look it might be that your period is starting'.*

*Jane: Y'know she started her period and so we went through that and we talked about that before it would happen and I talked about when I thought it might happen cos it linked in with me.*

Therefore, in addition to explaining and reassuring girls about menstruation, these genetic and empathetic discourses appeared to emphasise the connection between their bodies, creating a sense of mother-daughter intimacy which fathers, by virtue of their male bodies, appeared to be excluded from. Interestingly, as reported elsewhere (Gaddis and Brooks-Gunn, 1985), fathers and sons did not appear to discuss male pubertal transitions, such as facial shaving or spermarche, in the same way. Furthermore, several mothers suggested their male partners' apparent difficulties discussing menstruation may be a continuation of the way women's bodies appeared to have been constructed as mysterious and hidden within their childhood experiences. Indeed, several men described menstruation as taboo in their childhood households, with three recalling being sent to collect their mothers' and sisters' sanitary products from the chemists in sealed brown-paper bags. Finally, a few mothers said their male partners had difficulty acknowledging their *own* menstruation and so were unlikely to find communication with their daughters comfortable.

So far this chapter has explored verbal communication (or lack of) concerning the negotiated management of young people's physical development. The following section focuses on the tacit interactions regarding bodies and how the lived experience of physical boundaries and privacy within families change as young people grow up.

## **6.6 Bodily boundaries: defining the 'appropriate' and negotiating privacy**

As discussed in Chapter Five, parents' seemed to feel their children's increasing privacy was a 'normal' part of 'growing up'. Teaching young children about bodily modesty and managing their bodies was often cited by mothers as an important early role in their children's sexual learning. For example, although rarely mentioned by

young people themselves, mothers described a variety of ways in which they conveyed notions of 'appropriate' bodily boundaries to their children, as illustrated by Brenda Innes' response to a question about when parents should start communicating with their children about sex and sexuality:

*Brenda: As a parent you should be explaining things about their bodies when they're little, y'know, yeah don't poke that in there [laughs] y'know and giving them an idea of what's appropriate and not appropriate when they're little and like in a big communal changing room don't have them outside y'know, say 'aye we're goin' in here and we'll shut the door and we'll get changed, that's fine', so you're startin' to put into them, oh we need to do that when we're here cos it's not appropriate for that man I've never seen before in my life to see my bum, y'know, just starting to filter it in.*

In this extract, Brenda described the need for parents to implicitly convey a sense of bodily modesty to children, specifically identifying 'bums' as something which should be hidden from public view. Mothers reported communication about other bodily boundaries including teaching children not to touch each other's genitals and not to allow themselves to be touched by 'strangers'. As mentioned previously (6.5.1), the presentation of girls' bodies in public was also commonly discussed in families. Like Brenda, most of these mothers seemed to feel a subtle process of 'filtering in' was an appropriate way to convey these notions of privacy, although a small minority also said they had more explicitly discussed the need to 'cover up' with their children. However, children were not only taught to 'cover up' their bodies *in public*, but as they grew older, parents and young people described a process of erecting boundaries of modesty *within* their families.

In particular, the significance of parents' and children's negotiations over private time in the bathroom emerged from participants' accounts of the shifting dynamics of their relationships, and the evolution of perceived boundaries of 'appropriate' physical contact and nudity. Clearly bathrooms are inextricably linked with bodily practices and maintenance, such as washing, (un)dressing, urinating and defecating, amongst others, most of which generally involve an element of nudity, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that this room appeared to hold particular significance in

parents' and young people's understandings of their negotiations over bodily privacy. Certainly, the ways in which these spaces were used within most families appeared to evolve as children grew older. Indeed, perhaps due to their corporeal associations, bathrooms were frequently reported by parents to be the location of early discussions about sex and bodies, particularly talk about the functions of genitalia, reproduction and the importance of bodily hygiene. Several parents described bathrooms as communal spaces when children were younger, where there was often more than one person in the room at the same time, and family members regularly bathed or showered together. As children grew older, however, this intimate knowledge of each other's bodies appeared to become identified as inappropriate, particularly across genders, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Mike: Obviously when they're younger you share a bath with them and have a good laugh y'know and when they reach a certain age you stop doing that and with a girl it's – well I mean now we wouldn't do that obviously, absolute privacy now [...] but I mean it's never been an issue, I've never really thought about it to be honest, it's just something that naturally has come about.*

*Don: We have privacy at like bath-times with all the children, Emily and Michael up till recently have shared baths, even up to six months ago, they used to share a bath but we just decided it's about time we maybe separate them now y'know?*

Rather than being verbally acknowledged between family members, the evolution of these bodily boundaries appeared to be largely tacit; indeed, as Mike noted above, it just seemed to '*naturally come about*'. By separating siblings, or by a parent stopping bathing with a child, this implies it is no longer considered appropriate for family members to have such intimate knowledge of each other's bodies. In this sense, this change in bathing practices seemed to be a key way in which ideas about bodily modesty were communicated within families. Furthermore, emphasis on the segregation of male and female bodies in the bathroom appeared to be one way in which sex started to be defined within families as heterosexual, in that it was somehow considered more inappropriate for opposite-sex parents and children to be naked together than those of the same sex. Indeed, particular anxieties were expressed in relation to bodily boundaries between fathers and daughters. For

example, Sheila Turnbull described her husband's recent avoidance of the bathroom when occupied by his daughter:

*Sheila: John I've noticed recently he'll, he tries to avoid goin' in the bathroom when Beth's there.*

*RL: Whereas he might not do that with the younger ones?*

*Sheila: No, he would go in or whatever whereas I think if he knows Beth's in the bath or whatever now he's, I mean it's no' that she's said 'oh dinnae come in now' or whatever, it's just obviously he feels that she's beginning to develop a bit and maybe she's wantin' some space to herself or just a bit of privacy – it's a kind of subconscious thing isn't it? You just read the signals like the shut door.*

In the context of widespread concerns about sexual abuse and incest, fathers may express confusion about what constitutes appropriate behaviour with their children, and anxieties about the misinterpretation of physical intimacy (Gabb, 2006; Kirkman et al., 2002; Morgan, 1996). Indeed, as girls became physically mature and developed a growing awareness of their sexuality, this was a common theme across the accounts, as both fathers and daughters described withdrawing from the more physical intimacy of previous times, such as hugging and kissing. For example, Elspeth Crozier recalled her own childhood experiences: *'I remember my sister not wanting to sit on my dad's knee and y'know me not wanting to be clasped close and have big hugs any more'*. In the few families where their mother's new partner had moved into the house, girls expressed heightened sensitivity to these boundaries, as illustrated by Hannah (15), who reported a variety of additional measures she took to regulate the boundaries of knowledge of her body from her mum's boyfriend:

*Hannah: If I'm in my room my door's closed and if I'm in the bathroom it's locked, yeah and I wear a dressing gown if I'm around the house, 'specially with Dave around the house now.*

*RL: Has that kind of changed things, having Dave in the house?*

*Hannah: Yeah, it means I'm actually wearing more clothes, it used to happen that I'd wear shorts and a strappy top around the house but with Dave being in the house I've started wearing a bra and wearing more clothes.*

*RL: Is that, I kind of understand, but if you could just explain why that might be?*

*Hannah: Just because I can see he feels a bit awkward around me.*

*RL: So it's that he feels a bit awkward about it?*

*Hannah: Yeah.*

In this extract, Hannah suggested it was Dave's awkwardness which she was responding to by wearing more clothes around the house. Mostly, however, young people said their increasing privacy was because they felt awkward themselves, rather than their parent/s. For example, another girl described her awkwardness about the prospect of her step-father coming into the bathroom when she was getting changed, noting that her mother did not seem to appreciate her discomfort:

*Daughter: I'll go like that, 'Mum, he might come up!', and then she'll go, 'come on, he brought up two girls!', and I mean fair enough her saying that but it's, it's different because it's you, do you know what I mean, it's different.*

*RL: Cos you weren't one of the ones that he brought up?*

*Daughter: Exactly exactly, because I've only known him what four, five years, so I mean I wouldn't like go around parading [laughs].*

This girl indicated her discomfort may be related to not having known her step-father since she was younger, although her mother appeared to feel his involvement in raising two other girls (with his previous wife) should ameliorate her embarrassment. This mother also raised the issue of bodily boundaries, when she described her daughter's varying comfort being partially clothed in her step-father's presence: '*when we go on holiday she walks about in her bikini and all the rest of it in front of him, but I mean she wouldn't walk about in her underwear here*'. This reflection implies meanings of 'appropriate' nudity between parents and children may be contextual; while a bikini may be considered acceptable on a beach holiday, just wearing one's underwear around the house may be perceived to have different implications, even though it involves a similar amount of nudity.

Although most young people seemed to increasingly seek bodily privacy from their parents, one girl was a rare exception who still appeared to be comfortable being naked around her father. This girl's mother seemed relaxed about this, remarking that once her daughter started feeling '*sexually attractive towards boys*', she would inevitably instigate greater bodily privacy from her father. However, although she described trying to reassure her husband, he appeared to be concerned:

*Father: I find this almost amazing but it's still there that y'know I can walk into the bathroom when she's in the shower and she doesn't mind at all, erm, and y'know she's developed [gestures to indicate breasts].*

*RL: But she's comfortable?*

*Jeremy: Yeah, yeah, I mean I do, do I knock? I do sort of half tap the door now, cos I'm beginning to feel almost slightly awkward, although I try not – I feel perfectly comfortable, it doesn't worry me at all really, but I sometimes think, oh, y'know is this ok? And I sometimes think of other fathers and daughters of her age and I think, I wonder if so-and-so marches into his daughter? Is that right?*

Despite claiming he felt 'perfectly comfortable' with his daughter's nudity, the father's 'half tapping' of the door indicated his uncertainty about whether it was appropriate for him to see his daughter naked now she had developed breasts. His suggestion that their shared time in the bathroom may be unusual compared to other families, implies the power of culturally-understood norms of 'appropriate' behaviour within father-daughter relationships. Furthermore, this couple's apparently differing responses to their daughter's nudity indicate that understandings of the boundaries of appropriate contact and behaviour with children may vary between parents.

As the majority of young people expressed some level of awkwardness and embarrassment about their physical development, it is perhaps unsurprising that they appeared to feel uncomfortable revealing their bodies to others. Even those who reported being comfortable with their physical development did not seem to want others to see their bodies, and many young people, such as Sarah Kerr (13) described becoming more private about their time in the bathroom: '*I lock the bathroom door cos I really don't want somebody to walk in when I'm in the shower.*' Indeed, bathrooms are potentially places in which young people's physical development could be observed, as suggested by these extracts from two mothers' interviews:

*Jane: In the bathroom, y'know when they are going into the shower, I'm always curious to see how far she is growing [pubic hair] because I'm just curious, I just say, 'just show me!', 'Mum! Don't, no!'*

*Joan: I saw them [daughters] in the bathroom and they'd come out and put their pyjamas on and I said, 'you'll have to wear bras now'.*

When describing the main changes in her relationship with her mother as she grew older, Francesca Robson (14) remarked:

*Francesca: I used to not mind her coming into the bathroom when I was having a shower and stuff but now I like, I don't feel that comfy doing that and stuff [...] I lock the door when I go to the toilet too, I spoke to my friends and they say that they do the same as me but I hope my mum doesn't think I'm being too closed up or anything...*

As Francesca noted, her increasing desire for bodily privacy, manifested through solitary time in the bathroom, was something she had reflected on with friends and appeared to be an important component of her understanding of 'growing-up'. For Francesca's mother, Julia, this appeared to have operated as a cue for communication, as she noted she had purchased some books on puberty for her daughter after noticing she no longer seemed comfortable using the bathroom at the same time. Generally, however, young people's increasing desire for bodily privacy was not something parents and children reported explicitly discussing with one another. Nevertheless, despite an apparent lack of direct talk, this message appeared to be strongly expressed to their family members through shutting, or even locking, the bathroom door when it was occupied. Based on their study of the rules that exist in family homes, Wood and Beck (1990: 12) discussed the symbolic significance of the front door into the family house, noting, "the door is a valve but it is also a *sign*" (emphasis added). If this symbolism is considered in relation to the bathroom, the shutting and locking of the door appeared to be understood within families as a sign of the occupant's desire for privacy. This was clearly articulated by Sheila Turnbull, when talking about her son:

*Sheila: I think he just maybe started shuttin' the door or something, whereas y'know if I'm in the bath I rarely shut the door, it's maybe ajar or something like that which is no' kinda like an invitation to come in but it's allowed, well if the door's shut y'know there's somebody that's no' wantin' you to go in.*

In this extract, Sheila clearly distinguished between the meaning of a closed door and one that is ajar. She also noted that this was not something which they had ever discussed, but she had interpreted his closing of the door as a signal of his desire for privacy. Indeed, the significance of shutting the bathroom door was invoked in a third of parents' descriptions of the process of 'growing-up', such as Sandra Kerr, who said:

*Sandra: I s'pose growing a beard and shaving, you see all that happening and y'know you don't go in the bathroom, they lock the doors and that kind of stuff, that's them growing up.*

By commenting on those bodily changes visible to parents, Sandra implicitly alluded to those which tend to be hidden from view. Indeed, another mother, Kim Franklin, described how her knowledge of her son's body had dramatically reduced as he had 'grown up':

*Kim: Y'know, any changes like y'know getting hair on his body I don't see cos of course now I sort of see him, his arms and from the neck up sort of thing [...] There was a much more relaxed vibe about that when he was younger and now that he's more sort of pulled back or, 'I'm in the bath, don't come in Mum!', so I s'pose I do feel that I don't know how he's developing, whether he's, y'know, very hairy or whether things are happening at the normal rate for him.*

As discussed in Chapter Four, parents and young people seemed to sway towards behavioural understandings, rather than age-based definitions, of 'teenagers'. In many families, shutting the bathroom door was reported to be an important behavioural indicator of the onset of puberty and a sign that young people were 'growing up'. Therefore, rather than just being an incidental occurrence, shutting the bathroom door appeared to be a significant event shaping families' everyday interactions, even though it was not often remarked upon between parents and children.

In reference to her research on older people and bodily care, Julia Twigg (2003: 143) commented:

“Nothing could be more mundane and everyday than the processes of body care [...] These processes are assumed to be both too private and too trivial for comment, certainly too trivial for traditional academic analysis. They belong with those other aspects of private life which we are socialised to pass over in silence.”

Indeed, while discussion of families’ negotiations over the bathroom is, by definition, concerned with micro-processes, these apparently mundane and everyday actions are not outside wider discursive concerns. Firstly, by examining young people’s strategies to secure privacy from their family members, this chapter contributes to literature which disrupts notions of the home as a private space within a public/private dichotomy (Allan and Crow, 1989; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Sibley and Lowe, 1992). Furthermore, in the context of widespread panic about childhood sexual abuse, this research responds to a distinct lack of empirical information about practices of intimacy and sexuality, and perceptions of ‘appropriate’ boundaries in so-called ‘normal’ (i.e. non-abusing) families (Gabb, 2007).

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Backett-Milburn (2000: 82) noted that keeping children’s bodies healthy and maintained is a major objective for parents, although how this is achieved in practice is, “often unclear and, therefore, contested both between parents themselves and between parents and children”. Certainly, in this study there were a variety of ways in which parents, especially mothers, appeared to continue to feel they should monitor the bodily care of their children through teenage years. However, in the context of their children’s increasing privacy and the sexualised connotations of their physical development, the practical negotiation of this could be complicated. Furthermore, parents, particularly fathers, appeared increasingly uncertain about how much interest they should show in their children’s changing bodies (or what they should see), and so there was a process of erecting boundaries to keep interaction and communication ‘safe’.

Most young people reported some level of communication with at least one of their parents (usually mothers) about their physical development. Although many said they found discussion about their bodies awkward or embarrassing, this nevertheless appeared to be largely understood as a legitimate topic of communication between mothers and children. Young people's concern about 'being normal' in terms of their physical development resonates with James (1993) argument that the body plays an important role in children's evaluations of each other. That young people appear to experience these concerns as very real worries, yet may feel embarrassed about raising them with parents, is supported by Harvey et al. (2007), who found that young people expressed high levels of anxiety about their physically developing bodies on anonymous internet forums.

Mothers' involvement in helping manage their children's bodies extended beyond just discussion and reassurance about their physical development, to also involve practical management, such as purchasing products and helping seek 'expert advice' (e.g. from doctors, bra-fitters, websites). Indeed, participants described the negotiated management of young people's changing bodies; while there was an element of relinquishing some responsibility to mothers, young people also maintained power by regulating what they did and did not disclose to them.

Mothers were far more involved than fathers in helping manage their children's physical development, and more so with daughters than sons. It may be that mothers and daughters more readily discussed their interactions concerning bodies as I am female. However, the greater extent of reported communication between female participants confirms studies which indicate less parent-son communication about puberty than parent (mother)-daughter communication (DiIorio et al. 1999; Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999). Indeed, there appeared to be particular tensions concerning cross-gender communication between parents and children, partly due to the seemingly high value placed on experiential gendered knowledge. Although a small minority of fathers reported discussion with children, the majority seemed

happy to stand back from involvement. The few accounts of fathers talking to sons about their bodies were described in terms of joking, banter and even teasing. Nevertheless, indirect comments and banter between fathers and sons indicate that while these may not have been the cosy discussions some girls reported with their mothers, there *was* communication going on.

Finally, considering the management of pubertal bodies emerged as a strong theme across the accounts, there were conspicuous silences around the physicality of these transitions. In particular, there was little mention of genitalia, nor of bodily fluids and emissions. This resonates with anthropological discussion concerning the social danger posed by bodily fluids which disrupt the social order (Douglas, 1967; Lawton, 1998; Turner, 2003).

## 7 ACCOUNTS OF COMMUNICATION

### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that parental management of their children's pubertal bodies was a significant mechanism through which 'appropriate' sexuality was *implicitly* communicated within families. This chapter now turns to participants' accounts of their *direct* communication, or lack of, about sex and sexuality. The first section outlines participants' accounts of the extent of their talk about sex and sexuality, focusing on what parents and young people across the sample said they did and did not discuss with one another, and their accounts of the challenges of discussion. Through examination of these topics, I then consider constructions of sex and sexuality within their accounts, particularly focussing on themes of risk, safety and heteronormativity.

In Chapter Two I introduced the ambiguity of the term 'communication' within the literature, noting that it is often conflated with talk. Indeed, one of the aims of this research was to extend the current research focus on talk between parents and children, to explore other modes of communication within families. Participants described multiple ways through which ideas and information about sex and sexuality were conveyed within their families. Their understandings of the different layers of communication are outlined later in the chapter.

### 7.2 To talk or not to talk?

In Chapter Two, I highlighted the increasing recognition that parents and children do not consider sex and sexuality to be a 'unified domain', but rather that sexuality incorporates many different aspects and issues with an apparently sliding scale of perceived legitimacy as a topic of discourse between parents and children (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999). I wanted to explore these notions within my sample to

understand more about the perceived limits of appropriate talk between parents and children. Which topics were widely communicated about, and which did parents and young people rarely report discussing? As previously discussed (3.3.6), many participants used vague language in the interviews to describe their sexual communication, often not specifying the different issues and aspects of sex and sexuality they were referring to when they said they had, or had not, 'talked about sex'. This is an important finding in itself, as it indicates that sex and sexuality is commonly experienced as a difficult topic of conversation within multiple social interactions and contexts.

The data presented in this section are based on two types of accounts of the content of their talk: those spontaneously raised by participants and those stimulated by the prompt cards listing different aspects of sex and sexuality, which were used with approximately half the participants. The advantages and limitations of this method were outlined previously (3.3.6), and a tabulated overview of the responses can be seen in Appendix 7.

All participants reported at least some talk about some aspect of sexuality within their families, although these accounts varied tremendously both across and within families. A small minority of families said they talked comfortably, and sometimes even regularly, about a wide range of different sexual issues, while all participating members of a further small minority appeared to agree among themselves that they rarely, if ever, talked about sexuality. A minority of parents, mostly fathers, explicitly said they had *never* discussed sex per se, and rarely discussed sexuality-related topics, with their children. Interestingly, however, none of these parents seemed to feel this precluded a climate of openness within their family; for example, Jeremy Scott commented, '*whilst it's all very open, there's not much discussion*'.

Generally, as reported in other studies, parents tended to report more frequent and extensive communication about sex and sexuality than did their children. However, even within parents' accounts, despite much talk about what they would like to or should discuss with their children, there still seemed to be relatively little direct talk

about sex. In addition to discussion about physical development, the most commonly reported themes were safety, condoms, pregnancy and homosexuality. These will be explored in greater depth in the following section.

Communication about emotional and relational aspects of sexual relationships did not seem to have been a priority for most parents and young people, with very few reporting having discussed 'fancying', how to convey that attraction or falling in love. Indeed, many young people said they expressly did *not* want to talk to parents about these issues, as illustrated by this extract from Hannah's interview:

*Hannah: I think I was in love with my last boyfriend [...] but I really felt that was something I couldn't talk about to my parents.*

*RL: What was it, why couldn't you talk to them?*

*Hannah: Just cos it felt strange, especially cos that's something I like to keep private and stuff.*

*RL: So it wasn't that you'd like to but found it difficult, you didn't actually want to?*

*Hannah: Yeah, ah-huh.*

Like Hannah, young people appeared to find it easier to convey what they would *not* discuss with parents than what they had. Most young people said they would not talk to their parents if they 'fancied' someone or if they had a boyfriend or girlfriend, although many said they would discuss this with friends; as Harriet (14) noted, '*you tell your friends more details*'. Girls in particular distinguished between parents and friends regarding what they felt comfortable discussing with each, for example:

*Rosie (13): Like talking to my friends about a conversation I had with such-and-such the night before and all the slang words and all the dodgy stuff, I would never ever talk to my Mum about that, she'd just go 'oh my god who is this boy? You can never talk to him again!'*

Rosie alluded to the value of shared generational experience, noting it was easier to talk to friends as, '*you can relate to them more because they're the same age as you and generally going through the same things as you*'. However, as did other girls, Rosie also described the risk of disclosing private information to friends who might '*go and shout about it with everybody else*', noting her greater trust of her mother

meant she talked to her about '*really personal stuff to do with your own body*'. Thus, like many young people, Rosie appeared to value her mother and her friends for different types of talk.

Although many parents seemed to feel a responsibility to talk to their children about sex, they described many reasons for not doing so. By far the most common was that they did not want to embarrass their child or make them uncomfortable, as reflected in these extracts:

*Kim: I feel that I should talk about sexual things, I find it reasonably easy to be open about them, but I think that I'd embarrass him or at least I feel that I would.*

*Terry: Cos it's maybe more about his embarrassment rather than mine, y'know I'll speak to him about anything but only if he's more or less comfortable about it, I wouldnae speak to him if he was tryin' to get oot the door and I was draggin' him back in and sayin' 'you must speak about it!', cos that's no' good.*

To a lesser extent, parents talked about feeling unable to discuss sexual topics due to their *own* embarrassment:

*Sandra: I feel as though a parent should be able to sit down and talk about sex and what it's all about without feeling embarrassed and I know I haven't and I probably would find it difficult.*

A minority of mothers also identified their male partners' embarrassment or lack of knowledge as a further barrier to communication. Many parents said they had not broached particular topics, such as contraception, as they perceived these to be irrelevant to their children at this stage. Parents sometimes qualified these statements, however, by saying they would be willing to discuss these topics if young people raised them, for example:

*Julia: I haven't talked about contraception but I would when it, if it becomes relevant, or if and when, if she wants to talk to me about it but I'm sure she'll know anyway.*

However, while irrelevance was a strong theme in parents' accounts of their lack of discussion, only a small minority of young people identified themselves as too young or not currently in need of information, such as Harvey (11) who said he did not want to know any more about sex 'right now', although he noted he might once he was older.

Concerns about permissiveness were only articulated by a couple of mothers, including Mary, who reflected:

*Mary: I tend not to initiate too many conversations about these kind of things, they may make a bit of a joke and I might laugh about it but it's not something that we discuss quite seriously and I s'pose a part of that is because I don't want to be too permissive, I don't want to say, 'if you're gonna have sex, make sure you use condoms', y'know what I mean?*

Young people cited various reasons for not talking to their parents about sexual matters, including that they did not need to and that they would be embarrassed. Indeed, the lexicons of embarrassment, awkwardness and discomfort were common in both generations' talk about either the prospect, or the experience, of communication:

*Beth: I never speak about stuff like that with my family, it's just awkward, especially with my brother and my Dad, I don't know why, it's just kind of just the fact that we've known each other all our life and we're just like family, I don't know it's just weird to talk about and stuff.*

A large minority of young people said they would not talk to one or both of their parents as they were worried about their interest being interpreted as evidence of sexual activity; as Natalie Maxwell commented of her mother, '*she'll get the wrong end of the stick*'. This was reported regarding young people's interest in finding out more about sex in general, but particularly in relation to contraception. For example, although she said she had heard something about a contraceptive injection from friends, Beth (12) said she would not ask her mum about this as '*she'd get the wrong idea*'. One boy also said that, despite having questions about homosexuality, he did

not feel he could ask his parents, as they would assume he was gay. However, while these young people expressed concern about their parents' judgements, a smaller minority said they felt they could ask their mothers 'anything'.

While some participants, particularly young people, seemed happy mutually avoiding discussion about sexuality, others said they *did* want to talk to their parent/child but struggled with finding ways to comfortably broach the subject, or 'bring it up'. For example, when asked about the most difficult aspect of communication with her parents, Laura (13) noted:

*Laura: Gettin' it out there, like actually saying it, cos sometimes I'll maybe want to say something but I'll think, 'no I can't, I'll just completely embarrass myself'.*

*RL: So just saying the words?*

*Laura: Yeah, it's not about them understanding cos I know they would in most situations so it's not that but it's about actually gettin' it out there.*

Even though she said her parents were likely to be understanding, nevertheless, like many other young people, Laura appeared to struggle with finding ways to initiate a conversation. A few parents and young people talked about the importance of starting to talk about sexual matters from a young age, noting that in the context of ongoing dialogue, it may be less embarrassing to broach specific conversations. However, participants did not always seem to feel this had happened in their own families, such as Kirsty (13):

*Kirsty: If your Dad just y'know talked to you about it when you were young and then you'd just grow up feeling you can talk to your Dad.*

*RL: Uh-huh, so it's starting from a young age?*

*Kirsty: Yeah, cos y'know when you're quite young you just feel you can talk to your Dad about anything and not feel embarrassed or anything, I think yeah if you grew up thinking that then it wouldn't be hard or anything, I think that'd be like a good thing to do.*

While a majority of parents appeared adamant that their children would ask them about anything sex-related if they wanted to, a large minority did not seem to think

their children would choose to come to them first. These diverse perspectives are reflected in the following two quotations:

*Diane: I s'pose there's nothing I've tried to broach that I've not been able to, erm, because I s'pose really I've not instigated any talks about it, y'know I've kind of let her take the lead, if she wants to ask me something she can, because again I know she knows the facts of life, she's got that information there and if there's anything relating to that then I know she'll come and ask me.*

*Shona: Things like having sex and all the rest of it, I mean let's face it young people just wouldn't ask their parents. I mean we're being realistic about it, and yes I'd like tae think she would ask but let's face it I don't believe she would ask me about sex and all that, more than likely to ask friends or read it on the internet or get it out of magazines, although if she asked me I would tell her the truth, but as I say it's just not came up yet [laughs].*

### **7.3 Unpacking 'sex and sexuality'**

Having provided an overview of the topics parents and young people reported talking to each other about, I will now explore their constructions of sex and sexuality in more detail. As discussed earlier, it was sometimes difficult to ascertain what participants meant when they talked about 'sex and sexuality'.

#### **7.3.1 Risky sex: discourses of risk and safety**

The vast majority of the sex and sexuality-related communication participants described seemed to be framed within dual discourses of risk and safety; indeed, participants commonly described parents talking to their children about 'being careful' and 'keeping themselves safe'. However, as much of the reported communication was euphemistic, it was not always clear what the perceived risks were, or indeed what 'being safe' involved. For example, commenting on the lack of discussion about sex within her family, Sarah Kerr (13) noted:

*Sarah: Like they don't really speak about stuff like that, like it's kind of like weird with my Dad cos I'm his little girl and stuff but my Mum just says that when I'm older I'm just to be careful with guys and stuff just in case.*

Where the risks of sex were elaborated upon, pregnancy was by far the most commonly articulated 'danger'. The possibility of their child becoming pregnant, or getting someone pregnant, seemed to be a concern for many parents, although this was delineated by both class and gender. Perhaps unsurprisingly, more parents (mostly mothers) and daughters reported talking to each other about pregnancy than parents and sons. For girls, pregnancy was particularly reported to be discussed in terms of limiting their education and future opportunities, presumably based on the assumption that girls would bear the main responsibility for a child. For example, all three members of the Innes family described regular talk about the negative consequences of pregnancy:

*Brenda: I've told her it's not having sex it's the getting pregnant, having sex and taking precautions I think is perfectly alright [...] fourteen I think's a bit young but I would think by the time you're sort of sixteen, having sex is probably fine and just don't get pregnant cos then you've got responsibilities and you can't get on with your life.*

However, while more talk was reported with girls than boys, this was cross-cut by class. Although many parents across the social spectrum appeared to have discussed pregnancy and early parenthood *in general* with their children, it was only those from socially deprived backgrounds who seemed to feel it was a realistic risk in their *own* children's near-future lives. These parents often appeared to be more forceful in 'warning' their children than those from more privileged backgrounds, as Lorna (14) noted: '*pregnancy, yes I've had the warnings definitely [laughs] ma mum's talked tae me about that and she just says you need tae be careful and all that*'. A minority of boys' parents, both mothers and fathers, reported warning their sons about the risks of sex in terms of 'getting a girl pregnant'. Both parents and sons said these warnings were explicitly conveyed; for example, Paul Wicker described directly telling his son, '*don't get birds pregnant*', while Ricky Gibson (11) reported a recent conversation with his mum where she told him '*don't get girls pregnant an' all that*

*until you're like older'*. However, there appeared to be a strong narrative of male responsibility within these parents' accounts of communication with their sons, as Tracey explained when describing her discussions about pregnancy and contraception with her son:

*Tracey: The main thing is that if you do eventually start experimenting with a girl make sure you're covered and that is it, [...] you might not want to know your child's doin' these things, but yer better off knowin' and tryin' to steer them differently than lettin' them bugger up and gettin' another thirteen or fourteen-year-old girl pregnant through sheer stupidity.*

*RL: Is that something that kind of worries you?*

*Tracey: It is cos it's different on lassies, lassies get the fear o' being landed wi' a child, ken, whereas laddies dinnae really get that fear [...] they think they'll get let off the hook and there's no way I'd let him off the hook, ken, it's a responsibility thing.*

However, despite arguing for male responsibility, Tracey nevertheless commented that if she had a daughter she would have been *'even more forceful in talkin' about it, more for the fact that she could land pregnant'*.

In stark contrast with the strong emphasis on the risk of pregnancy, very few participants reported talking with each other about sexually transmitted infections. A minority of parents talked in their interviews about the risks of what they termed 'diseases', but hardly any said they had discussed this with their children. Young people commonly expressed awareness of sexual 'diseases', although they mostly said they had learnt about these through school or the television, rather than discussion with parents.

Sexual safety was a dominant discourse within participants' accounts of communication, with an overwhelming majority of parents saying their main priority was that their children were safe. However, parental constructions of sexual safety appeared to vary. For the majority, 'being safe' seemed to refer to using contraception, although the communication of this to their children did not seem to be a straight-forward matter. Despite many parents identifying contraception as one of the most important aspects of 'sex education', a large minority of these parents

also said they felt their children were too young to discuss it, often stating it was 'not relevant'. For example, Joan MacKay, who lived in a deprived area of the city, talked about the importance of contraception within 'sex education', remarking: '*I mean I don't want them coming in and saying 'I'm having a baby!' That's the last thing I need!*'. However, when asked if she had discussed this with her daughters, she commented:

*Joan: No, I didn't talk about that no, I think they're actually too young for that, don't you? I just said, 'you're not to have sex and if you do, come and speak to me first.*

Two boys, (13) and (14), said their parents recently threw away their c:cards, a card which enables young people over thirteen to access free condoms, telling them they were 'too young' to have one. Interestingly, these stories were absent from these parents' accounts, perhaps suggesting they did not want to present themselves to me as 'illiberal'.

Although more than half the participants said they had communicated about condoms within their family, very few reported having discussed where to get contraceptives and none reported any interaction about how to use them. A few young people said they did not need to know this at the moment, although others, particularly boys, said they had 'mucked about' with condoms with friends. Again, the largely euphemistic references to 'protection', 'being covered' and 'taking precautions' in the interviews are likely to reflect the communication between parents and children.

There was very little reported communication about other forms of contraception. Only one mother, again from a low-income background, reported direct discussion with her daughter about the Pill, due to her suspicions she was having sex:

*Mother: I remember when I was tryin' to get her to go on the Pill, she was goin', 'you're disgusting, you're disgusting', and I was like 'why am I disgusting?', 'talkin like that!'*

The daughter's apparently defensive reaction to her mother's suggestion of her sexual activity was to express disgust at the insinuation. Indeed, young people's fears of being morally judged by their parents may be a barrier to honest dialogue.

Interestingly, one father noted he would feel more confident talking to his daughter about condoms than other contraceptives as he was more familiar with them and they did not require acknowledgment of female genitalia:

*Paul: The IUD, the coil and all these things, the femidom, I don't really know how to use them myself, most of them are aimed at women, and I would be slightly embarrassed saying to her, 'well with a femidom you go up the, y'know, I'll just let your Mum tell you that', erm I wouldn't be inclined to know about that one.*

Parents' multidimensional understandings of sexual safety are illustrated by Terry Vaughan's response to a question about parents' roles in their children's sexual learning:

*Terry: I just really want my children to be safe, I'm no' under any illusion that they're no' gonna try and dae things [...] everyone knows it happens and it's goin on, but at the end o' the day, it's like safety, consensual.*

*RL: What do you mean by safety?*

*Terry: Contraception, y'know, that they're no' goin' in a dingy wee alleyway an' all that kind o' thing, that you're doin' it in a safe place but also that they're keepin' themselves safe fro' pregnancy, STDs etcetera.*

*RL: Is that something you talk with Fraser about at all?*

*Terry: Maybe not as direct, but it kinda does come up in a more roundabout way yeah, he knows people in the area that's got pregnant as a teenager but he doesnae really kinda want to have an open discussion about that, y'know, it's no' something that we've kinda totally openly discussed about condoms.*

While many other parents referred to safety in terms of contraception, Terry was one of only two parents who mentioned safety in terms of consensual sex, although a few parents reported talking to their daughters about 'saying no'. Terry was also one of a further small minority who talked about the physical context of young people's sexual activity although, again, this was only mentioned by those living in less

affluent circumstances. However, this extract illustrates the tensions within parent-child communication; despite identifying his wishes for his son's safety, Terry also noted this was not something they directly discussed, but rather came up '*in a more roundabout way*'. Indeed, much of the communication reported by parents and children seemed to involve cautiously skirting around the issues.

For a minority of parents, all of whom self-identified as Christian, sexual safety seemed to equate to abstinence from sex until marriage. These parents reported talking to their children about sexual relationships more directly and more regularly than most, for example:

*Rosemary: Most of the time, I think it's nearly every day, I always talk to her, I say, 'don't ever have a boyfriend until you're married, just continue with your education, you are not cheating me, you're cheating your life, if you don't go to bed with men, you will get everything you want'.*

*Mary: Well because we are Christians, for me it's important that they're not sexually promiscuous. I don't want them going out and having sex with anybody and everybody, and we personally believe that it's important to get married and have sex afterwards, I don't know how that's gonna go down with them particularly [laughs] but I will say it as many times as there's an opportunity.*

All these parents' participating children seemed to have a clear awareness of their parents' views, as Mary's son illustrated: '*I have talked with Mum about like be careful how much people you do sleep with and not to have sex before you're married or anything like that*'. However, while a few of these parents appeared to be dogmatic in their warnings about pre-marital sex, others talked about trying to negotiate the delicate balance between their own personal morality and the values they felt it was important to convey to their children to keep them 'safe':

*Sheila: As I say through our religion it's something that really, I mean ideally somebody has sex after marriage, but I know that doesn't always happen so I mean I don't want to say to the kids, 'you must never have sex outwith marriage', cos that would be irresponsible me saying that cos you know these things do happen.*

This section has explored the multiple meanings of sexual safety within the accounts. Through dominant focus on pregnancy as the major risk of sex, this appeared to implicitly frame sex as heterosexual. The following section will explore both explicit and implicit heteronormativity within the accounts.

### 7.3.2 Heteronormativity

There was a presumption of heterosexuality in the language an overwhelming majority of participants used, particularly parents speculating about their children's future relationships. Indeed, despite my careful use of gender-neutral language so as not to imply heterosexual relationships, nearly all the parents referred to their children's future partners as the opposite sex. Exceptionally, one mother spontaneously reflected:

*Mother: I would talk about partner rather than boyfriend, I would say y'know 'when you decide you want to have a loving relationship' rather than say 'get married', I mean I actively use as open and sort of broad language as possible so that they don't in any way feel that I expect them to only have relationships with boys or people from the opposite sex.*

*RL: Do you think they've picked up on that?*

*Mother: Well, to start with I didn't want to make it extant, I just privately used that language in the hope that that would just give them a subliminal message that that was what I felt...*

Thus, this mother seemed to feel that language was significant for communicating sexual values. However, she also described the indirectness of this strategy, hoping the message would be conveyed 'subliminally'.

Almost half the participants expressed what might be considered 'tolerance' of homosexuality<sup>10</sup>; about equal numbers of parents and young people said they knew people who were gay, often commenting that they were 'no different to us' or 'really nice people'. However, a minority of mothers and young people described their

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<sup>10</sup> Although commonly used in relation to homosexuality, the use of this term is problematic (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

male partners and fathers, most of whom were not interviewed themselves, as finding homosexuality 'difficult'. For example, Tracey Gibson said her husband became aggressive when she joked their son might be gay. Many parents and young people remarked on the widespread use of the term 'gay' to denote something negative, although only a small minority of parents reported challenging this, such as Debbie Baxter who said she and her partner had '*always slapped down on*' what she termed their son's 'homophobic' language.

Even though few participants reported explicitly negative comments about homosexuality, it nevertheless appeared to be constructed as a topic of amusement within many families. For example, the popularity of *Little Britain* at the time of my fieldwork meant that 'the only gay in the village' was commonly mentioned as a joke which parents and children could laugh about together. Furthermore, in a few families, participants reported parents, particularly fathers, teasing boys about being gay. For example, Hannah Wicker (15) described this between her mother's new partner, Dave, and her brother:

*Hannah: We have a running joke that my wee brother's gay, and we know he's not but with my Mum and Dave, cos we met Dave last year and he moved in like two weeks after or something, and he always thought Tom was coming onto him and we knew he wasn't but it just stuck.*

In this sense, the teasing instigated by Dave appeared to have assumed the status of a 'family joke', which seemed to be mobilised to foster good relations between Dave and his new step-children. Indeed, Tom also talked favourably about his step-father, saying they 'get on really well', also noting: '*I make fun of him and he makes fun of me, I call him bald, he calls me gay*'. Tom did not appear to consider this in conflict with his own perspectives on homosexuality, stating: '*I don't really care if people're gay or not, there's nothing wrong with that*'. Nevertheless, although Hannah noted that no-one thought Tom was gay, their interactions appeared to police the boundaries of acceptable masculinities, in that men should be young (i.e. not bald) and heterosexual.

While there were significant tensions around sexual diversity, this nevertheless seemed to be an area which was possible for some parents and children to acknowledge with each other. However, any examination of parent-child sex and sexuality-related communication must also consider those topics which parents and children say they do not discuss with one another as these can tell us much about the perceived limits of appropriate communication within families.

### **7.3.3 All that is left unsaid: Notable absences from parent-child sexual communication**

Parents and young people reported very little communication about what ‘sex’ actually involved. As discussed in Chapter Five, parents mostly seemed to feel it was their responsibility to ensure their children understood ‘the facts of life’, invariably seeming to refer to the reproductive function of heterosexual sex. However, beyond ensuring their children were aware that ‘sex’ referred to penile-vaginal intercourse, further discussion of sexual practices seemed to be considered too embarrassing or awkward, even in those families where other sexuality-related topics appeared to be more comfortably discussed, as reflected in the following extract from Shona Young’s interview:

*Shona: I think it would be quite difficult I s'pose the bits about, like how tae have sex or something like that, that I probably would still find quite difficult [...] actually saying about the mechanics and what happens, that kind of thing, I'd still think that would be quite hard, and I just cannot imagine she would ever want tae ask me anything like that.*

Indeed, discussion of sexual practices appeared to be extremely rare. Although a few mothers described responding to their younger children’s requests for explanations of sexual practices, such as ‘blowjobs’, there was little reported discussion of how to negotiate oneself in these encounters. Only one mother reported talking to her children about sexual practices other than penile-vaginal intercourse:

*Mother: I tell my daughter, 'do what you are comfortable with, don't let anybody force you [mimicking male voice] 'oh we should do anal, let's do anal', no! Or, 'my ex-girlfriend gave me oral sex', no! And I tell my son, 'don't force anybody's daughter to do what you want, because if she calls the Police I will give them the back-up to jail you so people have to treat people with respect, y'know?*

This exceptional account of a parent raising non-reproductive sex with her children, nevertheless did not seem to be within a discourse of sexual fulfilment, but rather reproduced traditional ideas of masculine and feminine sexuality through positioning her son as potentially predatory and her daughter as sexually vulnerable.

In accordance with findings from other studies (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999; West, 1999), there appeared to be a distinct lack of communication between parents and children about sexual pleasure. Parents sometimes talked in general terms about wanting their children to be happy in their future relationships, but sexual fulfilment did not seem to be a subject for discussion. Only one mother reported acknowledging sexual pleasure – both male and female – with her son, noting she had told him, *'if you're gonna dae it, you've gotta enjoy it properly and you've gotta understand that we have our pleasures too!'*. However, she conceded she had not *'got into depth yet about how it feels'*, as she felt discussion of female genitalia would be *'total gobbledee-gook to him'*, although she intended to do this in the future. Male sexual arousal was rarely reportedly alluded to in jokes between fathers and sons (7.4.3), while no other participants reported any communication about female sexual arousal or orgasm. This "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988) will be reflected on further in Chapter Nine.

Perhaps the most notable absence from parents' and young people's accounts of their communication was masturbation. Although masturbation was one of the prompt cards, most participants either ignored the card, while others laughed at the suggestion that they might discuss this with their parent/child. Indeed, participants' apparent difficulty discussing masturbation was evident in the interview dialogue, as most seemed keen to change the subject as soon as possible. Exceptionally, one mother spontaneously described trying to initiate conversation about masturbation

with her daughter, although she reported the latter's resistance to this, noting '*she was not interested in having that conversation*'. In two families, parents described alluding to masturbation with their sons, after finding pornography in their possession. For example, one described the ensuing encounter after seeing 'porny mags' in her son's schoolbag:

*Mother: I said, 'as far as I'm concerned if that's what you're y'know, there'll probably come a time when you want them, you might want them now', I said, 'that's fine so long as you keep them out [undistinguishable] and if [younger brother] ever finds them I'll kill you [laughing] 'y'know what you do is up to you', but he says 'oh god' [embarrassed tone]*

Thus, this mother appeared to both legitimate her son's pornography, while simultaneously conveying it was something to be hidden. A few parents alluded to normative boundaries of appropriate communication between parents and children, such as Kim Franklin, who noted that masturbation, '*is not particularly something that er, y'know you share mostly with your parents*', while Christine Johnson remarked, '*it's something you don't talk about*'. Judith Eliot expanded on this:

*Judith: I think masturbation is something that you will come across yourself and it's your own little secret, I don't mind if she will never talk to me about it...*

This extract is interesting in light of the rest of Judith's interview, in which she reported feeling it was best for young people and parents to discuss sex 'openly'. Indeed, the notion that there are aspects of sexuality which do not need to be discussed between parents and children appears to challenge conceptions of 'open' communication as that where family members can discuss anything. Certainly, masturbation seemed to be one aspect of sexuality which young people were allowed, and even *encouraged* to keep private.

## 7.4 Unpacking ‘communication’

This chapter has so far provided an overview of participants’ accounts of their talk about sex and sexuality-related topics. Through examination of the topics that were and were not reported to be discussed, I then explored how sex and sexuality appeared to be constructed as a topic of discourse within these families. However, analysis of the accounts revealed complexities within understandings of ‘communication’, as well as constructions of sexuality. When asked to reflect on their sexuality-related communication, participants tended to initially provide accounts of their verbal interactions, although in the broader context of the interviews, participants described many other modes of communication through which sexual information and ideas were conveyed within families.

### 7.4.1 Conceptualising ‘talk’

Participants seemed to vary in their consideration of what counted as having ‘talked’ about a topic. In many cases, participants, particularly young people, initially said they had not talked about either sex in general, or about particular sexual issues with their parent/child, yet later went on to describe some level of communication about that topic. There may be a variety of explanations for this. From an objectivist perspective, this might be understood as contradictory or evidence of an unreliable source, but these apparent tensions within many individuals’ accounts raise more interesting questions about how parents and children theorise and represent their communication. What does it mean to say that you have communicated about sex? Indeed, what do parents and young people seem to think *counts* as ‘communication’?

Tom Wicker’s (13) account of his communication with his parents about condoms is a good example. Not only did Tom say his parents regularly told him to use a condom, he also recalled a particular instance where his mother left condoms for him at home:

*Tom: My parents always tell me to use a condom, even when we just bring it up, which is quite weird, and they get me them, which is weirder.*

*RL: So they've given you them in the past?*

*Tom: Yeah, a couple, about a month or two back [...] yeah, she just left them on the table, I phoned her up and asked her why there were condoms on the table and she said they were for me.*

*RL: And did you have any kind of chat about it?*

*Tom: Nah, she went alright then and hung up.*

However, later in his interview Tom stated:

*Tom: Well I don't talk to them about condoms, even though I got them from them, they just asked me what I'd done with them, and I told them I just messed about wi' them and they were like 'oh right, fair enough', and left it at that.*

At first sight, there appears to be a tension within Tom's account concerning whether he has or has not talked to his parents about condoms. However, if we consider how Tom might have conceptualised what it means to talk, this might not necessarily be so. Although he reported a verbal exchange with his parents about condoms, there does not seem to have been any discussion of how to negotiate their use with a partner, nor how to practically use them, which may be what Tom considers 'talking'. Indeed, Tom's father, Paul, said he had not talked to his son about where to get condoms from, nor how to use them, although he seemed to feel the banter and jokes they exchanged did constitute having 'talked'.

Tom and Paul's accounts of their communication are also a good illustration of divergent perspectives within families. During the interview, Tom frequently stated that he did not talk to either of his parents about sex and sexuality because, '*it would be weird*', he did not '*need to*' and he was, '*never in the house long enough to bring something like that up*'. Paul, on the other hand, described regular chats and 'banter' with Tom about multiple sexual topics, including condoms, girlfriends and homosexuality. In the context of implicit criticism of his ex-wife's parenting, Paul seemed keen to portray himself as an involved father, and thus described much ongoing dialogue concerning sexual matters with his children. Although Tom said he generally got on with his dad, he seemed keen to stress his independence and to

portray himself as 'knowing' about sex. Thus, their accounts may reflect their differential investments in their representation of communication.

In a few cases it became apparent that parents' assertions they had talked to their children about sexual matters did not seem to involve a two-way dialogue, for example:

*Don: I'm open about most things, we've talked about drugs, we've talked about sex, we've talked about menstruation, I don't mean sitting down constantly and going over it but she's heard, I wouldnae allow her ears to be there if I didnae want her to hear what we're talking about, so she basically knows my attitudes and opinions on they things.*

Although it is unclear from this extract who Don was referring to as 'we', he seemed to count his daughter, Georgie's (12), presence when he was talking as them having talked, even though she seemed peripheral to these interactions. It is interesting that in Georgie's account of communication with her father, although she reported fairly regular conversations about smoking, alcohol and drugs, she clearly stated several times that she did not talk to her father about anything sex-related as, '*I've got me pals for that sorta thing*'. In this sense, Georgie and Don's conceptualisations of talk appeared to be quite different; Don's emphasis on Georgie hearing him talk did not seem to count as talking in Georgie's view. Indeed, describing her mother's 'lectures' about the risks of sex, Honour (15) identified the difference between *talking* with someone as an interactive conversation, and *being told*, which renders the 'listener' passive: '*my Mum tells me about it, not me talking to her*'. A small minority of mothers described similar strategies for talking to their children about topics they felt were important, even though they knew their child did not welcome discussion. For example, Diane Dixon described talking to her fifteen-year-old son:

*Diane: I do sometimes, y'know, stuff that I feel I need to talk to him about although he doesn't want to talk, y'know I'll go in and I'll shut the door, sit on his bed and say 'right', and I would talk to him then whether he wanted me to or not - y'know I would just talk at him.*

Unfortunately, as I did not interview her son, I could not explore his perspectives on his mother's approach to communication. However, while Diane seemed to feel talking *at* her son was the only way she could gain his attention, she also indicated awareness that these were issues he did not seem to want to discuss with her, and so it is likely neither of them felt particularly comfortable with these interactions. Thus, these extracts illustrate the importance of two-way dialogue between parents and children. Furthermore, I would also tentatively suggest that these multiple understandings of what 'counts' as talk, may partially explain discrepancies between children's and parents' reports of their sex and sexuality-related communication in this, and other studies.

#### 7.4.2 'Sit-down conversation'

Many parents and young people spontaneously referred to 'sit-down conversation', although this was rarely how they described their own communication with each other. Indeed, although much parent-child communication appeared to occur when seated (e.g. while watching television, in the car), the idea of 'sitting down' seemed to signify not just a contextual description, but also the *type* of communication that was imagined, as reflected in the following extract:

*Jeremy: I mean the old-fashioned idea of sitting down with your child as soon as they turn a certain age and explaining the facts of life, that's just out-dated and unreal I think so no, I think you are there to just pick up on things and make sure they're going down the right lines, I can't imagine y'know sitting down and having a proper conversation about being serious about this for a second...*

Evidence from the accounts indicates that participants seemed to feel a 'sit-down talk' represented a direct and potentially formal conversation explicitly focused on sexual topics and typified by a one-way dispersion of information from parents to children. Although a very small minority of mothers seemed to aspire to talking with their children in this way, an overwhelming majority of parents said they felt this was outdated, inappropriate and likely to be experienced as uncomfortable for all concerned. Indeed, the notion of a 'proper conversation' or 'sit-down talk' was

frequently invoked as a measure against which participants' own more casual communication was defined, as illustrated by Sheila Turnbull:

*Sheila: I never sit them down, cos then that's quite an unnatural situation. If I was to say 'right, come in and we'll sit down and talk about sex tonight', I mean that would be, I might find that quite awkward as well, whereas if as I say, if they ask me a question or it comes up and it's just something you're talkin' about in general...*

*Elspeth: We haven't sat down and talked about sex for a very long time actually in terms of sitting down and having a conversation about it.*

*RL: Did you ever actually sit down and have a sort of chat or?*

*Elspeth: What, a sort of a birds and the bees type-chat?*

*RL: Yeah.*

*Elspeth: No, that was a very gradual thing when she was younger, I mean, y'know bit by bit by bit, how babies are made, 'what like that? You mean really?'*

Interestingly, a couple of parents used the phrase in more positive terms when describing talk about other topics; for example, Murray Yule remarked: *'I think we can, as a kind of family we will kind of sit down and freely talk about family things'*. However, in contrast to the style of communication that might be considered suitable for more general discussion, most participants described their sex and sexuality-related communication as casual and almost fleeting, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Sarah (13): I don't talk about it [sex] with my family, my Mum's probably said some stuff but like just bits and bobs, but not like into full-blown conversation about it...*

*Terry: It's maybe no' kinda sit down direct, this is the issue let's deal wi' it, the information's goin' over but there might be a wee bit o' humour in it and a wee bit o' banter, we don't have huge chats but we have discussions and comments, flash back and forward etcetera...*

*Mary: They're not direct conversations that we have, erm, I s'pose some of this is probably much more indirect or jokes...*

These extracts illustrate the finding overall that parents' and young people's sex and sexuality-related communication did not reflect the 'urban myth' of 'sit-down' talks, but rather acknowledgement of sex and sexuality was woven into their daily interactions through indirect comments, jokes and asides, non-verbal gestures and responses and tacit family codes.

#### **7.4.3 The use of distant others and extreme cases**

As already discussed, many parents and children appeared to find it particularly embarrassing to talk directly about sex and sexuality. Therefore, one strategy which a large minority of parents appeared to use to convey sexual values to their children was to draw attention to particular issues, such as pressure to have sex and teenage pregnancy, via distant 'others', such as television characters. Through discussion of these 'others', parents were able to articulate their perspectives about the boundaries of appropriate sexuality and behaviour to their children, without directly focusing on their child. Although parents across the sample reported alluding to extreme cases, the response to one particular news story provides an illuminating example of how parents used these extreme cases to communicate their sexual values.

On 12<sup>th</sup> May 2006, during the middle of my fieldwork period, most national and local newspapers carried the story of a girl who, having become pregnant at eleven, was soon-to-be Britain's youngest mother aged twelve. In the three weeks following this report, the story was referred to by over half the participants I interviewed, both parents and young people. For example, when asked about recent communication about sexual matters within his family, Adam Turnbull (14) noted that 'teenage' pregnancy had been broached through the story:

*Adam: That girl in the newspaper, the eleven-year-old, I read it in the paper and everything.*

*RL: And then what happened?*

*Adam: Well my Gran was over at the time and Mum and Gran were having a conversation about it and everything and I just sort of listened in, just like how wrong it is in that the mum's actually like proud of her that she got herself pregnant and she's getting publicity for it.*

While Adam noted he did not participate in the conversation himself, he appeared to have surmised his female relatives' attitudes about the situation. Indeed, Adam's mother, Sheila, seemed to feel positively about sexual matters casually arising via 'items in the news' and expressed awareness that her responses to these stories were likely to be a way in which her children gained a sense of her values:

*Sheila: I mean when that twelve-year-old girl was pregnant they would've got vibes of my opinion off that when we were talkin' about it, equally they obviously didn't think it was wonderful either, it wasn't that they were sayin' 'oh that's y'know as it should be' or y'know, that's what should happen, I mean it's not...*

Most parents appeared to express a strong negative reaction to the story which was picked up on by their children. In many of these cases parents seem to have indicated their feelings verbally, as Harvey (11) noted when recalling his mother's response: '*well there was like a newspaper that was saying, 'the Mum to be twelve' cos she's had a baby and my Mum was like, 'Why did she have that now? She should wait!'*' However, Harvey's interpretation of his mother's response appeared to extend beyond her verbal reaction: '*just the way she turns her face and things when she's reading the paper, that's how I know what she thinks*'. Parents described varying degrees of engagement with cases such as these, with some saying they explicitly drew attention to them as 'big warnings' to their children, while others said discussion tended to arise from their children's interest in the stories.

#### **7.4.4 Humour**

The significance and deployment of humour was one of the most striking gender differences between young people's accounts of their sex and sexuality-related communication. Although a few girls expressed preference for communication which was not too serious, the active importance of humour and joking was far more prominent in boys' accounts of their sexual communication. Most boys seemed to feel humour facilitated more comfortable communication about sex and sexuality, and many

identified it as the main difference between talking to their friends and their parents, as Evan Bell (13) explained:

*Evan: Cos like you can talk to your friends an' that like cos they'll understand and you can speak to them in any way you want an' that, with your Mum and Dad like you can't, like you have to say it in a certain way.*

*RL: Why do you have to?*

*Evan: You have to stay like serious an' that, where your pals an' that you can have a joke an' just, I dunno...*

Like several boys, Evan suggested joking with friends about sex was easier than talking to his parents as he did not feel pressure to 'stay serious'. Luke Franklin (13) also expressed dissatisfaction with his mother's approach to talk about sexual matters, which he described when asked about any changes he would like to make to their communication:

*Luke: Er, for her to sort of like stop being so blunt about y'know, like maybe if she softened it up and asked me less directly, y'know make sure you're in a good mood, sort of like joking about and stuff before you just.*

*RL: So is that quite important to be a bit jokey?*

*Luke: Yeah, you've gotta be sort of like in the right mood to talk about it.*

For Luke, humour seemed to be a crucial part of 'setting the scene' for more relaxed communication. It also appeared to be a distancing mechanism, which may be more comfortable than his mother's 'blunt' questions. Indeed, one of the few boys who seemed relatively comfortable communicating with his mother about sexual matters, suggested it was her use of humour which enabled him to approach her:

*Ben (13): I've come home and a couple of things I was too shy to ask in the classroom I'd ask Mum.*

*RL: And do you feel ok doing that?*

*Ben: Yeah, I feel fine cos I know when Mum tells me she kind of makes it into a joke as well so it's not hitting you straight away serious, she puts it as a joke sorta.*

*RL: And do you think that's a good way?*

*Ben: Yeah, it's quite a good way cos she's not just puttin' it right on you.*

As Ben notes, the creation of a light-hearted atmosphere meant he did not feel 'put on', as Luke appeared to. Ben's mother, Christine, certainly indicated humour was a conscious part of her strategy to create a climate of approachability for her son:

*Christine: I think parents should even just leave some leaflets round or something like, 'here, just have a look at this', and make a bit of a joke out of it and make it like they're not doing anything wrong asking about.*

However, although on the whole mothers seemed to be more involved than fathers in talking to their children about sex, and despite a minority of mothers' apparent sensitivity to the role of light-heartedness in their communication, boys rarely described their communication with their mothers in this way. Rather, they noted it was fathers with whom they could joke about sex. As discussed in Chapter Five, fathers were commonly described as someone to 'have a laugh with' and more light-hearted than mothers, although they were also sometimes reported to be stricter. Indeed, fathers' jokes appeared to play an important role for some boys' sexual learning, as Nathan (12) explained when talking about his main source of information concerning sex and puberty:

*Nathan: Er, my Dad and my brother.*

*RL: Not your Mum?*

*Nathan: No, like my Dad like making rude jokes an' stuff.*

*RL: With your Dad saying rude jokes and stuff, like do you always know what he's talking about or?*

*Nathan: Sometimes not but then like I ask somebody what it means like my friend or something and they tell me so...*

Nathan's assertion that he had learnt most of his sexual information from his dad and brother is particularly interesting in light of his mother's assessment that he talked to her the most within the family about issues related to sex and 'growing up' and '*does not talk to Dougie about anything much*'. Certainly, Nathan rarely mentioned his dad elsewhere in his interview, and described a relatively detailed level of discussion with his mother about sexual relationships and values. Nevertheless, this extract seems to indicate the importance of his dad's 'rude jokes' for his learning about male

bodies and sex. Even though boys said they did not always entirely understand their fathers' jokes, some noted they had initiated a process of information-seeking, such as Nathan, who clarified what he had heard with his friends.

Although a few declined to say what the jokes were about, where boys did elaborate on their content, they seemed to centre around euphemistic references to penises, 'pubes', erections and male ejaculation. As most mothers said they struggled to talk to their sons about their physical development (see Chapter Six) and fathers were also often reported to avoid talk about puberty, these jokes may be some boys only parental communication regarding male bodies. Fathers' jokes tended to be described by boys as 'rude' or 'adult', as Angus (11) illustrated:

*Angus: I've not really learnt anything from my Dad [laughs] but I don't really know, I probably have kind of subconsciously kind of thing, yeah.*

*RL: What sorts of things?*

*Angus: Well sometimes Dad passes jokes that are for adults and then I think about it [...] and it's quite like all these smutty jokes that my Dad kind of does, but I get them now.*

*RL: Do you think he knows that you get them?*

*Angus: He does now cos I kind of laugh quite a lot at his jokes.*

*RL: So by you laughing he knows that you understand what's going on?*

*Angus: Yeah.*

In this extract, Angus acknowledged his different levels of learning, alluding to the indirect communication of sexualised information through his father's jokes. Although Angus said his father's 'smutty jokes' (one of which was about erections) were often addressed to his father's friends, rather than directly to him, Angus still appeared to acquire information from them about bodies and sex. He also suggested that by laughing at these jokes, he conveyed his understanding of the source of the humour, and thus his sexual knowledge, to his father. Indeed, this has resonances with the ways in which some parents reported gauging their children's understandings of sex and sexuality by observing their reaction to sexual content on television (see 7.4.5). Furthermore, Derrick's wife, Caroline, attributed Angus's

apparent ease at asking his parents about potentially sensitive issues, such as masturbation, to the climate of '*winding up and innuendo*' within their family.

One father talked about using humour to facilitate conversation about girls with his son and his son's friends:

*Paul: I know most of his mates well enough that without trying to be too cool or trendy, cos that's counter-productive, I can get involved in the discussion and slag them all off, sometimes between these boys if you slag them about something and tease them you can get more across that way rather than being the hectoring, lecturing Dad.*

While Paul talked about trying to convey the importance of respectful relationships through joking, some of the other 'banter' and jokes which were described, particularly those relating to penis size and male sexual 'performance', could be considered to perpetuate hegemonic versions of masculinity.

Although most boys said humour facilitated more comfortable sexual communication, a minority also drew attention to its potential for precluding discussion if it were perceived as insensitive, as Nathan (12) explained:

*Nathan: It's quite hard to talk to them about erections or something like that, and like I feel uncomfortable talking to people about all that stuff and all.*

*RL: Would you maybe talk to your Dad about that, do you think?*

*Nathan: Probably not cos like he'd just go 'bit of a strange question' and it's like he'd just make a joke out of it to be honest...*

Although Nathan reported having picked up sexual information from his dad's 'rude jokes', nevertheless, his perception that Dougie '*turns everything into a joke*' appeared to prevent him talking to Dougie about personal issues, such as erections. It may be that boys find general joking easier than personalised teasing. Certainly, Angus indicated his past experience of his father's teasing meant he did not want to talk to him about 'fancying' girls:

*Angus: I haven't spoken to them [parents] about girls [laughs] and I don't really want to, I'd be a bit embarrassed.*

*RL: Do you know what it is that would make you feel embarrassed?*

*Angus: Well, my Dad would just kind of go, 'Angus fancies someone!', cos the first time I fancied someone, Dad sang for like a month or something, the same song throughout the household even when there was visitors!*

Derrick's teasing about his crush was experienced as embarrassing by Angus, particularly as it extended beyond family knowledge. While those fathers who mentioned joking in their communication with sons mostly talked positively about its use, Derrick was the only father to express recognition that this may also be problematic. Indeed, he identified his apparent tendency to '*be a bit flippant and make jokes about things that are probably quite serious*' as the most challenging aspect of communication. It may be that some fathers' light-hearted, or even 'flippant' responses to talk about sexual matters are partly due to their own embarrassment or efforts not to make communication into a 'big issue'. Certainly, the extracts above appear to indicate the role of humour in both facilitating and preventing comfortable communication between fathers and sons. Indeed, achieving the balance between a light-hearted and relaxed climate which is not perceived as insensitive appeared to be difficult to negotiate, and could further contribute to the difficulties that many parents and children seem to have when communicating about sex and sexuality.

Although over three quarters of the boys who lived with a man talked about their male-male sex-related joking, interestingly fathers themselves discussed this less. There may be several explanations for this. Some of those fathers who boys referred to in their interviews were not interviewed themselves. Of those who were, however, it may be they were reluctant to discuss their joking if they thought I would not assess it favourably. Or, perhaps these men themselves did not regard joking as 'proper communication'?. Nevertheless, the prominence of humour within most boys' and some fathers' accounts indicates the need to value the modes which boys seem to find comfortable, and also to recognise fathers' different ways of communicating from mothers.

#### 7.4.5 Understanding through observation and inference

Many participants of both generations described modes of communication which might be considered *indirect*. Over half the parents alluded to ways in which they appeared to assess their children's level of understanding about sex and sexuality through observing and interpreting their responses to situations where sexual content arose. For example, Tracey Gibson remarked:

*Tracey: I'm very good at picking up the little things, cos that's how I get my information, it's not always if they say something, it's how he reacts to something, that lets me know what's goin' on with him.*

Parents' interpretation of their children's non-verbal behaviour resonates with the earlier discussion (5.2.5) about highly sensitised and heightened intimate knowledge of one's family members. Parents' observation and inference was often, although not exclusively, reported in relation to the television, as these extracts from two fathers' interviews illustrate:

*Peter: We've been conscious sometimes of some of the sex references in Friends, they're pretty stark, y'know Joey likes porn, y'know, Sean and Kirsty are balling out laughing at this [...] particularly you notice with Sean that he clearly, he clearly twigs, it's obvious that he's understanding what's going on and that's what, that gives me reassurance that he knows enough that he needs to know.*

*Mike: Just watching innocuous sitcoms like Friends and that, there's a lot of sex talked about on that so y'know she sits there watching this stuff and doesn't say, 'what does he mean by that?' which means that she either knows entirely what he means or at least she knows that it's something a bit dodgy so she's not going to talk to me about it [laughs]*

As can be seen in these extracts, parents seemed to gauge their children's understanding by observing their responses, such as laughter at sexualised jokes or manifestations of embarrassment. For some of the parents who reported finding communication difficult, this enabled them to gain some idea of their children's level

of knowledge without having to experience the discomfort of discussion. As Mike indicated above, however, the meanings of children's responses did not always appear clear to parents. For example, Jane Armstrong wondered about her daughter, Fiona's (12) understanding regarding sexual innuendo in a comedy program:

*Jane: She's watching Blackadder and laughing and we're going, 'oh that's ok', and I'm thinking actually – is she getting all the jokes or is she getting all the jokes? It works on a lot of different levels.*

Other parents seemed fairly confident they understood what was meant by the non-verbal cues their children conveyed, such as Diane Dixon, who described her daughter, Kirsty's (13), response to a sexual scene on television:

*Diane: There was one scene and he was sort of pinning her against the wall, 'I just wanna shag you', y'know or something like that, and we were both sitting on the settee and she kind of, looked and gave me a smirk y'know as though, so I mean she's understanding and I think that's ok, y'know um looking at me because she knows that I know she's witnessed this, but it's like, like a shared, not shared joke, but um, yeah it's not, there's not an embarrassment.*

In this extract, Diane suggests that Kirsty's 'smirk' indicated she understood the sexual nature of the scene and was comfortable with this being tacitly acknowledged by her mother. However, although Kirsty did not explicitly refer to this program herself, there was a strong narrative of embarrassment throughout her interview which appeared to challenge Diane's perception of Kirsty's level of comfort. For example, Kirsty described feeling embarrassed watching scenes with sexual content on television with her mother:

*Kirsty: I'd still be embarrassed with my Mum, even though I talk to her about stuff I'd still feel embarrassed, even if it was her programme, like not mine, I'd still feel embarrassed.*

*RL: What do you mean by her programme?*

*Kirsty: Like if it was her programme and y'know she'd chosen to watch this programme so it wasn't like I was watching it and it was something y'know unsuitable for me or something but um y'know [giggles] I'd still feel embarrassed, and she, I think I said*

*to her once 'this is embarrassing' and she said 'why?' cos I guess she doesn't feel embarrassed but I do.*

By identifying the significance of 'ownership' of the programme, Kirsty appeared to suggest her embarrassment would be greater if her mum knew she had purposively selected something sexual. This resonates with Buckingham and Bragg's (2004: 193) argument that collective family viewing of the television can be, "a forum in which revelations of knowledge can be made or suppressed". On the one hand, young people's active choice of potentially embarrassing media can constitute a 'coming out' to one's parents as sexual. Certainly, this seemed to be how Derrick interpreted Angus's response to female nudity on screen:

*Derrick: I don't know whether he's any real interest in girls yet, I mean maybe to some extent, he certainly takes an interest in sort of scantily clad women on the telly, and he'll draw attention to them, he's quite pleased to have us know he finds these things exciting and stimulating but I don't know how much that is bravado or a sort of genuine interest...*

In this extract, Derrick seems to indicate that through his explicit display of excitement at these images, Angus is trying to communicate his sexual awareness to his parents. Thus, while in some families young people appeared to be engaged in hiding their sexualised knowledge from their parents, in other families, young people seemed to actively try to convey their sexual knowledge to their parents. This underlines communication as an interpretive process, through which parents and young people assess each other's non-verbal cues and responses.

#### **7.4.6 Modelling relationships**

Parents discussed the role of their own personal relationships, and those of people close to the family, in communicating particular values concerning sexual/romantic relationships to their children. Parents who were no longer with their child's other biological parent almost always raised this issue themselves. Those still with their child's other parent raised this less themselves, although I initiated reflection by

asking them if they had tried ‘to pass on any important values about personal relationships’ to their children, or whether their children might have learnt anything from them about personal relationships (see Appendix 5). It is also worth noting that while parents talked extensively about their modelling of *relationships*, this was devoid of any discussion of their own sexual experience.

In particular, parents appeared to feel they might influence their children’s development of relationship values by providing an example of an ‘appropriate’ relationship. For example, Kirsty Davidson’s father, Peter, indicated that while the ‘facts of life’ may be communicated to children through school-based sex education, values concerning the ‘realm of relationships’ are more appropriately and successfully conveyed through behaviour that is modelled by adults:

*Peter: The whole issue about relationships and everything else, that’s what they should be picking up from us and that’s what I s’pose they should be learning through, I don’t know, observation and what’s going on around them.*

*RL: Do you mean sort of values and?*

*Peter: Yeah, and I hope it’s fortunate in a sense of there’s actually very few of Kirsty or Lewis’ friends, they’ve got a very boring set of parents in that the parents tend to be together [laughs] in first marriages and all this sort of stuff [pause] I mean it slightly tongue-in-cheek but also pretty positively in that I can’t think of any divorces, second marriages [...] there’s a huge amount of settled stability around their friends, their parents and everything else and y’know, I hope that’s a good thing and I think they’ll be picking that up...*

In this extract, although Peter jokingly referred to the ‘boring set of parents’ which might influence his children, there was a sense that diversity of family forms was not compatible with the ‘settled stability’ he identified as positive. Indeed, those parents currently married to their child’s other parent talked about hoping their relationships demonstrated the value of stability and long-term marriage to their children. As indicated in the extracts above and below, parents also identified marriages beyond their own which might model similar values and may influence their children’s understanding of personal relationships. These included those of parents’ friends, young people’s friends’ parents and extended family members. A few parents also

seemed to feel that through their experience of the day-to-day realities of their parents' interactions, children may develop a realistic appreciation of relationship dynamics, as these extracts illustrate:

*Mike: I s'pose he's seen a way that me and Sandra, our relationship, it's not a dramatic relationship, I'm not one for dramatic romantic gestures and what-not but we have a good laugh and what-not and we're still together [...] I s'pose they've seen us having a very stable, steady relationship.*

*Brenda: Mmm, relationships, yeah we always try and make the point that well they're nice y'know but they're not Disney, but she sees, I mean me and her Dad, we bicker, we shout but I would like to think that she thinks we're alright, y'know, I don't think she's ever had any cause to think, 'oh my God, my parents are getting divorced!'*

Like a few other parents, Brenda appeared to suggest that it was important for children to witness adults in long-term partnerships bickering in order to dispel cultural fictions of 'perfect' relationships promulgated in media targeted at both children and adults. The positive impact of these observations may, of course, be related to the extent or intensity of arguments; nearly all the participants (both young people and parents) from families where there had been a divorce or separation talked about how upsetting it had been for the children. However, where parents had subsequently formed new partnerships following the breakdown of a marriage, this also seemed to be regarded by parents as an opportunity for young people to witness and learn about loving relationships, as Fraser's (14) father, Terry Vaughan, explained:

*Terry: We've definitely spoken about romance and being in love, me and my partner, we're totally in love and I'll buy her flowers and he'll [Fraser] tell me what a sobby git I am y'know and I say, 'well it's important, y'know I dinnae take her fo' granted and she doesnae take me fo' granted, you have to work at it', so I do, I speak to him about it [...] he knows I've progressed from leaving his Mum to where I am now, he's seen me down, he's seen me heart-broken, he's seen it and he's had first-hand experience fro' it, he knows how he felt when he had myself and his Mum arguing all the time and doors slamming and somebody goin' out and no' comin' back till five or whatever, an' he knows how happy it is in a household where love is felt...*

In this extract, Terry described two mechanisms through which his new partnership might impact on Fraser's (14) understanding of relationships. Firstly, Terry noted he had verbally communicated with his son about the importance of respect and loving gestures, using his own behaviour towards his new partner as an example. However, Terry also remarked on Fraser's 'first-hand experience' of both his parents' divorce, and his father's new relationship, indicating this is a further mechanism through which understandings of loving relationships are communicated within families. Paul Wicker also seemed to feel it had been positive for his children to witness him falling in love with his new partner, Lynn, as he hoped this would, 'give them an idea of how relationships should be'. However, while Paul seemed to feel positively about this implicit transmission of relationship values, he also talked about his difficulty verbally communicating about his new relationship with his children:

*Paul: I do feel slightly awkward just now discussing that I've never felt for anybody how I feel for Lynn, I feel difficult discussing that with my kids when their Mum is somebody I've never felt that for, but then again I have gone over the subject of one day you'll find somebody and that'll be the person for you and you'll know, and then equally as much, six months or six years or twenty years later, they might no longer be the person for you and perhaps it's, cos my situation with their Mum it's been easier for me to do it that way, that you'll just know that it's right or not, and you've just got to deal with that as it comes.*

Although Paul appeared cautious of undermining his relationship with his children's mother in their eyes, he nevertheless described drawing on his own experiences to facilitate discussion with his children concerning the dynamism of relationships. Certainly, a minority of parents who were no longer with their children's other parent seemed to feel that children's awareness of their parents' previous relationships was an important factor in communicating the potential fragility and fluidity of sexual relationships. For example, one mother remarked:

*Mother: Both [husband] and I have been married before and we talk about that quite openly so he [son] knows that people make mistakes y'know if they do make commitment in relationships, he's seen his sister with a couple of different boyfriends and he knows that relationships don't always last for ever...*

In this sense, it may be that it is easier for parents to discuss the ‘ups and downs’ of relationships in the context of parental relationships which have broken down publicly, as opposed to those that may still be together and investing energy in the presentation of their relationship as stable. Certainly, one mother who disclosed *current* marital problems in her interview, talked about her difficulties communicating about the emotional aspects of relationships with her children:

*Mother: ... like they'll ask me about how I met [current partner] and I will say, like I will talk about what it was like, but again I can probably be much more factual rather than talk about the emotional kind of side of it.*

*RL: Do you find that easier, the sort of facts?*

*Mother: I s'pose it's just where I'm at, I s'pose if I felt like we were madly in love then I would be able to talk from that place but at the moment I just, it's quite hard to think about that kind of thing.*

While parents most commonly talked about using their own experiences as examples of positive relationships, a small minority of mothers also said they talked to their children about their experiences of domestic abuse with previous partners, as this extract reflects:

*Mother: I tell all of them, it's good to fall in love, it's good, but falling in love and going home to have sex will come at a price [...] I give them the example of me and their Dad, we were in love but when the baby came and poverty came in it wasn't about love anymore it was about responsibility and I'm not going to sit there for you to disrespect me in front of my children or batter me or become abusive, my daughter will grow up and think it's ok for a man to beat a woman, I said, 'I did not tolerate it from your father so you will not!', and I tell the boys, 'don't ever raise a hand to a girl!'*

In the context of discussion about love, this mother described using her response to her ex-husband's violence to convey her perception of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and expectations of the quality of relationships to her children. While most of these parents described using their ‘negative’ experiences as positive teaching points, a further mother assessed herself as a ‘bad example’:

*Mother: Oh, I'm the worst one for relationships [laughs] she'll no' have learnt much good fro' me cos I'm still learning now, I'm still learning, it's took me my lifetime eh, bad choices, and impulsive choices.*

Nevertheless, this mother also said she had talked to her daughter about her previous abusive marriages, urging her '*not to put up with the same*'.

This section has so far explored parents' talk about how their own personal relationships may be used to communicate relationship values to their children. However, the six mothers who were currently single also reflected on how their status may impact on their children's learning about relationships. These reflections were raised by mothers themselves, although more so by those who had parented alone for most of their children's lives, rather than those who were more recently single. Four women said they had chosen not to enter, or decided to end, relationships for the sake of their children. For example, Dawn Hall criticised mothers who '*had a different boyfriend every other month*', noting that she consciously chose not to pursue relationships as she wanted to model values of long-term commitment to her son:

*Dawn: He knows what my morals are on that side o' things because as much as it like, I've been on my own with him fro' when he was a year and a half, I've only ever had one partner in the past fourteen years, I've never had men floating in and out, he's never had any uncles or anything like that cos I wouldnae have him living like that, I don't believe in that.*

Dawn's 'morals' appeared to relate to monogamy and long-term relationships, although her decision to remain single seemed to have had a strong impact on her happiness, as there were strong themes of loneliness and the difficulties of lone parenting threaded through her narrative. However, despite sacrificing their personal and sexual lives for their children, most of the lone mothers also appeared to experience guilt concerning the example they were setting their children. Like Dawn, Julia Robson also described ending a relationship when her daughter was younger, as she felt this man was not interested in taking a fathering role. Despite

prioritising Francesca above her relationship, Julia reported feeling anxious about whether the lack of a male figure in Francesca's life was impacting on her current interaction with boys, recounting an incident where Francesca was uncomfortable with a classmate who 'took a shine to her':

*Julia: She didn't like it at all, and in a way it kind of worried me cos I thought, well he's not actually doing anything, so y'know you kind of question, 'oh is she like that cos I don't have a partner?'*

It is interesting that while modelled behaviour was regularly raised by parents in the interviews, young people rarely talked about how their parents' relationships might affect the development of their own attitudes and values about personal relationships. Even though I directly asked them about this, many seemed to find it very difficult to answer, commonly responding 'I don't know'. It may be that, for some young people, particularly those who have been raised by two parents in a long-term marriage or partnership, their own parents' relationship is so taken-for-granted that they do not reflect on it. Indeed, if their friends are also mostly from two-parent 'original' families, they may not be familiar with other family contexts. Evidence from those young people who talked about how different contemporary teenage relationships are from when their parents were young (see 4.5.1), also suggests young people might not see their parents' relationships as relevant to their own. Those children who had experienced their parents' separation or divorce commonly talked about how their parents seemed happier in their new relationships, but few explicitly identified this as something which affected their own development of values regarding personal relationships.

Certainly, evidence from the accounts suggests that, for parents, the modelling of their own personal relationships was perceived to be an important mode of communication about relationships values. In some cases parents seemed to feel relationship values were implicitly conveyed to their children through their own interactions with partners. At other times, parents noted they explicitly drew attention to their behaviour through verbal communication with their children. Many parents seemed to feel their current relationships conveyed positive values; for those

still with their child's other biological parent, these tended to be monogamy and stability, while for others, particularly those whose children had witnessed them finding new partners, emphasis was placed on the importance of modelling love and happiness. Generally parents described talking to their children about their current relationships – either with the children's other biological parent, or a new partner. Parents less commonly reported talking about past relationships with their children, although a minority said they used 'negative' experiences to communicate their expectations for their children's future relationships and also appropriate responses to difficult situations. Those parents who did not have partners or who reported being unhappy in their relationships, expressed concern they were modelling negative behaviour. Obviously, as young people were not asked about their current relationships or future intentions, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about how parents' modelling of relationships may impact on young people's sexual behaviour and formation of personal relationships. Nevertheless, these data offer useful insights into the multiple ways through which parents seem to believe they influence their children's development of values regarding personal relationships, and also the additional pressures that lone parents may experience in terms of guilt and anxiety about their influence on their children's future outcomes.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

Discussion in this chapter began with an overview of parents' and young people's reported talk about sex and sexuality. Analysis of the accounts indicates that while there was a moderate amount of discussion about sexuality-*related* topics, there was very little direct talk about sex within most families. Indeed, the stereotypical notion of parents and children 'sitting down to talk about the birds and the bees' appeared to be far removed from these families' experiences of sexual communication. Despite this lack of direct talk, however, information and ideas about sex and sexuality appeared to be woven into families' everyday interactions. Humour and joking seemed to be particularly significant for facilitating boys' communication with their parents, especially fathers, although where this crossed the line into teasing this

could preclude more meaningful talk. Participants' apparent difficulties to qualitatively describe their communication indicates this is an area shrouded in multiple meanings and indirectness; indeed, communication itself is a slippery concept. However, this chapter illuminates parents' and children's understandings of the nuances of communication, which are at odds with the narrow focus on direct talk in much other research.

So what do these accounts tell us about how sex and sexuality is constructed as a topic of discourse in families? In essence, sex did not seem to be presented as something 'sexy', but rather as a dangerous (heterosexual) practice with a number of associated risks from which one must protect oneself. That parents and children reported most communication about sexual safety supports other research (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999) which found this was considered a legitimate topic for discussion between parents and children. However, the contribution of these qualitative accounts to earlier quantitative studies indicates that although most parents used similar language to describe the values they tried to convey to their children, parents' meanings of safety, risk and responsibility varied. In addition, despite relatively common euphemistic references to 'being safe', parents' warnings appeared to be accompanied by virtually no practical information about how to access contraception nor how to negotiate its use within sexual encounters. Furthermore, the emphasis on pregnancy within accounts of communication reinforces the notion that this is the only risk of unprotected sex. Indeed, there was very little reported talk about sexually transmitted infections, or discussion of the emotional impact of sex and what it might mean for a relationship. No parents reported discussion of the spectrum of risk in terms of sexual practices; indeed, talking about 'sex' seemed to almost always refer to penile-vaginal intercourse. This narrow interpretation of safe sex may be partly due to parents' own lack of knowledge and experience, but focus on reproductive sex is unlikely to satisfy the information needs of most young people, including those who identify as gay or lesbian.

## 8 CONTEXTS OF COMMUNICATION

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on participants' talk about the timing and contexts of their sexual communication. While there has been considerable focus on the *content* of parents' and children's discussions about sex (2.3.4), rather less is known about the *contexts* in which these conversations take place. Robinson et al. (2004) have highlighted the role of context in shaping familial interaction about sex and sexuality within the home, noting the differentiation of spaces within which sexuality may be acceptably acknowledged. Indeed, understanding how contexts might be constructed as (in)appropriate for sexual communication is key to understanding young people's and parents' varying levels of comfort in different situations. In Chapter Two (2.3.4), I noted that studies have explored parents' assessments of the stage at which it is appropriate to talk to their children about various topics. However, this chapter considers the timing of communication at the micro-level: are certain times of day more conducive to communication? Are these the same for young people and parents? What contextual factors appear to be important for more comfortable communication between parents and young people, and what do they say about the contexts in which conversations actually come about? Furthermore, do parents and young people feel similarly or differently about the suitability of various settings for communicating about sexuality? This chapter examines these questions by exploring the ways in which time and space shape young people's and parents' experiences of communication.

### 8.2 It just comes up? The paradox of 'naturally-occurring' conversation

This section examines participants' talk about the contexts in which sexual matters are raised. The most commonly mentioned context for communication was while watching television, which will be returned to later (8.4). However, participants –

particularly parents – also described trying to find times to raise topics themselves. Although several parents alluded to trying to find the ‘right’ time, most conceded that ‘a perfect moment’ was unlikely to occur, as Janet Nixon commented: *‘there’s never a right time for these kinds of things is there?’* Indeed, most parents stressed that they tried to deal with things as and when they came up:

*Ronnie: Sometimes I think maybe we do need to do it in a more structured fashion in terms of saying, ‘actually Evan, Mum and I need to kinda speak to you’, but it just seems so bloody trite, and so kinda y’know [puts on patronising voice] ‘has anybody told you about?’, I mean we’ve never done things that way and if it comes up or, y’know, he says something then we’ll try and take it, try and deal with it there and then.*

*Sheila: They don’t tend to ask an awful lot of things, it’s just as I say sometimes things come up naturally and y’know [...] if it came up naturally I’m quite happy to discuss something.*

As discussed in the previous chapter, almost all parents seemed to feel that picking up on things as and when they ‘come up’ was preferable to attempting ‘the talk’, which appeared to be considered out-dated and embarrassing for all concerned. Indeed, the emphasis on sexual matters arising naturally appeared to be very important to many participants of both generations. However, even though most seemed to agree it was best for conversations to come up ‘naturally’, some parents (usually mothers) described consciously engineering times they felt would be conducive to communication about sensitive issues, as Elspeth Crozier described:

*Elsbeth: I specifically set time aside every night to spend with Rosie, sometimes she wants to spend time with me, sometimes she doesn’t but I make sure that I’m there. Mostly these days I tend to just sort of go and, once I’ve managed to get her off the computer then I sit with her, I just go and sit in her bedroom and just chat with her.*

While these parents did not seem to envisage these times to be exclusively for communication about sexual matters, several noted that these contexts may facilitate sensitive discussion in general. A few young people appeared to recognise their parents’ efforts to create these contexts, such as Lucia (13) who noted:

*Lucia: When I'm going into bed, my Mum comes and says goodnight and she says, 'is there anything that you want to tell me or anything?', and I say, 'oh right ok'...*

However, it was not only parents who seemed to consider when and how to raise issues about sexuality, as a minority of young people also reported thinking about communication in advance. For example, Elspeth's daughter, Rosie (13) described her approach to asking questions about her physical development:

*Rosie: I just like think about it in my head and I think what are the reasons why I want to know it and why I think it would be important to ask my Mum about it [...] and if it's really important then just work yourself up to it over a couple of days and I like I always think of like what I would say, like a wee conversation.*

*RL: Kind of rehearse it?*

*Rosie: Yeah, I kind of think 'what's the kind of stuff that you could say?'*

Rosie's description of weighing up the issues and rehearsing conversations in her head suggested these were not interactions which just 'came up', but rather were carefully planned and anticipated. Similarly, although Adam (14) noted conversations about sexual matters did sometimes just 'spring up', he also appeared to plan times he could broach issues with his mum:

*RL: So if you do ever have chats about relationships and sex, when would they happen?*

*Adam: In the living room on a night-time when everyone else is just sort of in bed.*

*RL: So just you and your mum?*

*Adam: Yeah [...] sometimes it would be that I waited, that I actually waited, but other times it just sort of springs up – most of the times it's actually I wait and speak to Mum.*

As these extracts demonstrate, it appears to be a paradox that parents and young people expressed preference for conversations where sexual matters seem to come up 'naturally', as these interactions sometimes occurred within carefully engineered contexts. Therefore, a challenge for families is to try to negotiate the delicate balance between communication *appearing* to occur casually, even where it may be considered carefully beforehand.

Participants identified several contextual factors which appeared to facilitate apparently natural communication. A further aspect related to the casualness of communication was not just that it was experienced as casual by those participating in the conversation, but also that it did not draw the attention of other family members. For example, Honour (15) described regular conversations about the risks of sexual intercourse and romantic relationships which her mother initiated while they were alone cooking in the kitchen, away from her father and sisters who watched television in the living room. Honour drew on the rarity of the interview situation to distinguish between the types of conversations which others might be intrigued by and those which would arouse less interest:

*Honour: Like y'know when you're doing something like this, like the way that I'm talking to you someone might get tempted to listen to what you're saying, but if you're in the kitchen doing something, they won't think that it's that serious, they think if it's serious you go into the dining room, close the door so I think it's kind of good.*

Interestingly, she related this to the location of the conversation, noting that the dining room was understood as the site for more 'serious' interactions, whereas the kitchen was conducive to informal chats. As the prospect of direct 'sit-down talk' made many uncomfortable, conversations were often reported to 'come up' in places where family members could focus on doing something else, as this appeared to make it feel less of a 'big deal'. A minority of parents identified cars as a good place for talking to their children about growing-up and sexuality, as reflected in these extracts:

*Christine: I find with Ben if you pick the time right, it might be just us, it's usually when we're spending time together in the car or something, I can ask him, 'oh have you got a girlfriend or anything?', he'll open up to me.*

*Don: Most of the time I wait until her and I are in the car so there's no tellies distracting us or other people or all sorts of things, and I'll speak to her, but generally I just feel she's just, 'yeah, ok, right Dad', that kind of thing.*

*Shelley: But even in here when you try and talk to Georgie she'll pick up a magazine and sorta she's into that or she'll stare at the telly, I think in the car it's =*

*Don: You've got her attention.*

For Don Leslie, time in the car meant he was alone with his daughter, Georgie (12), away from potential 'distractions' which he seemed to feel impeded their communication in the house. Within busy families such as the Leslies, who lived in a small flat with several children, the car may be one of the only places where parents and children can talk without other people around. Laurier et al. (2008: 10) discussed the distinctiveness of car-based communication due to passengers' relative immobility: "In the car you cannot walk *away from* nor walk *into* a conversation with another speaker" [emphasis original]. Furthermore, the unusually fixed arrangement of bodies militates against face-to-face communication. Although convention suggests eye-contact is an important factor for 'open' communication, situations where parents and children do *not* have to look at each other may actually enable talk and disclosure about sensitive topics; as Brenda Innes noted, '*it's easier when you're not face-to-face*'. Indeed, a large minority of participants of both generations talked about the benefits of contexts which enabled them to avoid eye-contact, such as Francesca (14):

*Francesca: Well usually I feel easier talking to her [mother] in the evenings or when I'm just about to go to sleep, I ask her to come in and I talk to her. Like I went through this stage where I was really worried about how I was changing and going to high school, like everything and so sometimes I just talk to her when it's dark and we're both just lying down.*

*RL: Is it easier when it's dark?*

*Francesca: Yeah, cos it's easier if you're not looking someone in the eye to talk to about it.*

Several participants commented on the benefits of lack of eye-contact in relation to time spent watching television, which is explored further in section 8.4. Thus, issues of privacy, informality and place are all important for apparently 'naturally-

occurring' talk about sex and sexuality. This section has focused on contexts which participants said were conducive to communication. I now turn to consider the significance of the timing of communication, including the importance of recognising times that are not considered appropriate for sensitive talk.

### **8.3 Finding time: Negotiating times for (not) talking**

While many participants appeared to value time spent together 'as a family' in terms of opportunities for communication, some parents also expressed recognition that young people may desire time apart from their families and that certain times might not be appropriate for sensitive talk. In particular, young people appeared to value 'time out' after school, and a large minority of parents spontaneously said this was not a time in which young people welcomed much communication; as Celia commented, '*you ask the kids what kind of day they've had and you get nothing, you literally get a yes or a no*'. Kim's son, Luke (13), remarked that his willingness to talk about sensitive topics was dependent on how he was feeling that day:

*Luke: You've gotta be sort of like in the right mood to talk about it, y'know you can't've got back from a really bad day at school and then y'know just expect your Mum to talk about all these questions about sex and stuff.*

Certainly, parents' and young people's daily personal experiences appeared to be another contextual layer feeding into their communication. Many parents seemed to feel fairly confident about their assessment of appropriate contexts for broaching certain issues and reported withdrawing if young people seemed unwilling to talk; as Christine Johnson said of communication with her son, Ben, '*I know if the time's not right, I'll try again later*'. Similarly, describing how she knew when to '*take a step back*', Jane Armstrong explained that Fiona's (12) '*eyes go down and the subject is changed for definite*', illustrating both verbal and non-verbal ways through which individuals appeared to express their level of comfort and willingness to communicate.

Christensen (2002: 83) found a general consensus among children that knowing their parents would be there when they needed them was of greater importance than spending more time together. Several parents expressed recognition of the significance of parental availability for communication, as these mothers commented:

*Caroline: So long as I'll say yes when he says he wants to go for a walk [laughs] instead of 'no I'm too tired' or 'I haven't done the washing up yet', y'know and as long as we still keep doing that and having those times when we can chat about relationships and things...*

*Jane: I think probably the biggest thing is to offer opportunities to talk, not when it's convenient to you but when it's actually convenient to your child and that's usually at some point everyday, because when you're ready to sit down and say 'ok, tell me about your day', their moment might have passed and if you just say 'I'm making tea but I really want to hear' or, 'I'm washing the dishes but I really want to hear'...*

These extracts reflect the accounts of a minority of parents, mainly mothers, who indicated their prioritisation of being available for sensitive talk above the household chores or their own tiredness. However, it is perhaps significant that most of these parents either worked part-time or self-defined as 'home-makers'. Indeed, in families where parents worked full-time, the everyday coordination of family life and parents' working schedules meant some described finding it difficult to be available when their children wanted to talk, as illustrated by these extracts:

*Terry: I make time for all my children, my daughter, she comes in late so her time for speakin' to me is probably about half past ten, and it's a huge pain in the backside cos y'know you've worked, you've done all the other things you need to do as well, some days are very hectic, and the last thing I want to do is speak wi' my daughter for another hour if she comes in at half ten at night but that's important to her so I make that effort, sometimes I tell her, 'just go away, I cannae be doin' wi' it', but ninety-nine per cent o' the time I make that effort and we just chat y'know.*

*Sandra: I mean they will say to us sometimes, 'Mum, are you listening?', which is bad and I just think with again working the way I do you come out and sometimes you need a half an hour or an hour to de-stress [...] I think that's the bit where I find I'm not there for them, I feel as though I should be more there for them but I just can't do it all y'know so there's a bit of a guilt going on in my head!*

Indeed, these extracts indicate the additional pressure that some working parents seemed to experience to be available consistently for their children and ready to communicate when young people wanted.

As discussed previously, the mostly commonly cited context for communication was while watching television, and so the following section considers the nature of this context, and the types of communication it facilitates.

#### **8.4 Television**

By far the most commonly mentioned context for sexuality-related communication between parents and children was while watching television. Participants across the sample regularly spontaneously referred to television, with many participants citing it as a significant source of sexual information, commonly saying young people 'picked up' sexual words and meanings from programmes, particularly soap operas, reality TV and hospital dramas. A minority of parents said children asked them to clarify meanings, although generally when they were younger. As discussed previously, neither parents nor young people seemed to favour broaching sexual topics formally, and so many participants of both generations identified advantages of sexual matters arising through this external source, as Kim Franklin explained:

*Kim: I think sometimes if I've brought up sex then yes, Luke is embarrassed um, if somehow we end up talking about it as part of something else then he's not [...] I mean you don't say to people, you don't even say to friends, 'let's talk about how men behave towards women', or, 'let's talk about when it's ok to have sex with someone', y'know that's not the kind of conversation someone usually has but actually some of the most interesting conversations we've had along those lines has been while we're watching something like Big Brother.*

Kim's reflection on the style of communication she might have with her own friends about sexual relationships indicated preference for conversation appearing to occur organically, rather than raising the issue 'cold'.

Only two individuals (from different families) claimed to feel relaxed and comfortable when sexual content was viewed collectively. Indeed, even in families where participants reported some comfortable communication about sex and sexuality, the vast majority of parents and young people described varying levels of embarrassment and awkwardness when sex 'came up' on the television. For example, recounting a film he had recently watched with his children with an unexpected homosexual kissing scene, one father described a sense of objection to the apparently unwelcome intrusion into his family's private space: *'there was a sense of, 'wait a minute, this is our cosy living room!''*. He also noted his 'acute embarrassment', was intensified by his lack of knowledge about 'where it was going', further commenting. *'I didn't know what to do with myself – I don't think I handled it very well.'*

Many young people, and fewer parents, described strategies that they or their family members used to cope with their embarrassment by disengaging from the programme, including remaining silent; looking away; turning the channel over; becoming involved in another activity, such as reading or homework; leaving the room or trying to distract their relatives' attention, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Laura (13): Even though I feel quite laid back about talking to my parents about things it's still kind of embarrassing to watch stuff like that on TV, like sex scenes and stuff like that.*

*RL: So what kind of happens?*

*Sarah: It's just awkward [laughs]*

*Laura: I just kind of not look at the TV or not look at them [laughs] if it's quite explicit, then they might turn it over without saying anything.*

*Nathan (12): Sometimes I'll be watching TV with my Mum and sex comes on and I'll just keep really quiet and sometimes try to distract her from the TV and I'm like, 'oh yeah, did you ever see that on TV?', and then sometimes I say, 'can I go to the toilet?'*

However, even though over half the parents said they felt uncomfortable when viewing sexual content communally, they often appeared to value its utility in raising topics which may otherwise be difficult to broach. For example, Murray Young described watching *Sex and the City* with his wife and daughter:

*Murray: Some of it was like 'bloody hell!' [laughs] y'know? But I think that helped kind of open things up a bit [...] it was all about people's relationships with their partners, with gay partners, why did that guy have an affair, that was really crappy, so there was all this thing about relationships and stuff like that rather than just the sex stuff, that was there as well but the good thing was it was done jokingly, and so it did spark kind of conversations about stuff and I think from Lorna's point of view it probably opened the door saying 'well it will probably be okay to kind of ask about this kind of stuff', y'know laid the ground say, 'aye this is okay talking about this' rather than 'oh an abortion what's that, oh my gosh, leave it'.*

As reflected in this extract, a large minority of parents talked positively about television's ability to depict the complexity of sexual and personal relationships, although most said they found it very uncomfortable to watch actual sex scenes with their children. Like many others, Murray identified the humorous presentation of these relationship dilemmas as crucial to enabling more light-hearted, comfortable communication. Furthermore, Murray's comment about the focus on relationships, '*rather than just the sex stuff*', reflects a finding overall that parents and children seemed to find it easier to discuss sexual *relationships* (though not their own), rather than sex per se. This distinction was evident in his daughter, Lorna's, own account as she described comfortably chatting with her parents about pregnancy and abortion when it came up on the hospital drama *ER*, but said she became embarrassed during 'sexy scenes', and would get up to make a drink.

About half the mothers and fewer fathers, notably all from middle-class families, commented that television had become increasingly sexualized over the past generation; indeed, a few commented on the relaxation of the nine o'clock watershed, which they said was more rigidly adhered to in their own childhoods. However, these parents mostly seemed to have complex feelings about this perceived

liberalisation of sexual content on television; on one hand they expressed a sense of positivity about increasing ‘openness’ about sex and representations of sexual diversity, while still remaining concerned about the perceived promotion of ‘promiscuity’, teenage sex, sexual objectification of women and depictions of sexual violence:

*Kim: You feel really old when you say this but it does feel as though children are exposed to things earlier, and I mean they are, there’s a lot of [sighs] a lot more openness about sex on TV, sometimes good stuff and sometimes [...] there’s a lot of exposure around to all kinds of images that are sort of, to me they’re like soft porn and it’s like porn getting in by the back door.*

*Peter: Y’know the news, whether it’s about sort of rapes, murders, anything else, erm it didn’t happen but with the Mark Oaten thing<sup>11</sup>, I was waiting for Sean to say ‘what’s a rent boy?’, y’know, and it’s middle-aged again but there’s this sort of sense that everything’s fair game and there’s things which used to be brushed under the carpet and now sort of routinely – and that’s the 6 o’clock news not post-watershed or anything else and for an eleven-year-old to be exposed to all of this, it’s probably right they need to learn but I’m not sure how we’re helping them learn it.*

As mentioned in Chapter Four (4.5), a minority of parents appeared to qualify their statements about finding particular sexual content distasteful by referring to themselves as ‘middle-aged’, as illustrated in the two extracts above. However, despite a significant number of parents expressing discomfort about their children viewing sexual content which they found inappropriate or offensive, only a small minority described efforts to prevent their children watching such programmes. This did not always appear to be a successful strategy as parents talked about sex scenes ‘popping up’ unexpectedly. Nevertheless, by explicitly banning certain programmes, this conveyed strong messages about the boundaries of appropriate viewing which their children seemed extremely adept at grasping, as illustrated by the following extracts from a mother and her daughter:

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<sup>11</sup> Liberal Democrat politician, Mark Oaten, resigned from the front bench shortly before this interview (January 2006), following a story in the *News of the World* about his relationship with a male sex-worker.

*Jane: Her friends were going to watch this film 'Love Actually', so we said 'ok, well we'll go and watch it first', [laughs] and I thought hmm, 'do I want to introduce this idea of this pornographic, the fact that this approach to sex exists and is a huge business and introduce it as a comedy thing, and we both looked and said, 'I don't feel comfortable watching this with Fiona', so that has been something that she must say, 'ok so I'm thrown out of this film, I can't watch this film'...*

*Fiona (12): You have to think about what you watch on television, just common sense really on what you watch and what you don't watch, and films that we watch are approved by parents before we watch them.*

More commonly, parents expressed resignation to their children being exposed to sexual values on television with which they disagreed, such as Mike Kerr, who commented, "they hear it all in school anyway". A large minority appeared to regard this as an opportunity to communicate their own values in relation to those represented on television, often through verbal comments, as illustrated by the following extracts:

*Jeremy: I mean moral guidance yeah, I think we do it in conversation as we go along, y'know we'll occasionally drop in, cos they'll say, 'oh he's gone to bed with her', something on the television, I mean they often use the expression 'did he have sex with her?', and in those instances you'll say, 'well I don't know but y'know they're not married and it's not a good thing to have sex', or something like that or, 'he doesn't really love her', or little things like that.*

*Brenda: It's like using Trisha and Jeremy Kyle as this big warning, y'know obviously these people have very dysfunctional relationships but to just say, 'look at that, she's got three kids and has no idea who their fathers are, how is that fair to either the fathers or the kids?', and I always say, 'look at that stupid cow, look at her sittin' there greetin' about this man, don't you end up like that!', I sometimes take it upon myself to say, 'see that, look at that, imagine that!'*

Other parents described using non-verbal responses, such as 'tutting', rolling their eyes or, in one case, even covering their children's eyes, to express their disapproval of the programme's content:

*Mary: I find the TV quite offensive actually, I think sex is often in your face and I don't like it, y'know, they talk about it on TV as if it's, 'oh I haven't had sex in three weeks, I'm gonna die', and I find that really disturbing so when that comes up on TV I'll show my disapproval, I'll kind of make a face or I'll roll my eyes or, 'what have we talked about boys?', y'know, because I want them to know that I don't think it's right and I know they can be hugely influenced by friends or y'know any programme that's on and it's not that I want to turn off the TV and say you can't watch it', but if it comes up then I will try and influence them.*

Despite Mary's concerted efforts to communicate her values to her children, she further described her perception of diminishing influence as they grew older, noting she was 'no competition' for comedy programmes, such as *Friends*, which she felt made casual sex 'really appealing'. However, this was a minority view in relation to other parents who identified comic scenarios and characters as facilitating easier communication.

In addition to describing their own responses to sexual content on television, parents also talked about their children's responses, with some parents noting that they used these to assess their level of understanding about sexual matters. As discussed in the previous chapter (7.4.5), this tended to be gauged by noting whether they laughed at sexualised jokes or also if they displayed signs of embarrassment.

While the *content* of television programmes seemed to facilitate raising sex and sexuality-related issues, in some families the intimate *nature* of the time parents and young people spent watching television together also appeared to play a role in shaping the perceived suitability of the context for sensitive communication, as reflected in the following quotations:

*Christine: There's just certain times he picks, like if we're watching a movie together he might turn round and go, 'aw Mum, can I ask you something?', and I can almost tell what the question's gonna be about, either relationships or y'know what's happening to him or something so yeah, he's pretty comfortable with that.*

*RL: Would that be cos there's something related in the movie or?*  
*Christine: Um, no, just cos of the close time we're sharing or just the two of us here or we might've just shared a joke or had a wrestle or did something silly and he would ask me something.*

*Paul: ... just if we happen to be sitting there, and if we're watching the telly, normally or frequently there's one or two or three of us sitting snuggled up on the couch, your legs intertwined sort of thing, and just making comments at the telly or whatever, like, going back to the domestic violence thing, comments such as 'that's totally unacceptable, that's out of order, I'd never let that happen, I hate that', yardy-yada-yada, and just constant reinforcement of it's negative, I wouldn't necessarily do it on a face-to-face basis cos that's too direct, as if I'm making a point, if I'm saying something about the telly it's like osmosis to sink in.*

Therefore, in addition to the content of programmes stimulating discussion, the relaxed informality of this shared time, and the opportunity to avoid eye-contact, meant that many parents appeared to evaluate television-watching as an appropriate context for communication. However, the apparent significance of the television for sexual communication between parents and children was in tension with the framing of television as something that was, at the least, not good and, at worst, 'bad for you'. Despite many participants noting that intimate conversations commonly occurred while watching TV, some did not appear to consider this constituted 'quality time'. Indeed, although many participants said watching television was the main activity they engaged in 'as a family', middle-class parents often framed these comments as 'admissions', noting they probably watched 'too much' and it was 'not healthy'.

### **8.5 A time and a place? Tacit understandings about inappropriate contexts**

Even though most participants seemed to agree it was best for conversations about sexual matters to arise 'naturally', many also appeared to have strong ideas about the suitability of contexts in which these issues were allowed to 'come up' in the first place. A key factor in participants' understanding of certain contexts as (in)appropriate appeared to be the presence of particular family members and the consequent potential for embarrassment. Despite participants' assertions about the value of time spent together as a family, most parents and young people reported preferring to communicate about sexual matters in pairs, rather than with multiple family members present, which was frequently described as embarrassing.

Embarrassment is social, in that it is rarely experienced on one's own (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004), and many young people said certain family members, particularly fathers, were more embarrassing to communicate with than others, as these extracts from two young people's interviews illustrate:

*Kirsty: Well if something's happening on the telly in like a soap or something and they're like kissing, even when they're just kissing I feel quite embarrassed if my Dad's there [giggles].*

*Robbie: Me and my Gran have not got as much of an open relationship as me and my Mum, we don't talk about like sex or anything like that, it's mentioned but when it's mentioned it gets really awkward, like if there's like a funny scene – like no 'funny but y'know what I mean – on the TV I'll get quite embarrassed or maybe I'll walk out but with my Mum I'd just not like take a second thought about it.*

As reflected in these extracts, young people's discomfort was contingent on particular family members' presence. Many young people described similar feelings of discomfort when sexual matters were raised in front of specific family members and even though this may not lead to any verbal interaction, their apparent discomfort seemed to convey ideas about appropriate communication contexts.

Thus, interpersonal relationships and understandings about boundaries of communication appeared to shape where and when parent-child communication about sex and sexuality occurred. Consequently, it seems that the situational context of communications about sex and sexuality may be determined by who is present, thus foreclosing other times that may be important for family communication more generally, as one mother, Diane Dixon, commented: '*it's not dinner-table conversation*'. Indeed, although a small minority of participants described talk about sexual topics at meal-times, a larger minority identified this as inappropriate, including Paul who remarked: '*it's not the dinner topic of choice*'. Meal-times have been identified as an important time for 'doing family' (James et al., 2008), and the notion that sex does not constitute appropriate talk within this context indicates its marginal place within family communication.

Although most family members appeared to have shared understandings about the unsuitability of certain familial contexts for communication about sexual topics, many found it hard to articulate how they assessed this, tending to say they ‘just knew’, it was ‘a feeling’ they had, or that was ‘just the way it was’. However, these tacit understandings concerning appropriate contexts for communication did not appear to be innate knowledge, and may stimulate discomfort if transgressed, as Sheila Turnbull described when recalling an enquiry her youngest daughter, six at the time, made during a family meal:

*Sheila: It was one day Sophie had said ‘what’s a fanny?’ or something like that [...] I think it was naïveté that she didn’t know, I mean everyone else at the table knew and were horrified that she’d said it.*

Sheila suggested it was Sophie’s ‘naïveté’ about both the word itself and her family’s conventions which appeared to allow her to feel able to ask a question which other family members may have avoided in this context. Indeed, for those who seemed to understand the sexual potentialities of genitalia, this boundary transgression was reportedly experienced as acutely uncomfortable. Although Sheila later noted that she tried to offer Sophie an explanation, it is likely her interpretation of her family members’ response also formed part of Sophie’s learning about her family’s tacit codes regarding sexual communication. Similarly, one mother, Dawn, reflected on her own childhood experiences of learning these codes from her brother’s response to sexual content on television:

*Dawn: I always remember my big brother if you were sitting in the living room, if something like came on the TV, anything to do with sex, John would always get up and go away cos he was obviously really embarrassed in front o’ my Mum and Dad so I think that made me think, ‘oh you don’t talk about things like that to your Mum and Dad’...*

Therefore, in some families, contrary to parents’ and children’s claims that sex ‘just came up’, there also seemed to be energy invested in foreclosing certain contexts by keeping family space and time apparently asexual, as if sex and sexuality was only allowed to come up in small pockets around the house, under certain circumstances.

A significant concern for some parents when trying to broach sexual topics was the potential for distraction and so some parents reported preference for time spent out of the house as they seemed to find it easier to hold their children's attention. A few parents talked about going for walks with their children, including Julia Robson, who said they were, '*a good time to talk, something about no distractions*'. A further minority of mothers seemed to feel shopping trips were suitable places to raise sensitive matters, while others mentioned cafés, suggesting that time away from the house enabled them to talk more freely. However, these latter contexts, which may traditionally be perceived as feminised, were more commonly discussed in relation to daughters, thus raising questions about the contexts which male family members – both fathers and sons – may find more conducive to communication.

Furthermore, parents and young people appeared to differ in their assessments of the appropriateness of certain contexts. Indeed, while several parents appeared to feel public contexts were suitable for sensitive communication, a large minority of young people reported feeling uncomfortable being out of the house with their parents, tending to rationalise this as a normal part of 'growing up':

*Sarah: I just feel a bit embarrassed being out in town with them.*

*RL: Why's that?*

*Laura: I think it's just cos we're teenagers, eh, that's just kind of what happens.*

Furthermore, a few young people described their discomfort talking to their parents about personal issues in public. For example, Nathan (12) described an incident where his mother, Mary, initiated a conversation about puberty outside their house:

*Nathan: It's quite embarrassing, like once I was just in the middle of the street, like we were having like a wee cycle ride and she was going like, 'now we have to have a chat' and I was like 'oh no, here we go', and I think we were talking for about an hour just like saying, 'now, this is what happens when you're growing up and your hormones will go like all weird and stuff'.*

*RL: And how did you feel about it?*

*Nathan: At the end of it I was a bit in shock at how much my Mum had said about it and I was like, 'ok, let's just keep silent for a while', I was like quite embarrassed just talking about it in public and everything.*

Nathan noted how he felt embarrassed discussing these issues in public, which he seemed to feel was an inappropriate context for discussion, although he later conceded that if they had been at home he would have avoided the conversation. However, Nathan's mother, Mary, said she found it difficult to talk to Nathan in the house as she described him as being 'too fixed onto what he's doing':

*I don't think it helps Nathan's quite glued to when the TV's on, he doesn't want any other distraction. For me to have a conversation with Nathan we kind of need to be out of here cos he's just busy, he'll be drawing a picture or playing the Playstation and he's completely fixed onto what he's doing.*

In terms of her older son, however, Mary said they communicated successfully while watching the television as it enabled them to avoid eye-contact yet still interact. Thus Mary described adapting the contexts in which she broached issues according to her assessment of each sons' level of comfort and concentration in different settings. Therefore, this attempt to find different yet appropriate contexts for communication about sexual matters is evidence of the negotiated practical work parents appeared to do in this area.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

Sibley and Lowe (1992: 189) note that, "the home is not just a spatial setting for the acting out of power relationships within the family [...] space can be manipulated by members of the family but it also conditions interactions". Indeed, this chapter has illustrated the spatial and temporal dimensions of parent-child interactions and how these play a key role in the creation of contexts in which family members feel comfortable communicating with each other.

Contextual factors which appeared to ameliorate discomfort included the apparent casualness of conversation, the level of privacy from other family members and the possibility to avoid eye-contact. While most participants seemed to feel it was best for discussion about sexual matters to 'just come up', this emphasis on 'naturally-

occurring' conversation appeared to conceal the active engagement in the construction of familial contexts as (in)appropriate for communication about sex and sexuality. In some cases, families seemed to share tacit understandings about contexts which were deemed inappropriate for acknowledgement of sexual matters. Instances where sexual matters were raised in these contexts – either through internal transgressions, such as younger children's questions, or by external intrusions, such as the television – appeared to be experienced as uncomfortable and embarrassing, indicating that it is important for parents to be mindful of those contexts which do not seem to be appropriate for communication, as well as those that do. However, parents and young people also reported disparities in their identification of contexts as appropriate for communication. This foregrounds the value of collecting the accounts of both young people *and* parents, rather than exploring parent-child interaction from one perspective. Finally, while an element of casualness appears to be extremely important for communication that is experienced as comfortable, it is also necessary to remain aware of the enormous amount of everyday practical work that parents and young people do in this area and to use their own knowledge about where and when communication works best as a basis for supporting families with these issues.

## **9 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter, I draw together the substantive findings which have been presented in Chapters Four to Eight, and situate these within the literature, both that which was identified as relevant at the outset of the study, and that which emerged as salient over the course of the research. I evaluate the contribution this thesis makes towards understanding parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, highlight the significance of the findings for policy and practice, and suggest how further work could complement and extend existing bodies of knowledge in this area.

### **9.2 Discussion**

Based on the qualitative accounts of parents and young people from twenty-three families, this thesis has illuminated some of the everyday practices, processes and meanings of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality. The study illustrates the important contribution that qualitative research can make to the primarily quantitative field of research on parent-child communication about sex and sexuality. Indeed, adopting a qualitative approach enabled insight into the meanings which parents and young people gave to their communication, which frequently remain hidden in quantitative analyses. Like many other studies, parents in this study tended to report more extensive and more frequent communication than did their children. However, this thesis has gone some way towards offering different explanations for these discrepancies to counter those who cite teenagers' unreliability as commentators on their families' lives. Indeed, analysis of the interaction of perspectives within families and across the sample has revealed the varying salience of different issues for different family members. For example, boys' talk about the importance of humour was largely absent from female participants' accounts, while parents' accounts of modelling relationship values to their children did not seem

relevant to young people themselves. Therefore, the study foregrounds the importance of representing mothers, fathers *and* young people's perspectives.

As noted in Chapter Two, many studies on parent-child communication about sex appear to construct parents as 'sex educators', tending to investigate the extent to which parents are providing information for their children. However, while parents certainly play an important role in shaping communication, young people are not passive recipients of information. Rather, this thesis highlights young people's agency in their sexual learning. Throughout the thesis, I have shown how young people consider, initiate, maintain and regulate communication with their parents. That is not to undermine the challenges they described, nor to downplay the structural processes of gender and generation which shape their communication, but rather to recognise their involvement and 'pro-activity' in their health-related practices as they grow up (Christensen, 2004; Prout, 1996).

The study was designed to enable exploration of how social positions of gender, generation and social class might shape parents' and young people's experiences of communication. However, while commonalities of gender and generation were striking, differences of social class did not strongly emerge across the sample, as found in other studies of the family lives of young people (Gillies et al., 2001). Rather, I was struck by the similarities across the accounts of individuals and families from widely different social backgrounds; that parents and young people living in extremely privileged circumstances described similar challenges and barriers to communication to those living within the ten per cent of most deprived households within Scotland is remarkable. That is not to say there was no difference, however, and I have highlighted points at which this became more marked, for example working-class and middle-class parents' varying expectations of their children's likelihood of early parenthood.

I will now discuss the findings with respect to each of the research questions outlined in Chapter One.

**RQ1: As children enter teenage years, what are the implications of changing dynamics of parent-child relationships for their communication about sex and sexuality?**

This thesis has elucidated the process of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality within the context of the early teenage years. It considered how parents and young people see themselves, and each other, at this stage in their lives. In particular, it explored how changing dynamics of parent-child relationships present both challenges and opportunities concerning intimate communication. Other studies have noted that parents distinguish between images of children *in general*, and their *own* children (Backett, 1982; Brannen et al., 1994). For example, Gillies et al. (2001: 7) concluded from their study of the family lives of sixteen to eighteen-year-olds:

“Few parents identified with common public representations of the teenage years as particularly difficult. Instead most discussed how relationships with their children have improved since they have become teenagers, describing how changing dynamics within the family have led to freer, more companionship-based interactions.”

While parents in this study talked about their children with much warmth, nevertheless some also spoke of current difficulties they experienced concerning their relationships with their children. In particular, more than half the parents described difficulties communicating with their teenage children in general, not just about sexual matters. Although they seemed to feel this was inevitable and temporary, tending to use biological explanations to absolve their children from responsibility for their ‘teenage behaviour’, nevertheless, parents *did* seem to consider the early teenage years a ‘difficult stage’. That some of these parents rooted their accounts of interactions with their own children in terms of stereotypical images of teenagers may be due to the younger age of ‘teenagers’ in this study (11-15 year-olds) as opposed to other research which has largely focused on older teens (15+) and their parents (Brannen et al. 1994; Gillies et al. 2001). Certainly, Gillies et al.

(2001: 38) reflect, “disagreements between parents and teenage children may be greater in the earlier teenage years, with many areas of conflict more or less resolved by the later teens”. The strong discourse of loss within parents’ accounts of their changing relationships with their children chimes with Langford et al.’s. (2001) finding that parents of younger teenagers (11-16) in their study described their families as disappearing rather than developing. This indicates the importance of recognising the differences between the earlier and later teenage years and tailoring information and support for parents and young people appropriately, rather than referring to ‘teenagers’ in general.

Mothers appeared to value opportunities to discuss their growing-up children with other parents, although they talked about losing these opportunities following the primary-secondary school transition. This resonates with Valentine’s (1997: 49) observation that, “routine practices of mothering and what it means to be a ‘good’ mother are constructed and contested locally, and that social interactions between mothers play an important part in this process.”

In addition to parents’ accounts of their growing-up children, this thesis responds to calls for greater documentation of young people’s self-definitions and their own views on the ‘boundary crossing’ into teenage years (Valentine, 2003; Weller, 2006). That most young people reported feeling emotionally closer to their mothers than their fathers supports other studies (Brannen et al., 1994; Langford et al., 2001), although, as reported by Frosh et al. (2002), over half the boys noted that fathers were more ‘jokey’ and light-hearted than mothers, and someone with whom they could ‘muck around’.

As discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.1), much research has focused on friends and school surpassing parents as a main source of sexual information and influence in the second decade of children’s lives. However, evidence from this study underlines the enduring importance of parents as sources of information and influence for some young people. Although young people reported discussing some sexual topics more with friends than parents, and while generational difference was identified as a

barrier to some communication, young people also specified issues which were considered too personal to share with friends, yet were legitimate to discuss with parents. Young people appeared to value parents' experience and their ability to help them manage perceived problems, such as those concerning their developing bodies. Furthermore, they talked about the significance of trusting their parents in relation to intimate communication. In other words, despite the increasing importance of friends in the early teenage years, parents *do* still matter to young people. This resonates with Gabb's (2007: 1) recent argument that, "parents and children are constructing many different networks of support and intimate relationships both within and beyond the family in ways that resist uniform interpretation." Therefore, rather than seeking to establish whether friends or parents are the most important 'source' of sexual information, it may be more useful to consider the connections within the multidimensional networks of influence and support which young people draw on, and the ways in which these might either complement or be in tension with each other.

In addition to considering micro-dynamics in parent-child relationships as children grow up, the thesis also explored parents' and young people's reflections on macro-level shifts in parent-child relationships across generations (Scott, 2000). In particular, the thesis resonates with debate about the nature of contemporary parent-child relationships and whether parents and children are moving towards greater equality and disclosing intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). Parents rooted their reflections on parenting within their own childhoods; while some described close relationships with their own parents, they mostly assessed their current families as more 'open' than their families of origin. However, Dermott (2003) warned that caution should be exercised when making assertions about generational changes in parenting based on contemporary parents' accounts. Certainly, parents seemed to *aspire* to more dialogue than they recalled with their own parents, but they also seemed to experience many of the same challenges in talking with their children.

Despite a general sense among most participants that their relationships were more 'open' than the previous generation, there was, nevertheless, a powerful generational

hierarchy. While middle-class mothers in particular emphasised their increasingly friendship-like relations with their growing-up children, the thesis sheds light on the processes by which parents sought to maintain knowledge of their children's lives. Indeed, accounts of the complex strategies parents used to monitor and supervise their children, such as verbal disclosure and solicitation of information, investigating their children's belongings and observing and interpreting their reactions chimes with Brannen et al.'s (1994) argument that communication is a means of control within families.

**RQ2: What do parents and children say about the content and process of their communication with each other about sex and sexuality?**

Although nearly all parents expressed an understanding that communication about sexual matters was important, this thesis supports other research which reports minimal direct talk about sex between parents and children in many families. In Chapter Seven I argued that the term 'talk' means different things to different people, and therefore, has limited utility in quantitative research seeking to accurately measure parent-child communication via questions such as, 'Have you talked to your parent/child about...?'. I also tentatively suggested that this might partially explain the disparities between the greater extent of reported communication by parents than young people within both this study, and the wider literature. However, while parents and young people rarely seemed to sit down to talk about sex, sexuality did seem to be woven into their everyday communication; as Gabb (2008) has commented: "sexuality is in the subtext of families' interactions". The thesis elucidates the everyday contexts of communication and the nuanced processes beyond direct 'sit-down' talk. However, as much of the communication described was indirect or non-verbal, where parents are basing their assessments of their children's understanding of sex and comfort on these responses, these interpretations may not take into account young people's active disguise of their (lack of) knowledge.

Regarding the content of communication, the thesis concurs with an Australian study (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1999), which found that sexual safety and young people's physical development were the most commonly discussed areas, with least discussion about sexual pleasure, masturbation and practical information, such as where to access contraception and sexual health services. In terms of sexual safety, pregnancy overwhelmingly appeared to be the main risk communicated between parents and children, with parents highlighting the impact of early parenthood on young people's future opportunities. That pregnancy was *not* discussed in terms of bringing shame on the family, as in accounts of young, unmarried mothers in previous generations (Hockey et al., 2007), resonates with these authors' observation that, "that which is marginal to, or risky about hegemonic heterosexuality may shift over time" (ibid: 11). Indeed, many parents acknowledged that their children would probably engage in pre-marital sex in their later teens, although early parenthood was still widely identified as undesirable. Furthermore, the mobilisation of personal fulfilment within warnings about pregnancy and early parenthood is consistent with descriptions of families in post-traditional societies which posit contemporary parents as investing energies in ensuring their children reach their full potential.

Despite euphemistic talk about the risks of sex, very few participants reported direct discussion concerning sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Occasionally, participants reported allusion to 'diseases', but there was no discussion of the spectrum of risk in relation to different sexual practices. Furthermore, the only specified 'disease' parents and young people described discussing with each other was HIV/AIDS, possibly due to awareness raised by high-profile public health campaigns in the 1980s and 90s. That there was no reported discussion of Chlamydia, despite this being the most common STI among young people (ISD Scotland, 2007) is concerning. In part, this may be because the school-based SHARE sex education programme had not yet been delivered to these younger teenagers. However, these findings confirm recent analysis of children and young people's concerns about sex and sexual health which indicate that information about STIs are not a priority for most (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006).

Although parents' efforts to regulate their children's sexual health were implicit in their talk about avoiding pregnancy, this was framed in terms of maximising their future opportunities rather than achieving good sexual health. This may have been related to the age of the children in the sample who, for the most part, parents did not seem to believe were sexually active. However, while their children's sexual health did not appear to be a current priority for most parents, the maintenance of pubertal bodies was an area in which many mothers seemed to play an active role. In particular, mothers' involvement in accessing 'expert knowledge' resonates with other research about parents' ongoing sense of responsibility to maintain their children's healthy bodies (Backett-Milburn, 2000; Brannen et al., 1994).

In Chapter Six I noted that some pubertal transitions were reportedly discussed more than others. Partly this may be due to a gradient of visibility concerning bodily change, but also this seemed to be related to the meanings given to these developments: those which are understood in terms of growing older, such as menarche, may be more acceptable than those which require explicit acknowledgement of the sexually pleasurable potentialities of young people's bodies, such as spermarche. Lack of discussion about sexual pleasure reflects the "missing discourse of desire" in both school sex education (Fine, 1988; Ingham 2005), and also UK policy discourses which, unlike the World Health Organisation, do not mention pleasure in their definition of sexual health (Evans, 2006). While parents might identify pleasure as part of sex, they did not seem to consider this appropriate for discussion with their children. Other research has suggested that parents worry about appearing permissive about sex (Jaccard et al., 2000), but I found little evidence of this anxiety within these parents' accounts. It may be that the boundaries erected around parents' own sexual feelings and experiences are a barrier to discussion of pleasure, but further research is needed to investigate this speculation.

Unlike girls, some boys said they would like to talk to their fathers more about girlfriends, sex and their physical development, although some were no longer in contact with them. As also described by Frosh et al. (2002), father-son joking about sex seemed to be important to some boys, both as a way of establishing intimacy and

also as a source of information. However, there was a sense that some fathers could not handle sensitive talk. Drawing on the accounts of 11-14-year-old boys, Frosh et al. (2002: 237) have noted:

“...the very thing that makes fathers sometimes easier to get on with (their jokes and avoidance of serious topics, their mucking about and general playfulness) makes it harder for many boys to confide in them when they have something important to say.”

Based on their recent evaluation of the *Healthy Respect* sexual health demonstration project in Scotland, Von Teijlingen et al. (2007) warned that using humour in sex education may reinforce the notion that sexuality is embarrassing, and that educators, be they teachers or parents, are uncomfortable discussing it. Furthermore, humour has been identified as a key mechanism in the construction and regulation of hegemonic masculinities within schools, both primary (Walkerdine, 1991) and secondary (Epstein, 1997; Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Certainly, there did seem to be evidence of the circulation of heterosexist values and potential misinformation about sex through jokes and joking. However, boys' talk about the importance of humour and joking for comfortable communication must not be undermined. Sexual health promoters who work with young men report the positive use of humour as a tool for challenging heterosexist assumptions and facilitating discussion about pressures on young men. Therefore, the potential of humour for facilitating father-son communication requires further investigation.

**RQ3: What is the nature of boundaries of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality and how do these operate in family settings?**

Research which distinguishes different institutional settings where young people learn about sex and sexuality often draws on a dichotomy between public sites, such as school and community settings, and 'the home'. For example, Measor et al. (2000: 102) described 'family-based' communication as a "private realm", unproblematically comparing the "warmth and confiding character of home" to the "cold and impersonal approach of school sex education" (ibid: 104). However, this

thesis challenges these conceptions of intrafamilial disclosure, by highlighting family members' negotiations concerning privacy from each other. As such, the thesis chimes with a more critical examination of 'openness' in relation to parent-child sexual communication in recent years (Frankham, 2006; Kirkman et al., 2005; Solomon et al., 2002). Indeed, Kirkman et al. (2005) have expressed caution over the widespread endorsement of 'open communication' in the health literature, as this tends to be unaccompanied by any clarification of its meaning.

That parents and young people talked about themes of negotiating independence and privacy in relation to their communication over the teenage years echoes other research (Brannen et al., 1994; Gillies et al., 2001; Langford et al., 2001; Solomon et al., 2002). However, this thesis contributes important empirical evidence concerning the ongoing evolution of boundaries of bodily modesty between parents and children. While there has been considerable focus on physical intimacy and the 'politics of touch' between parents and younger children, for example through debates about breast-feeding, sleeping with babies and practices of body care (Gabb, 2004; Halley, 2007), there has been relatively little sociological discussion of intergenerational interactions concerning bodies in families with teenage children. Contrary to Sibley's (1995) argument that parents tend to establish boundaries within the domestic environment, and children only have limited opportunities to carve out their own space, evidence presented in Chapter Six suggests many young people exercised considerable agency in renegotiating boundaries of knowledge of their bodies, which largely seemed to be respected by parents. As young people grow up, their increasing bodily privacy shapes parents' and children's lived experiences of the shifting micro-geographies of the home. Of course, negotiations of bodily privacy within domestic settings shift with developments in housing over time (Allan, 1989), such as indoor bathrooms and the increasing tendency for children to have their own bedroom. Indeed, it will be interesting to see how the trend towards multiple bathrooms within homes may influence the negotiation of bodily boundaries between parents and children.

The original research questions were designed to reflect the exploratory nature of the study. However, it is important to consider how they might be developed in light of the analysis of the accounts. In Chapter Two (2.4.2) I briefly discussed literature which has highlighted tensions around youth sexuality, including competing constructions of children as both innocents and potentially sexually 'precocious'. As such, I noted that youth sexuality has been identified as a key site of control (Thorogood, 1992; West, 1999). If the processes by which children learn about sex are considered one arena for the exertion of this control, then parents are key agents in the policing of youth sexuality.

Although not explicitly framed in these terms, the thesis contributes to understandings of the mechanisms by which parental control over their children's sexuality operates, and how this control may be contested, both between parents themselves, and between parents and children. In particular, it illuminates parental control in the early teenage years, before most young people have become involved in partner sex. Although most parents claimed their children's sexual debut was not an immediate concern, there was a sense in which current interaction was considered important. For example, reported dialogue about girls' physical appearance indicates parental attempts to control their daughters' sexuality in public. Parental justifications for controlling children's sexuality can be seen in the accounts which positioned early parenthood as limiting future opportunities. Furthermore, that sex was constructed in most parental accounts as a heterosexual activity which should occur within the context of a longer-term relationship, indicates intrafamilial policing of the boundaries of 'acceptable' sexuality.

A potentially fruitful way of extending understandings of parental control over children's sexuality might be to consider its intersection with the negotiation of sexual knowledge within families. What parents say they want their children to know about sex, what parents report thinking their children know, what young people report knowing about and what young people say they want their parents to know they know are all connected but do not map neatly onto one another. Rather, the politics of sexual knowledge within families appears to be as much about

concealing knowledge (both parents' and children's!) and avoiding interaction, as it is about 'open' discussion. Jackson and Scott (2004: 235) have pointed to societal unease about children's sexual learning, contending that, "there is little focus on becoming sexual as a process; rather it is seen as a matter of leaping a chasm between 'innocence' and 'knowledge'." Indeed, although most parents claim they want their children to be more informed about sex than they were in their own childhood, there also seems to be a sense in which some parents feel children can know too much. Thus sexual knowledge appears to be constructed as both protective and potentially threatening. How do these contested framings influence the playing out of parent-child sexuality communication in practice? How do children resist parental attempts to control their acquisition of knowledge? Considerations of the precarious nature of sexual knowledge, and its complex negotiation within families, might usefully be informed by literature highlighting the currency of sexual knowledge in other settings, such as schools (Epstein et al., 2003; Mac an Ghail, 1994).

A further extension of the initial research questions regarding the processes and boundaries of parent-child sexuality communication includes consideration of how these are shaped by gender, both of parent and young person. The thesis has argued that parent-child communication is strongly gendered, in terms of the apparent emphasis on mothers' suitability and responsibility for this aspect of parenting; the greater extent of reported dialogue between same-sex parent-child dyads; the different modes through which mothers and fathers communicate with their children; and the content of their communication.

As discussed in Chapter Two, fathers largely tend to be absent from studies of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, and particularly from qualitative research in this area. The data presented in this thesis, therefore, provide important information about perceptions of fathers' responsibilities for this aspect of parenting, and also the negotiation and contestation of father-child sexual communication in practice. That fathers appear to have less dialogue with their children about sexuality than mothers, has often been framed in terms of failure, or 'abdication of their

responsibilities' (e.g. Walker, 2001). However, while some fathers undoubtedly avoid involvement, this study also indicates that fathers and children *do* communicate about sex and sexuality, albeit often non-verbally or indirectly. Furthermore, where fathers expressed apparently genuine concerns about discussing their children's bodies and breaching their boundaries of privacy, these challenged conceptions of fathers as disinterested.

Although there has been greater dialogue about involved and intimate fatherhood in recent years (Dermott, 2008), there are also dominant discourses about the threat of male sexuality tied up with media-fuelled moral panic concerning paedophilia and incest (Gabb, 2006; Kirkman et al., 2002; Morgan, 1996). In addition to a general level of embarrassment, how to be involved and handle sexual communication safely without their interest being misconstrued is an extra dimension with which fathers struggle. Certainly, those fathers who participated in this study may be different from those who refused, and there are undoubtedly many who are not actively trying to find meaningful ways to be involved in their children's sexual learning. However, even within a small, yet diverse, sample of eleven men, there was diversity of attitudes concerning fathers' roles and also assessments of their own achievements and challenges regarding communication with their children. For example, while some men seemed to stand back from communication with either their sons or daughters, others reported regular conversations about intimate topics and a small minority described taking an active role in helping their children manage their physical development.

### **9.3 Implications for policy and practice**

There is currently unprecedented public and political interest in sexual health in Scotland. A significant thrust of the Scottish Government's sexual health strategy has focussed on young people, and there has been considerable attention on the

importance of parents as sexual health 'educators', although this has not been substantiated by any national initiatives to support families in this area.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis supports much of the advice for parents which is currently advocated within sexual health promotion, for example: that communication appears to be easiest in the context of ongoing dialogue about bodies and sex from a young age; that discussion about sex is more comfortable when it is part of everyday life, rather than approached as 'the talk'; that television can facilitate conversations about the complexities of relationships, particularly as this enables talk about other people, rather than focus on young people's own lives.

However, the thesis raises a number of further issues which have not been so fully acknowledged and deserve particular attention.

#### *Communication processes*

- There needs to be greater reflection on the meanings of 'talk', and recognition that what parents and children consider 'talking' may differ. Parents need to be encouraged to consider the differences between talking *to* and talking *with* their children, and also to recognise when young people do not want to talk.
- As parents and young people generally described communicating in pairs, the importance of opportunities for one-to-one communication between parents and children should be highlighted.
- Advice encouraging parents to 'find the right time and place' to talk with their child, must acknowledge that these are subjective assessments and may be different for each individual.

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<sup>12</sup> There are a few isolated examples of local initiatives working with parents and families, such as the Talk2 and the Speakeasy projects in Glasgow and Dumfries respectively, but these need to be supported by national-level campaigns.

- The role of young people as agents in their own sexual learning must be considered when developing programmes to encourage parent-child communication; they must be designed for young people's needs as well as parents. As young people prefer to talk about sexual matters in general, rather than about themselves, activities such as vignettes, which facilitate discussion while securing privacy, would seem appropriate.
- Many parents and young people seem to find it easier to discuss sexual/romantic *relationships*, rather than sexual practices. Given that the development of skills in negotiating healthy relationships has been identified as an important component of achieving sexual health, it may be appropriate to raise awareness of the importance of communicating about healthy relationships, rather than the biological aspects of sex.

*Issues of sex, sexuality and sexual practices*

- There is a delicate balance between moving towards health promotion which motivates parents and young people to communicate about the pleasurable aspects of sex within healthy relationships, while also encouraging a comprehensive awareness of the risks. Sex already seems to be framed within a strong discourse of risk regarding pregnancy, but there needs to be more work to put STIs on the radar for young people and parents. Parents may be unsure of their own knowledge in this area, and so increasing parental knowledge about STIs, contraception and services for young people is important. While some young people might not want to discuss these aspects with parents, others might; it is about respecting, but not assuming, boundaries.
- Given that many young people will engage in other sexual practices prior to penetrative intercourse, if parents want to convey messages about sexual safety they should be encouraged to update their knowledge about the spectrum of risk in relation to transmission of infections.

## *Gender issues*

- While recognising and valuing the important role mothers play, the discourse of female suitability for communicating with children which works to legitimate some fathers' lack of involvement needs to be challenged. This should involve greater acknowledgement and encouragement of fathers' actual and potential roles in communicating with their children, particularly sons. In particular, greater recognition of the informal communication which young men and fathers report, and further exploration of both the possibilities opened up, and the restrictions imposed, by humour are required. Health promotion could encourage fathers' involvement by specifically targeting campaigns in male-dominated environments (e.g. sporting events, workplaces) and using high-profile male figures, such as those used in the White Ribbon campaign.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, if fathers are to become more confident in communicating with their children about sexuality, there needs to be explicit acknowledgement and discussion regarding men's anxieties about interactions with children.
- Support for both lone mothers and fathers, particularly those bringing up children of the opposite gender. This should include specific support focused on communication about physical development.

## *Sources of information, advice and support*

- Consideration of the provision of support for families requires recognition that the notion of help-seeking is at odds with many parents' understandings of parenting as inherently a private affair (Broadhurst, 2007), perhaps nowhere more so than concerning sexual matters. Therefore, it is important to consider

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<sup>13</sup> This global campaign encourages men to challenge the culture which condones violence against women. In 2007, the Scottish branch of this organisation launched a media campaign using well-known male actors, sportsmen and broadcasters, among others, to promote awareness about its message.

not only what support is made available to parents, but also *how* it is offered, so parents do not perceive it to involve a failure on their own part.

- Parents need to be reassured that young people do still value their communication, advice and support, in addition to that of friends; indeed there are some areas which young people say they would prefer not to share with peers but would be happy sharing with parents. However, simply telling young people they can ask their parents anything they want to is not enough, as many young people express difficulties knowing how to raise conversation.
- Parents appear to value discussion with other parents about their children's development, although many described losing the opportunities for this when their children move to secondary school. Therefore, initiatives which encourage informal interaction among parents, such as websites and support groups, are encouraged.
- As some parents do not feel consulted, and more feel uninformed, about their children's school-based sex education, there needs to be greater dialogue between schools and parents about the content and timing of sex education. Schools need to encourage parents and young people to discuss their school sex education with each other.

#### **9.4 Directions for future research**

Based on the findings of this study, in addition to reflection on its limitations, I have several ideas for further work which would extend this research:

- *Innovative qualitative methodologies*

While individual interviews have been extremely valuable for gaining insight into families' lives, the enduring challenges of researching an area which many

experience as private, embarrassing and even taboo, means these data are to some extent limited by what participants were willing to discuss in a face-to-face interview with an unknown researcher. Undoubtedly, this type of social interaction will have influenced the nature of the accounts. While I am not suggesting that these are inferior or superior to accounts constructed in different settings, the opportunities opened up by data collection methods which afford participants greater privacy, such as through the internet, may facilitate different types of disclosure.

Furthermore, as I have already argued, communication itself is a slippery concept. While research in this area is dominated by focus on talk, this thesis has shed light on the multidimensional processes through which information and ideas about sex and sexuality are communicated between parents and young people. However, inviting parents and children to reflect on their indirect communication in an interview may not be the most appropriate method for understanding these layers and nuances. Future studies could develop some of the innovative qualitative methodologies, such as 'emotion maps' (Gabb, 2007), which are designed to capture families' everyday experiences of communication. In particular, methodological development of qualitative research which moves beyond data generated solely through verbal accounts would complement the substantive concerns of a research agenda seeking to extend the focus on talk, to other modes of communication.

– *Longitudinal research*

This study gathered qualitative accounts of *current* communication in the early teenage years. However, without following these participants in the future, there is no way of knowing how their interactions may impact on young people's future sexual decision-making and behaviour, nor how they will make sense of this in years to come. As discussed in Chapter Two (2.2), while numerous studies have sought to examine how parent-child communication may influence sexual behaviour, this has only been explored quantitatively, and rarely longitudinally (Wight et al., 2006 is an exception), but rather retrospectively. To my knowledge, there are no qualitative

longitudinal studies of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality, despite the clear benefits such a research design would offer. A qualitative study which investigated the experiences of parents and young people over time would enable unique insights into the evolving *process* of parent-child communication, and parents' and children's own understandings of the complex relationship between communication and behaviour. Depending on the duration of such a project, it may also be possible to explore shifts across historical as well as biographical time.

– *'Social' parents*

In the context of increasing numbers of children living with non-biological parents, little is known about the role of 'social' (i.e. non-biological) parents in communicating with children about sex. Although contemporary sociological theories of families stress the importance of 'doing family' as a set of practices (Morgan, 1996), the few 'social' parents in this study indicated perceived parental responsibilities for sexual communication may be more clearly delineated between biological and social parents than other aspects of parental care. Indeed, that under half the social parents living with the younger participants agreed to be interviewed may be indicative of ambivalence concerning their role. Might they have been more readily involved in the study if it was exploring a less contentious topic? Valentine (1997: 46) suggested tensions between biological and social parents may be exposed in aspects of parenting concerning the care and control of young people's bodies. Do tensions concerning parents' sexual values and attitudes about bringing up children play out differently within parenting couples where only one is biologically related to the children, as opposed to both? Further research is needed to establish parents' (both biological and social) and young people's views on this. What are the challenges, and indeed what possibilities may these relationships offer, in terms of sexual communication? And how can 'social' parents and children be supported to comfortably communicate with one another?

## 9.5 Final comment

David Morgan (1996: 186) highlighted the benefits of exploring a 'family dimension' in specific topics of social inquiry:

“Developments in the studies of these specialized topics could contribute to our understanding of family processes while, conversely, studies of the family and household have something to contribute to these other specialized topics.”

Indeed, this study of parent-child communication about sex and sexuality has illuminated family processes more generally, including the negotiation of privacy and bodily boundaries within the home, modes and contexts of communication between parents and children and fathers' interactions with their teenage children. On the flipside, by taking families as the focus of investigation into young people's sexual learning, this has facilitated understanding of one context in the myriad influences on young people, and how broader discourses around sexuality are constructed within this environment.

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## Appendix 1: Letter sent to parents

March 2006

Dear Parent/Guardian

### *TIME TO TALK?: A STUDY OF HOW PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND COMMUNICATE ABOUT 'GROWING UP'*

I am writing to ask for your help. The Economic and Social Research Council and the Medical Research Council are funding an important new research study looking at parents' and children's experiences of sex education within families. I am sure you will agree that bringing up children is a very important, and at times difficult, task. We know very little about how children in Scotland learn about 'growing up', particularly issues related to sex, puberty and personal relationships, and so this study will be important for those working to support families and for the development of health policies.

I am inviting your family to take part in this study because Dr \*\*\*\*\*'s records indicate that you have a child living with you who is aged between 11 and 15. Participation in the study is voluntary but I very much hope that you will agree to help with this research. It is important that you understand why the study is being conducted and what your participation might involve so please take your time to read the accompanying leaflets, 'Time to Talk? Information for parents' and 'Time to Talk? Information for children and young people', which I hope you will share with your child. I would be happy to meet you and your child to explain more about the study and answer any questions you may have before deciding if you wish to take part.

Please be assured that whether you take part or not, your decision will not affect any dealings you have with your GP. Should you decide not to take part, no further requests or contact will be made. Even if you do decide to participate, but then change your mind, you may withdraw without offering any reasons.

Once you have read the accompanying leaflets, if you would like to know more about the research or are interested in taking part, then please complete the form on page 2, indicating how you would like me to contact you, and return it to me using the stamp-addressed envelope provided.

Thanks in advance for your help.

Best wishes

Ruth Lewis  
PhD Researcher, University of Edinburgh

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## REQUEST FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

### TIME TO TALK?: A STUDY OF HOW PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND COMMUNICATE ABOUT 'GROWING UP'

- If you would like to receive more information about the study or are considering taking part in this research, please fill in your details below and return it to me using the stamped addressed envelope provided.
- This is simply a request for further information and does not mean you have to be interviewed. You can decline to take part at any point.

---

#### SECTION A: I WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Name: .....

Address:.....

.....

..... Postcode:.....

Tel. no:..... E-mail: .....

---

#### SECTION B: PLEASE CONTACT ME...

- IN PERSON (I will telephone you to arrange a suitable time to drop by, or meet)
- BY TELEPHONE
- BY POST
- BY E-MAIL

Signature:

Date:

## Appendix 2

### Who am I?

My name is Ruth Lewis and I am a researcher carrying out a PhD based at the University of Edinburgh. I have experience interviewing children and young people about sensitive matters and have a Disclosure Scotland (police check) certificate.

'Time to Talk?' is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Medical Research Council.

If you would like to take part or simply want to know more, you can get in touch with me either by phone on 0131 650 4681, by e-mail at [r.lewis@ed.ac.uk](mailto:r.lewis@ed.ac.uk), or by letter at the project contact address:



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# Time to talk?

A PhD research study exploring:

- *Parents' and children's experiences of talking about 'growing up'*
- *Families' views on sex education at home*

## What is this project about?

Although there is quite a lot of research on sex education in schools, we know very little about how parents and children in Scotland discuss these issues at home. 'Time to Talk?' will explore how family members feel communicating with each other about 'growing up'. The aim of this research is to better understand the challenges and issues that parents and children experience talking about sex, puberty and personal relationships at home.

## Who can take part?

For this project I need to speak to families with at least one child aged between 11 and 15. We already know that lots of people find it difficult or embarrassing talking about growing up, while others never have a problem talking openly with each other about these things. Whatever your experiences, I would like to speak to your family and your contribution would be valued.

## What would be involved?

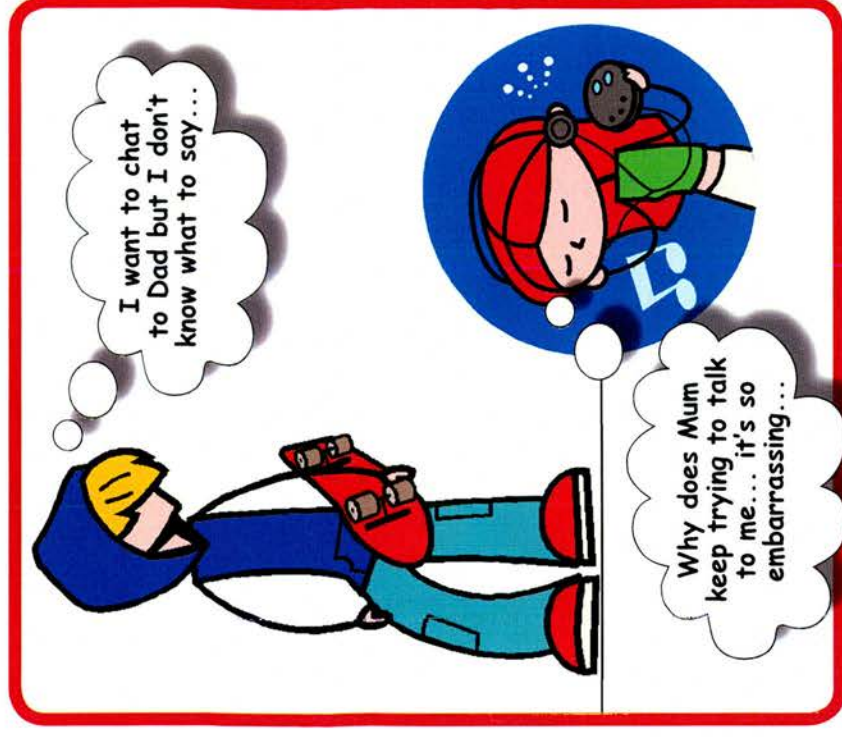
The study will involve me coming to your home, or to another convenient place, at a time that suits you, to interview you and your child. I would like to interview you and your child separately, and can do this on the same day, or on two separate occasions. Interviews with children will be approached sensitively and appropriately for their age and they can have a sibling or friend with them if they like, although they don't have to. If you live in a two-parent household I may also invite your partner to be interviewed, again separately.

You can choose for the interview to take place during the daytime, in the evening or at the weekend. The interview should take about an hour, probably less for your child. You can end the interview at any time. If you agree, the interviews will be recorded and transcribed to help with later analysis. However, anything you tell me will be treated in the **STRICTEST CONFIDENCE** and no report will ever identify you or any member of your family. The only exception to this is if someone tells me something relating to the abuse of a child, in which case I must pass this information on to the relevant authorities.

As a token of appreciation for your time, families will receive a £20 voucher (various choices available).

# Time to talk?

## information for children and young people



exception to this would be if you told me something that made me think you were being harmed. In this case, I would have to tell someone, although I would discuss it with you first.

### **What do I do if I want to take part?**

If you have any questions or would like to take part in the study, then please talk it over with your parent/s.

### **What happens if I don't want to do this?**

Nothing – that's not a problem. Just ignore this leaflet.



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## Can you help?

Although we know quite a lot about the sex education that you get at school, we don't know very much about how parents and children talk to each other about this at home.

This project will speak to families like yours to find out what you learn about growing up at home and how you feel talking to your parent/s about things like puberty and sex.

***Will you help me by taking part in this study and telling me what you think?***

You might want to ask me a few questions first:

## So who are you?

My name is Ruth Lewis (see picture) and I am a researcher at the University of Edinburgh.



## Who can take part?

If you are between 11 and 15 then I would like to speak to your family.

Some people find it really embarrassing talking to their Mum or Dad about these things, while others feel like they can talk to their parent/s about anything. However you feel, I would like to chat to you and hear your views.

## What would be involved?

Taking part in the study would involve me coming to your home, or maybe somewhere else, to interview you. I would also talk to your parent/s, although not at the same time as you. This is because I really want to listen to what you think about these issues. If you don't want to have this conversation on your own, you could have someone with you, like a brother or sister or a friend.

You can choose for the interview to be after school or at the weekend. You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to and you can stop and end the interview at any time. If you agree to take part you can change your mind at any stage later on without me asking why.

## What would happen to my answers?

If you agree, I will tape record our conversation and write a report up from the research. I might use some of your exact words in my report but it will not have your name in it so no-one will know that you took part.

## I don't want anyone knowing my private stuff!

All the interviews will be strictly confidential. That means you can tell anyone you like all about the interview but I won't talk to anyone about what you tell me, including your parent/s. The only

**Can you help?**

**Are you aged 11-15?**

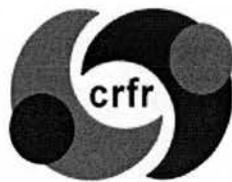
**Or are you the parent of a young person (11-15)?**

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
(University of Edinburgh) is looking for **families with at least  
one young person aged between 11-15** to take part in a  
research study exploring how parents and children  
communicate with each other about sex  
and puberty as children grow up.

This research will be important for those working to support parents  
and young people in Scotland.

We are keen to involve all sorts of families from across Edinburgh  
and would particularly welcome the participation of fathers!

For more information, please contact **Ruth Lewis**  
on **0131 650 4681** (please leave an answerphone message)  
or email your contact details to [r.lewis@ed.ac.uk](mailto:r.lewis@ed.ac.uk)



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## **Appendix 5: Interview guide for parents**

### **FAMILY LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS**

**Can you start off by telling me a bit about yourself and your family?**

- Occupation?
- Children? Partner? Extended?

**I'm interested in the day-to-day goings on in your house from when you get up to when you go to bed.**

- Can you run me through what happened yesterday? Was that a typical day?

**Can you tell me a bit about X's activities?**

- After school? Weekends? Time with friends? Time with family?

**How would you say your family gets on with each other in general?**

- Causes of arguments or cross words?
- Example of a recent altercation that comes to mind? How typical?

**How would you describe your relationship with x?**

**Is there anyone in the family who x is particularly close to at the moment?**

- Who do you think x would say s/he is closest to right now?

**Has your relationship with x changed over the last few years at all? How?**

**How do you see x these days? Do you tend to think of him/her as an adult/child/teenager?**

- Would x agree with this? What about in relation to their peers?

**How does it make you feel to watch x get older?**

**What does the term 'growing up' mean to you?**

- What things does that make you think of?

### **PARENTING**

**How would you describe yourself as a parent?**

- What about when you think of other parents you know?
- How do you think x would describe you as a parent? Your partner?

**What do you like about being a Mum/Dad?**

**As a mother/father do you see yourself as having any specific roles in relation to x's upbringing?**

## **YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING ABOUT SEX**

**Thinking back to when you were x's age, how similar or different was your life to x's?**

- Any similarities/differences in your family lives?
- Societal differences?

**By x's age, how informed would you have been about issues to do with sex, puberty and relationships?**

**Do you remember how you learnt about these things when you were younger?**

- Any particular stories that spring to mind about where or how you learnt about x, y or z?
- What did you think at the time about your experiences of sex education? What about now?

**Thinking back to your early teenage years, how did your parents deal with sex and sex-related issues?**

- Do you think you handle things similarly or differently?

## **LEARNING ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**Thinking about things today, what kinds of issues spring to mind when I say 'sex and relationships education'?**

- What would you say are the 2/3 most important aspects?

**Is there an *ideal* age when these sorts of issues should be dealt with?**

- How do you know when that is?

**Thinking about the parental role in all of this for a minute, *in an ideal world*, what would a parent's role be in talking with their child about sex and relationships?**

**Are there any other people who should be involved in talking about these issues with children? Who?**

- Are there any things that you think it's best for young people to talk about with someone other than their parents?

## **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHILD**

Now we've talked a bit about the ideal but in reality, a lot of families find it really difficult to communicate about growing up.

**In relation to what we've just discussed, what kinds of things have/do you and x communicate about?**

**Can you think back to *the first time* that you communicated sex and sex related topics?**

- How old was x? How did it come up? What was discussed?

**\*\*USE TOPIC CARDS\*\* have you communicated with x about any of the things on these cards?**

- How did you find it? Was it comfortable/uncomfortable?
- Were some things easier than others? Which ones are easy/hard?
- Is there anything on this list that you would like to talk to them about but haven't?

**Can you think about a time *in the past few weeks* when you've communicated with x about any of these topics, or anything else to do with sex, puberty or growing up?**

- What did you talk about? How long did you talk for?
- How did the conversation start? Where were you?
- X's response? (Qs, argue, silent)
- How did you feel about the conversation?
- Do you remember other times when you've chatted to x like that?
- Looking back on it, is there anything you would have done differently?

**In general, how responsive is x to discussion about sex and sexuality with you?**

- How do you think x feels talking to you about these sorts of things?

**How do *you* feel when sexual topics come up?**

**How *often* would you say you communicate about things like that?**

**Who usually initiates communication? (and how does the other react?)**

**When does this usually occur? (setting; time of day?)**

**Are there any things that you would like to be able to communicate about more?**

- If you've not been able to talk to x about these things, is there anyone else you think they might talk to instead?

**Do you think x finds it easier to talk to you/your partner? Why?**

**(If applicable) What is your experience of communicating with your other children?**

- Are any easier to talk to than others or is it much the same?

**Are there any important values about personal relationships that you have tried to pass on to x? How have you done this?**

**What do you think x might've learnt from you about personal relationships?**

**Do you think x knows how you feel about issues such as homosexuality/ abortion/ one-night stands etc? How?**

**How do you think x might pick up on your views?**

**How do you see your role panning out in the future in terms of communicating with x about their personal relationships?**

### **YOU AND YOUR PARTNER (if applicable)**

**Have you and your partner ever discussed x's sexual education?**  
(issues raised, decisions, agree/disagree, how deal with disagreements?)

**Do you and your partner tend to play a similar or different role in communicating with x about these sorts of things?**  
How do you feel about that? Would you like him/her to be more/less involved?

### **SUMMARY**

**Most difficult/successful aspect of communication about sexuality?**

**In general, are there any changes *you* would like to make about communication with x in this area? Are there any changes you think x would like to make?**

**What, if anything, could help parents in this area?**

**Imagine you have a friend whose child is approaching adolescence, what advice would you give them about the best way to deal with sex and sexuality issues with their teenager?**

**Any other comments?** Is there anything else that you'd like to say or do you have any questions, or think I've missed out anything really important?

### **FAMILY DECISION TO PARTICIPATE**

**Finally, I'm really interested in how your family came to be involved in this project. Could you tell me a little bit about how it came about?**  
○ How did you hear about the project?

- How did you feel being asked to be involved?
- Did you discuss it with people in your family when you were making up your mind?
- Was anyone more/less keen to take part than others? How was that resolved?

## **Appendix 6: Interview guide for children and young people**

### **FAMILY LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS**

**Can we start off by telling me a little bit about yourself?**

- How old are you?
- Give me a picture of how you spend your spare time when you're not at school (favourite activities/hobbies etc)?

**Tell me a bit about your friends: are there any friends in particular who you go about with or see in the evening or at weekends?**

- older/younger; same school? M/F? a 'best' friend?

**Now could you tell me a bit about your family...**

- Parents? Siblings? Extended?

**I'm interested in the day-to-day goings on in your house - could you run me through a typical day from when you get up to when you go to bed.**

- e.g. what happened yesterday? Was that a typical day?

**How would you say your family gets on with each other in general?**

- Causes of arguments or cross words?
- Recent example? How typical was that?

**Is there anyone in your family who you'd say you're particularly close to at the moment? Why do you think that is?**

- Who do you think your M/D would say you're closest to right now?

**Tell me about your Mum/Dad. How would you describe them?**

- What's the best thing about them?
- What are they like compared to other parents you know?
- Are there any things you aren't allowed to do? Any rules?
- How do you think they would describe themselves as parents?

**Has anything about your relationship with your Mum or Dad changed over the last few years, or is it much the same as before? (if yes, in what ways?)**

### **GROWING UP**

**Would you say you've changed over the last two or three years? If yes, how?**

**How do you see yourself these days? Do you think of yourself as an adult/ child/ teenager?**

○ How do you see yourself in relation to your friends or people in your class at school?

**What does the term 'growing up' mean to you?**

○ What things does that make you think of?

**How do you think things are the same or different for you now as an x year-old, compared to when your Mum/Dad was that age?**

**Some people find it really exciting that they're getting older but others can find it all a bit scary and like they don't know what's going on. Some people feel a bit of both.**

How do you feel about it? What do you like about it? Is there anything you worry about?

**Some people like talking about what's on their mind or about problems while others prefer to keep things to themselves. Is there anyone that you talk to? What do you talk to them about?**

## **LEARNING ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**Now obviously there's a lot of new things to learn about as you're growing up. Where would you say you've found out most of what you know about things like sex and puberty?**

○ School? Friends? TV? Magazines, books? Internet?

**Who do you think should talk to young people about things like sex, puberty, boyfriends/girlfriends etc?**

***IDEALLY*, what should parents' role in this be?**

○ Should they be involved in talking to children or is it best to let others do this?

## **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR PARENTS**

**Now, we've talked about the ideal situation. In reality, some people say they feel comfortable talking to their parents about things to do with sex but others say they find it difficult. In general, how would you say you feel about talking to your parent/s about things to do with puberty, sex, relationships etc?**

**\*\*USE TOPIC CARDS\*\* Have you ever talked to anyone in your family about any of the things on these cards?**

○ What was it like? Was it comfortable/uncomfortable?

○ Were some things easier than others? Which ones are easy/hard?

○ Is there anything on this list that you would like to talk about but haven't?

- How often might you talk about these sorts of things?
- Who would usually raise these topics?
- Where would you usually be?

**Can you think about a time *in the past few weeks* when you've chatted to your parent/s about any of these topics, or anything else to do with sex, puberty or growing up?**

- What did you talk about? How long did you talk for?
- How did the conversation start? Where were you?
- How did you feel about the conversation?
- Do you remember other times when you've chatted to your parents like that?
- If you haven't talked to them about these sorts of things, would you like to be able to? Is there anyone else you talk to instead?

**Can you remember back to the *first time* that you talked about sex with your Mum/Dad?**

- How old were you? What did you talk about? Can you remember how it came up?

**Are you happy with how you communicate with your Mum/Dad about these things, or would you like your communication to be different?**

- Do you feel can say/ask anything or are there some things you can't talk about?

**What things do you think can make it hard to talk to parents about things like sex, puberty, boyfriends/girlfriends? Are there any things that could make it easier?**

**Do you think that you have the same kind of views about things to do with sex and relationships as your Mum and Dad? Or do your views differ from what your parents think? Why do you think you might think similarly/differently to your Mum/Dad?**

**Do you think you've learnt anything from your Mum/Dad about what it's like to be in a relationship?**

**Do you know what your Mum/Dad think about people your age having a boyfriend/girlfriend? How do you know?**

**How do you see things panning out in the future in terms of how you speak to your Mum/Dad about your boyfriends/girlfriends, sexual relationships etc?**

**SUMMARY**

- **What would you say is the best thing about communicating with your Mum/Dad about sex, puberty and relationships? And what's the hardest?**
- **Are there any changes you'd like to make? Any your M/D would like to make?**
- **What, if anything, could help families talk to each other about these sorts of things?**
- **If you have children when you're older, do you think you will talk to them about things to do with sex, puberty and relationships? What might you do similarly/differently from your Mum/Dad?**

**Any other comments?** Is there anything else that you'd like to say or do you have any questions, or think I've missed out anything really important?

### **FAMILY DECISION TO PARTICIPATE**

**Finally, I'm really interested in how your family came to be involved in this project. Could you tell me a little bit about how it came about?**

- How did you hear about the project?
- How did you feel being asked to be involved?
- Did you talk about it with anyone when you were making up your mind?
- Was anyone more/less keen to take part than others? How was that resolved?

### **REFLECTIONS:**

**How did you find the interview? Was it what you expected it'd be like? Would it have been much the same or different if I was a man?**

### Appendix 7: Responses to prompt card exercise

Topic	Mother-child dyad		Father-child dyad		Total number people (n=35) reporting talk on topic*
	YP (n=17) reported talking to mother	Mother (n=11) reported talking to YP	YP (n=17) reported talking to father	Father (n=7) reported talking to YP	
How to keep yourself safe when you're out and about	11	10	6	5	27
How your body changes as you grow up	12	11	2	4	27
Condoms	4	6	3	3	15
Relationships	4	6	1	4	14
Pregnancy	3	7	1	1	11
Homosexuality (i.e. people who are gay or lesbian)	5	3	1	3	11
Sexually transmitted infections (e.g. Chlamydia; HIV/AIDS)	1	6	0	1	8

Self esteem	4	1	2	2	8
Abortion	2	3	0	2	7
Exploitation or violence in relationships	3	3	0	1	6
How to deal with unwanted sexual attention	0	4	0	2	6
What it's like to have a boyfriend/girlfriend	1	2	1	1	5
Reputation	1	2	0	2	5
Romance/falling in love	1	1	2	1	4
Sexual attraction / what it's like to really fancy someone	0	3	0	0	3
How to let someone know you like them	0	1	0	2	3
Pressure to have sex	0	3	0	0	3

Where to get contraceptives (e.g. condoms; the pill)	0	2	0	0	2
Sexual health services for young people (eg Caledonia Youth)	1	1	0	0	2
Masturbation	0	1	0	0	1
How to use contraceptives (e.g. condoms; the pill)	0	0	0	0	0

\*This number represents the total number of people who reported talk, rather than the sum of the row, as the first and third columns may list the same young person twice i.e. if they say they have talked to both their mum and dad about a topic.  
Data from 35 individuals from 13/23 families in the sample