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‘The main thing that I worry about is being approachable enough’: Parents talking to their children about relationships and sex in England

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Abstract

The role of parents in communicating with their children about relationships and sex is receiving increasing attention from policy-makers and commentators, both in respect of the recent introduction of statutory Relationships and Sex Education [RSE] in schools and of rising levels of violence against women in England. While a small body of literature has examined parent-child communication about relationships and sex from parents’ perspectives, this article focuses on the relational aspect of parents’ experiences and on their values in talking to their children about relationships and sex. 27 parents of children aged 19 and under attending state schools in London were interviewed. We find that, above all, parents want to have an open and honest relationship with their children in talking to them about relationships and sex. Many parents reported a very detailed engagement with children in this area, while others were concerned not to impose or discuss issues before their children were ready. All parents wanted their children to feel they were approachable and could talk to them freely about anything. We suggest that parents need to be supported to connect more with children and young people’s experiences, and to enable them to feel confident in talking to their children about relationships and sex.

Introduction

In line with current English policy discourse, parents are increasingly positioned, alongside schools, as playing a key role in educating their children about relationships and sex. While 2020 brought statutory relationships education into all primary schools and relationships and sex education into all secondary schools, the DfE’s (2019) Relationships and Sex Education guidance for English schools positions parents and carers as ‘the prime educators for children on many of these matters’ (DfE 2019: 4), and highlights the requirement for schools to consult with parents in developing and reviewing their RSE policy. While the majority of parents have welcomed statutory RSE in schools, a small minority have raised objections to perceived ‘age-inappropriate’ sex education and an LGBTQ ‘agenda’ in schools (Authors’ own, 2023). Parents, however, are encouraged by schools to work alongside them in educating their children in this area.

The availability of online advice and guidance for parents on how to talk to their children about relationships and sex is growing. For example, the NSPCC, the UK’s leading children’s charity, suggests that ‘it’s really important’ that parents help their children ‘to feel supported by listening openly and non-judgementally’ and ‘let them know they can talk to you if anything has happened that they’re upset by’ (NSPCC, no date). Brook, a sexual health service for young people, has published a set of Top Tips for RSE at Home which include ‘start early’, ‘create openness and approachability’, ‘answer questions’, ‘no big deal – little and often’ and ‘be aware and be involved’ (Brook, no date). With police declaring violence against women and girls in England and Wales a ‘national emergency’ (National Policing, 2024) and blaming the rise of online influencers for fuelling this ‘epidemic’ (Mendick, 2024), both parents and schools are seen as crucial planks in tackling sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny. The British Psychological Society, for example, has published advice for parents, carers and teachers on ‘How to talk to children about Andrew Tate and other toxic views online’ (BPS, 2023), while

teachers request ‘Parents, talk to your sons about Andrew Tate – we teachers can’t take him on alone’ (Okolosie, 2023).

This article reports on an interview-based study with 27 parents of children aged 19 and younger attending (or previously attending) state schools in north and north east London. The aims of the study were to examine how parents experience talking to their children about sex and relationships, the particular issues they struggle with, and the topics and values they think are important in relation to communicating with their children in this area. The analysis of our data for this article is focused not only on parents’ experiences, but also on how they characterised the kind of relationship they desired to have with their children with regard to talking about sex and relationships.

Parent-child communication about relationships and sex

Recent UK-based research into parent-child communication about relationships and sex is limited, and is summarised in depth in our previously published work (see Authors’ own, 2023). In brief, parents have strong views about being open and honest with their children when talking about sex and relationships, but often struggle to realise these ideals (Noorman et al, 2022). Stone et al (2017), in the most recent and largest qualitative UK study of parental attitudes towards sexuality education in the home, interviewed 110 parents of children aged 4-7 across London and southern England. Parents in this study split into two groups - those parents who were reactive, and those who were proactive (a smaller group) - in discussing issues of sexuality with their children, with a small minority ‘choosing to communicate both fully and openly about a whole range of sexual matters from an early age’ (Stone et al 2017: 598).

Mullis et al (2021), in a systematic review of 37 international articles reporting qualitative research about parent-child communication barriers about sexual health, found that embarrassment was the most cited factor among parents as a barrier to initiating such conversations with their children; they also cited a lack of knowledge and skills, and fear (focusing on the adverse consequences of sex). Robinson et al (2017)’s research with parents of primary-aged children in Australia found that most parents believed sexuality education was important and that it should be a collaborative approach between families and schools. However, many parents indicated that they did not address ‘difficult’ issues with their children due to a lack of knowledge, embarrassment and/or conflict in values. Research from the US echoes these findings: Holman et al (2023), in focus groups with 78 parents in the American Midwest, found that parents want to talk to their children about sex-related topics, but that in many cases, they struggle with having open, honest and detailed conversations.

Parent-child relationships and the ‘good’ parent

While this study concerns parenting in the broad sense of both mothering and fathering, it is important to acknowledge the larger role that mothers continue to play in caring for children. Over the past twenty years, maternal responsibilities have only intensified and become individualised in a neoliberal climate of limited state support, even as women’s participation in the workforce has increased (Miller, 2024). Ramaekers and Suissa (2011a) point to the ‘scientisation’ of parenting and the imperative that parents become educators of their children in a way that ‘makes it difficult to think and talk about a broader sense of what it means to be in a parent-child relationship’ (198). Relatedly, intensive parenting - parents investing increasing amounts of time and energy in children’s lives - has come to be promoted and viewed as a norm: this ‘inflated’ parenting role is now widely considered as ‘ideal’, with a problematic trend towards parent-blame (Faircloth, 2024). Parenting has come to be seen as a ‘labour-intensive

job with relational bonds of love and care technicalised through the instrumental language of parenting skills' (Gillies, 2020: 171), and this is not limited to the middle class. Certainly in the US, according to Ishizuka (2019), these 'child-centered, time-intensive parenting standards are now widely shared by parents of different social classes' (52). Since these imperatives have provoked a backlash against 'overparenting', with too much parental involvement also considered problematic, and subsequently placing parents in a double bind (Bristow, 2024), it is possible to speculate that parents may be confused by how much involvement in their children's lives is the 'right' amount. Wall (2022), in an analysis of Canadian advice sites on how to keep adolescent children safe online, finds a tension between over- and under-parenting: she identifies 'both a focus on intensive parenting and the need for parental surveillance of youth, on the one hand, and a strong emphasis on the need to respect privacy and establish trust, on the other' (351).

As Dermott and Fowler (2024) point out, there is a limited amount of sociological research that focuses on parent-child relationships, and they acknowledge that seeking to define good parenting is ambitious. Dermott and Fowler seek to provide a definition without reproducing dominant normative ideas around 'good' parenting skills leading to 'successful' child outcomes. As Raemakers and Suissa (2011b) have stated, there is no way to identify a causal link between certain parenting practices and certain child outcomes. They draw attention to the quality of the parent-child relationship, though at the same time wanting to resist any essentialist notion of what a 'healthy' parent-child relationship might look like. Dermott and Fowler advocate taking *relationality* as a way of understanding and evaluating parenting; so, a 'flourishing parent-child relationship is one in which both parties enjoy the other's company for its own sake, not merely for the benefits they might derive from it...From the parent's perspective, recognizing relationality also means not only accommodating a child's individual enthusiasms and pursuits but actively supporting, negotiating, and valuing their perspective. As such, good parenting becomes a matter of orientation and practices, rather than goals' (9). Good parenting, for Dermott and Fowler, is also characterised by intimacy and trust and a reciprocal responsiveness. Parent-child communication about relationships and sex gets right to the heart of these nuanced and delicate relationships, as parents seek to tread a fine line between over- and under-involvement.

Methods

The majority of parents in the sample were recruited through two primary schools in north east London; headteachers of these schools were approached by the first author and they agreed to place a recruitment notice in their weekly parent newsletter (none of these parents were known to either of the authors). In order to reach more parents of older children, five parents were recruited from author one's personal networks. As we discuss later in the conclusion, these recruitment strategies mean that the sample may over-represent 'more involved' parents. The final sample comprised of 27 parents of children aged 19 years and younger attending state schools in north and north east London. Nine of the parents had at least one teenage child, and the remaining parents had children aged 12 and younger. Five of the parents were fathers and the rest were mothers. The participants were of White (16), Black African or Caribbean (3), British/Turkish or Turkish (3), Mixed White/Black Caribbean (2), Indian (2) and Chinese (1) ethnicities. 16 parents in the sample were employed in graduate level occupations, 5 parents were employed in non-graduate-level occupations, and 6 parents were unemployed at the time of interview. All participants were currently or previously in heterosexual relationships. Participants cited in this article are listed in Table 1 (information about them is deliberately limited to ensure that no participant is identifiable), and they have all been given pseudonyms.

Participants were offered a £50 voucher as a token of thanks for their participation. All interviews were conducted by the first author (XX) over Microsoft Teams in 2023. Interviews were transcribed and initial open coding was carried out by XX. These codes were then discussed and refined with the second author (XX) based on a selection of transcripts. Codes were then grouped into several overarching main themes. Interpretive memos describing the analysis were shared and refined between the two authors. Only some of the identified themes are discussed in this article; main themes not covered in any detail here related to parents' handling of their children's technology usage, to parents' feelings about their children's school-based RSE, and to parents' use of resources to help them talk to their children about relationships and sex. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of XXX Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ETH2223-1379).

Talking to young children about relationships and sex: getting it 'right'

Participants were asked about their first/early experiences of talking to their young children about relationships and sex. Two of the parents cited in this section described their child as being on the autistic spectrum (high functioning [participants' words]), and they attributed their children's early asking of questions and high level of intelligence to this. Many participants described going into significant detail in terms of information they'd given their children, though some were conscious of not saying too much if children weren't ready for it:

So yeah he's [son, aged 8] asked me what is sex and I've tried to explain it in a sort of scientific way but also sort of making sure he knows that it's, that love is involved - so you love that person [...] In terms of relationships, my son talks to me about girls that he likes at school and girls that he might have as a girlfriend, and things that are OK for him to do with that girl, like maybe holding hands, maybe a little kiss is OK. [...] And also I find important to talk about homosexuality being a good and OK thing - if they feel like they're attracted to someone the same sex then that's completely fine, and someone is born that way. [...] reading the [RSE] curriculum made me think that he's finding out [outside school] about things too early for his age...the curriculum is talking about body parts and things; like, we've gone way beyond that - talking about what sex actually is. [Rachel]

While Rachel said she regretted giving her son a smartphone, she reported that he was 'getting the information from YouTube and friends but then I'm trying to give him that information but in a better way for his age'. She was concerned with what was age-appropriate, and wanted him to know 'just the right amount'.

Many parents who were very open with their children were also concerned about the prospect of their child informing other children (especially younger children) about something that was age-inappropriate. Fiona described her son (aged 10) as being curious from a young age:

I always knew I had to make sure he [son] was saying the right names; whereas my husband would be like 'willy', 'boobies', I'd be like, right, 'breasts', 'penis', so at least he knew in that sense. [...] This year [after a school Year 5 RSE lesson] the question I got was 'I don't understand what's the difference between a vulva and a vagina, because I just thought girls had vaginas and boys had a penis'.

Her son had also asked her to explain why Year 6 (aged 10-11) boys at school had said 'the number 69 is very sus'; she had explained to him what this referred to - 'I don't know if that's

right, if that's wrong, but he's got a genuine question and I can't fob him off' - but she was concerned about him repeating this to other children.

Yasmin also described being responsive to all her 9-year-old daughter's questions and accepted the reality of the 'times and world we're living in'. She had told her daughter that she herself didn't know everything, and that anything she didn't know they would look up together on Google:

My first experience, well, bearing in mind she's 9 and a half now [...] was about two years ago, when [...] she asked me if she was a lesbian [...] she said there was a girl at school who's very pretty and 'does that make me a lesbian?' So yeah, I had to explain that no, like, whether you're that way inclined or not, you can look at someone of the same sex and find them attractive without it meaning that you are actually attracted to them, and then it's just been one thing after another since then. I think media and social media have got a lot to answer for in how early on, in my opinion, kids are exposed to sexuality. [...] I think it is important that they're taught from a young age about their bodies and boundaries, etc, but the whole sexualisation – and in that I mean, like preferences – it would be nice if it was just a bit later on, like let the kids be kids.

Some parents had used books in order to help them with getting it 'right':

I used a book as a sort of guide about how much detail to go into [...] It touched a little bit on wet dreams ...and then it had one double page on sex, and it's just like 'man will get an erection, woman will feel wet and then it goes in, and you know, it's everyone should have a good time'. And then at the bottom it says it's totally normal if this sounds really scary and you don't need to worry about it too much. And my daughter's [aged 9] like, 'it does sound a bit sort of scary'. ... I know I have that habit, which I suspect a lot of parents of my generation have, which is we want to like over-explain to try and make everything cool, very woke, very like body positive. And with my daughter I think I've gone too far with that. [Georgia]

My son [now aged 12] was about nine when me and his mum bought him a book that explains it...but it's not patronising and condescending. It's literally very to the point, but in a way that children can understand it. [...] When he had a question that he felt he couldn't ask us, he could refer to the book. And that's when he started asking questions about what's an orgasm, what's masturbation, what's sex, how are children made? And both me and his mum were quite up front and told him. [...] we're always open and upfront and honest about it, but I'm not going to dump it on him if he doesn't want to know. [Jack]

Other parents were less comprehensive, uncomfortable with talking about relationships and sex, reluctant to impose, or confident that the school was providing quality, age-appropriate RSE:

Relationships, not too much to be honest. With regards to body parts, yeah, we both got penises, so we spoke about that. Girls, they don't have penises, they have something else. Called them lady gardens for now, so yeah, that's pretty much, he's only seven, so we haven't gone into too much detail. [Steve]

It was important to Steve to talk honestly with his son, and he reported that he felt comfortable taking with him about anything; he felt that 'parenting starts at home' in terms of that being his

son's most important source of information, and emphasised that 'he's young, he's free, he should just be, he's innocent'.

Amber described her 8-year-old son as 'not very inquisitive', but stressed that 'we have a really good relationship, so he's very open'. She commented that 'what they're showing in [school] sex ed scares the absolute shit out of me'.

XX: Has he ever asked you any questions about how he got here, where he came from?

Amber: I told him he come from my belly button, yeah.

[...]

XX: Have you spoken to him about things like consent and what the parts of the body are called and things like that?

Amber: He's never actually asked, but ... obviously, when we have a bath, he said 'oh, yours is different to mine' and I said 'yeah, mummy's got a mini and [you've] got a wiggy'.

Niamh described trusting the school to introduce RSE topics in an age-appropriate way, and also reflected on her upbringing in relation to her approach:

My mum [is] Irish, very Irish Catholic, didn't really talk as much [about sex], and I feel like I've got that in me still [...] I don't want them to know too much too soon. [...] But as my daughter, she's nine now, she's going to be ten soon, I think I do need to probably bring her to one side and find out what she is learning so that I can support her with that. I'm probably a bit shy with it all but I think I need to get a bit more confident in speaking about it.

Liam commented that 'I take a back seat. I let my wife take the lead on most of it, if I'm being totally honest with you'.

As with many of the parents who described talking to their children in more detail, these less proactive parents were also conscious of what was 'age-appropriate' and/or of not wanting to be overly proactive or imposing:

I've left a lot of it to the school. They [her children] are quite awkward about it [...] the 10-year-old, he's very confident, and he's had girls that have wanted him to be – so we've had girlfriend-boyfriend conversation. [...] I would never impose a subject unless they, if they came to me, I'd be really open with it, but there's never been, I feel confident they're getting that at school. [...] I do follow their lead. I had quite intrusive parenting, they were very strict Catholics [...] so I just try and be as accepting as possible. [Olivia]

I have realised that actually I don't initiate the conversation very much – I tend to be very responsive. [Annabel]

These responses echo the findings of Stone et al (2017)'s focus groups with parents in London and Southern England: parents were more likely to describe a reactive (rather than proactive) approach to discussion of sex/uality, led by children's questioning. In our study, this was sometimes out of concern for children's privacy:

I always feel like I'm conscious that they need their own privacy, so I don't want to intrude on that. We're not parents who look at our kids' phones all the time. [...] I was given quite a lot of privacy as a child, and I really appreciated it, and I want to give that to them. [Rebecca]

Hoffman (2013), in a study of American middle-class mothers and parent-child ‘power struggles’, also identified a pervasive pressure among her participants to get parenting ‘right’. Getting it ‘right’, for the parents in our study, often involved not only being conscious of the nature and timing of the information they were giving their children, but also in some cases letting children take the lead in terms of asking questions, and not wanting to intrude or cross boundaries in terms of children’s privacy.

Wanting an open and honest relationship with children

Our findings also firmly support those of Stone et al (2017) in that a very strong theme in the data was that parents want to have an open and honest relationship with their children. Parents were asked about their values in talking to their children about relationships and sex:

I want an open and honest relationship with her. I want her to come to me if there was anything bothering her and stuff. [Celeste]

Openness and feeling that they can ask questions, and feeling that they’ve got a safe space and that I’m not going to be judging them based on anything that they’ve done, or not done. [Annabel]

It’s about instilling an open conversation, always. [Fiona]

I very much want to keep that open communication and trust. I would much rather know that she can at least come and talk to me and tell me what’s happening, rather than go down the route of doing it secretly. [Yasmin]

These responses resonate with Dermott and Fowler’s (2024) definition of a ‘flourishing parent-child relationship’ as one ‘characterised by intimacy and the type of trust that enables difficult disclosure’ (9). The parents in our study very much want the door to be open and for their children to feel comfortable asking them questions and telling them about problems. Research by Renold et al (2023), however, has found that some young people find generational divides too big, and fear being judged or disciplined in relation to talking to their parents about relationships, sex and sexuality. The Sex Education Forum (a charity working to improve young people’s access to RSE)’s (2022) Young People’s RSE Poll of 16-and 17-year-olds in England found that while 33% of respondents rated the quality of their RSE from parents/carers as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, 12% rated it as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’. Parents in our study on the whole felt that they did have open and honest relationships with their children, though our sample was slightly biased towards parents of younger children.

Preference for same-sex parent talking to children

A prominent theme in the data was parents’ expression of finding it harder to talk about puberty, relationships and sex to an opposite-sex child, and of the same-sex parent needing to take greater responsibility. Fiona co-parented her son with her ex-husband and commented: ‘I think it’s really important as they get older that it can be a man-to-man thing and not mummy involved’. This was echoed by many of the parents:

When they ask you about boys’ private parts and stuff, I can’t. I find it hard to talk to them about that because I’m not a man. [Celeste]

There's things that I'll be better equipped to speak to him about. We're both boys, so I can speak to him from a boy's point of view. [Steve]

I can talk to her sort of girl-to-girl. There's a sort of camaraderie in what she faces and what I've been through; we're in it together. [...] I've got no idea what the experience is like for a little boy. I'll be relying on, my husband is one of four boys, so I'll be relying on him to sort of help guide that a little bit. [Georgia]

When it comes to the male feelings of a relationship or sex, obviously I don't know that 100%, coz I'm a female, so I'll look it up online. [Ruby]

I just don't have any credibility talking about what it's like to get erections all the time. [Martha]

Some mothers emphasised the need for *them* to talk to their daughters about menstruation:

I just didn't want to risk her first hearing about periods with someone [like her male class teacher] going like 'sorry, ladies, it's the curse'. [Georgia]

He [husband] can't talk to them [daughters] about periods the way I can! [Isabel]

A few of the mothers stated that their male partners were not adept at or willing to talk to their children about relationships and sex:

I recently realised that my partner does not talk to them about this *at all* and he actually just finds the whole thing excruciatingly embarrassing, and I realised that he never talked to his parents. [Annabel]

[Husband] is very private, so I would say he'd be less inclined to engage, but I do think that [son] would be more inclined to speak to [husband] than me, maybe. [Rebecca]

I don't think [partner] is doing a good job, to be honest. [...] Maybe his Catholic background is stopping him. [...] I think [son] is more comfortable with me talking about sex. [Nazik]

Some of these responses speak to the 'binary, and narrowly heteronormative way of thinking about assumed responsibilities of familial caring' (Miller, 2024: 10). Recent survey research in the US with parents of 6-11-year-olds found that mothers were more likely than fathers to report that parent-child sexual communication [PCSC] was solely their responsibility, and that sharing the same gender as their child had the largest influence on parents' perceived PCSC responsibility (Astle and Brasileiro, 2024). Astle and Brasileiro suggest that 'Helping parents deconstruct and operate outside of socially constructed gender roles can begin to break down barriers to PCSC' (770-771).

Topics parents find challenging

Parents were asked which topics they (would) find easier and more difficult to talk to their children about. Puberty and contraception were mentioned frequently as topics they find easy to talk about, while sexual assault, rape, pornography, gender identity, and mothers talking to their sons (as described above) came up frequently as topics they found or thought they would find difficult. Eleanor commented that what she would find most difficult was 'letting them

know that just because you *can*, you're at an age where you *can* have sex with someone, it doesn't mean you *should*'.

While some parents stated that they didn't know enough about gender identity to talk confidently about it to their children, a few parents expressed religious views which, they claimed, meant that while their children couldn't be transgender ('God created you as a boy, [...] as a girl. You don't decide to change and say I don't want to be a girl anymore, it's not normal' [Amara]), as far as other people were concerned, it was 'totally up to them' [Amara]. Other parents shared views that teaching children about multiple gender identities would confuse them. Steve commented that there are 'only two genders':

In my group chat [of parents] there's worries about gender identity. [...] we don't like how young they're teaching kids, we don't like what they're teaching kids. We feel like there's an agenda being pushed right now.

Ruby, who was Catholic, explained: 'I've got friends who are lesbians, I've got a friend who is a gay man [...] There is too many genders, there's too many non-like binary, I don't even know half the genders, I don't even know what I'm saying when I say non-binary'.

The few parents who did express these views were reluctant to share them in interview, and proceeded cautiously, often prefacing them with a question about whether they were free to express any opinion they wanted. Our previous larger-scale research (Authors' own, 2023) similarly found a small minority of parents expressive of concerns about schools over-focusing on minority experiences and pushing a perceived LGBTQ 'agenda'. As we report in forthcoming research with primary schools and parental engagement with RSE (Authors' own, in preparation), usually, when schools dispel myths and misinformation and share actual RSE resources with parents, their concerns are alleviated.

Online influencers and misogyny

We had not set out to ask participants directly about 'manfluencers' or Andrew Tate specifically (the interviews took place shortly after Tate had been arrested in Romania as part of a human trafficking and rape investigation), but we were interested in the digital as a new reach for expressions of misogyny. However, discussion of Tate emerged early on in interviews, with Rachel raising him as a concern: 'that's the fire-fighting [I'm having to do]: his sort of very bad views coming across on YouTube and my son asking about that'. Subsequently, participants were asked about their views of him. The majority of participants (most of them had heard of him, but some didn't know much about him) expressed revulsion towards him; for example:

Yes, actually my daughter [aged 10] asked me the other day 'who's Andrew Tate?'. And we just said he was a horrible man who doesn't treat women very nicely. She was quite happy with that. [Isabel]

However, several parents commented that they sympathised with some of his views:

Well, I might surprise you here, but I actually am of the pro Andrew Tate group. Now, that's not to say I agree with everything he says. ... the problem nowadays is, honestly, I think people are very quick to get offended. ... I don't disagree with him [AT]. I don't find him misogynistic, because I've looked into him and I actually think he is a good role model for young boys, in the sense of teaching the work ethic and like being successful

isn't a bad thing, being different, going out and doing something for yourself. ... I'm not a feminist either ...I believe men and women are not the same. [Yasmin]

I feel like he's quite a unique character, Andrew Tate. ... he's very intelligent. He says a lot of good things, but at the same time, I wouldn't want my son [age 7] listening to him now, because he also says a lot of things that I don't agree with. [Steve]

I think a lot of what he says is true. As a man, I think it's true. But I think a lot of what he says is absolute garbage, and it's unjustified, and yes, it's dangerous. ...I don't believe that Andrew Tate is a good voice for generation. [Jack]

Similarly, Haslop et al (2024) found in focus groups with 13-14-year-old boys in London that some did not agree with all of his content, but found him an authentic and reasonable voice 'in debates about gender fairness' (6). Analysing content relating to gender and sexuality from Tate's YouTube videos posted over a 6-month period in 2022, Haslop et al found that the most common discourses were of men as 'naturally' dominant over women, women as subservient to men, and men as victims who need to be wealthy and 'alpha' in order to attract women. They note that some boys thought he made outrageous claims deliberately as a form of banter, which works as a means to make his misogyny more acceptable. Of our parent participants, only one (Yasmin) was wholly un-critical of Tate. Internet Matters, a not-for-profit organisation supporting children's internet safety, in a survey of UK parents, found that over half of the younger fathers had a positive impression of Tate, and note that it is 'challenging - particularly for younger followers - to disentangle Tate's violent misogyny from the more 'attractive' aspects [finance and business advice] of his output' (2023: 2).

Discussion and conclusions

Reflecting on the sample of parents who opted to participate in this research, it is likely that the study attracted parents who were more engaged than average (and/or held particularly strong views) about matters to do with relationships and sex and/or their relationships with their children. Hence it is likely that these parents are not representative of the nature and amount of parental involvement that might be seen across a wider sample. The parents recruited from the two primary schools were all parents who read their child's newsletter (this might not be the case for all parents) and so were potentially more involved with their children's education than, for example, parents who may not read the newsletter.

What united most of the parents in this sample, across social class, was a desire to have an open and trusting relationship with their children, a relationship whereby children felt comfortable approaching them to talk about anything. Almost all parents gave examples of talking to their children honestly and openly, or anticipating that they would do so in future as their children got older. Concerns about being approachable enough, getting it 'right' in terms of being age-appropriate and striking a balance between being proactive and responsive, were also common to most of them. There is a palpable tension here, though; some parents were worried that they may have 'gone too far' (Georgia) and didn't want to impose or be too proactive. This is very challenging in a climate in which, as we have noted, parents are positioned as 'risk managers' for their children, and given 'support' and advice in a way that can be admonishing and provoke anxiety in terms of levels of parental supervision (Lee, 2024). We suggest that parents are placed in a paradoxical position between over- and under-parenting – this was seen not only seen in some parents individually, but looking across the sample at the differences in approach and degrees of proactivity. In terms of parental attention to *relationality*

with their children, however, these parents could be described as ‘good’ parents as per Dermott and Fowler’s (2024) definition, in terms of their seeking intimacy and trust with their children.

There was a distinct preference for parents to talk to their same-sex children about relationships and sex, and for parents to want their partner to talk to their opposite-sex child. Some mothers actively wanted to make sure that they were the ones talking to their daughters about menstruation and puberty (as opposed to male teachers or their male partners). It would have been interesting in this regard to include same-sex parents in this sample, in terms of how they navigate gender roles, as discussed earlier. Many parents found sexual assault, rape and pornography difficult topics to discuss with their children, and were also concerned about the impact of misogynist online influencers like Andrew Tate. In this respect then, parents may be struggling to talk to their children about more challenging issues, and certainly may be under-estimating their children’s exposure to some of these (see Davis et al, 2021).

Young people want parents to value and understand their perspectives, to feel more confident and comfortable in talking about relationships, sex and sexuality, and do not want advice imposed on them (Renold et al, 2023). Wider culture suggests that parents need to ‘step up’ and be more involved in promoting healthy relationships. While we remain cautious of positioning parents as ‘risk managers’ and, as we have argued here and previously (Authors’ own, 2023), critical of dominant models of intensive parenting and in particular of the high levels of responsibility placed on mothers in this regard, we suggest that bringing parents more ‘in touch’ with young people’s worlds may ease generational divides. Hence, as we have highlighted in our previous work, it is crucial to strengthen school-based RSE and school-parent partnerships, to assist parents in connecting with their children’s experiences and what they may be exposed to, so parents can feel more confident in supporting their children in this area.

Table 1

Table of participants

G = graduate level occupation

N = non-graduate level occupation

U = unemployed

Name	Occupation
Amber	U
Amara	N
Annabel	G
Celeste	U
Eleanor	U
Fiona	G
Georgia	G
Isabel	G
Jack	N
Liam	G
Martha	G
Nazik	G
Niamh	G
Olivia	G
Rachel	G
Rebecca	G
Ruby	N

Steve	G
Yasmin	U

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