We conducted focus groups with parents or guardians of children aged 10–12. We chose parents of children in this age-group because these children are not likely to have initiated sexual activity. Eight focus groups were conducted with fathers or male guardians, and eight with mothers or female guardians. To facilitate open discussion and the investigation of potential differences across demographic groups, separate groups were held for blacks, whites, English-speaking Hispanics and Spanish-speaking Hispanics. The groups were conducted in New York, Denver and Raleigh, North Carolina, between October 17 and November 15, 2007.* Sites were selected to reflect diversity in city size and region. Group sizes ranged from six to 11 participants; 67 mothers and 64 fathers participated, for a total of 131 parents. An institutional review board at Research Triangle Institute approved the study procedures.

Parents or guardians were eligible if they had regular contact with their 10–12-year-old (i.e., they saw the child at least four times a month). In Raleigh and Denver, the majority of participants were recruited by telephone using a listed sample of numbers for households known to include a child between the ages of 10 and 12. For the Spanish-speaking focus groups in Raleigh, telephone-based recruitment did not yield adequate numbers of participants, so this approach was supplemented by flyers, advertisements and contacts with community organizations and social workers. In New York, participants were recruited from existing databases maintained by the focus group facilities where the groups were held.

Group discussions lasted approximately an hour and a half. Participants provided written informed consent and were compensated $75 in Raleigh and Denver, and $100 in New York. Each group was led by one of four moderators with extensive experience in both focus group moderation and sexual and reproductive health research. To the extent possible, moderators were matched with participants by gender and race or ethnicity.† Moderator training included a review of relevant literature and background information on the scope and purpose of the study, a review and discussion of the question guide, practice using the question guide, and discussion and feedback with study team members after each focus group. Questions in the guide explored parents’ perceptions of the sexual risks confronting their children and of the motivations for, barriers to, and facilitators of communicating with their children about sex. After discussing these issues, participants were shown a 60-second version of one of the campaign’s TV advertisements and were asked for their reactions. Finally, parents filled out a brief, anonymous questionnaire that included questions about their social and demographic characteristics, attitudes toward teenage sex, communication with their 10–12-year-old about sex and reactions to the advertisement.

All discussions were audiotaped and transcribed by professional transcribers. The discussions conducted in Spanish were translated into English by two professional translators. A team of three researchers developed a preliminary codebook that was based on the topic domains and themes that emerged in the discussions. The team coded all transcripts using NVivo 8 software. To refine the codebook and ensure consistency, each researcher coded a transcript of the same focus group; the three then met to discuss how they had coded each segment of text. On the basis of these discussions, the team revised the codebook and developed a common understanding of the interpretation of the codes. This process was repeated with a second transcript. The team members next divided the remaining 14 transcripts among themselves to be coded individually, and consulted each other when uncertainties about how to code specific items or new topics emerged. The team used content analysis20 to identify core themes and patterns.

Sample Description

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 54; their average age was 42.4 (Table 1). Their level of education was higher than the U.S. average: Forty-two percent of participants had at least a college degree, a substantially higher proportion than the national figure of 25% for adults aged 25 or older.21 However, the proportion with a college degree varied substantially across groups, from 0% among black fathers in New York to 86% among white mothers in Denver (not shown). A few participants were guardians of a child aged 10–12, but the vast majority were parents. Participants’ mean number of children was 2.8, and 46% had at least one child at least four times a month. In Raleigh and Denver, the majority of participants were recruited by telephone using a listed sample of numbers for households known to include a child between the ages of 10 and 12. For the Spanish-speaking focus groups in Raleigh, telephone-based recruitment did not yield adequate numbers of participants, so this approach was supplemented by flyers, advertisements and contacts with community organizations and social workers. In New York, participants were recruited from existing databases maintained by the focus group facilities where the groups were held.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Selected characteristics of participants in focus groups on parents’ perspectives on talking to preteenage children about sex, 2007</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean age (yrs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean no. of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrs. of education (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;12</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>13–15</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living arrangement of child (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lives with both parents in same household</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lives with both parents in separate households</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lives with mother only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lives with father only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
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Parents’ Perspectives on Talking to Preteenage Children About Sex

Talking about what is happening in children’s sex education classes
Using books
Creating opportunities to talk about sex
Talking to children about sex when they are young
Using religious teachings and the church community as supports

Topics emerging in focus group discussions on parents’ perspectives on talking to preteenage children about sex, by main theme

Perceived threat of sex-related issues
- Sexual messages in the media and other sources
- Increasing teenage sexual behavior, peer pressure to have sex
- HIV and AIDS
- New technologies (e.g., text messaging, the Internet)

Perceived benefits of talking about sex
- To protect children from potential harmful consequences of sex
- To counteract misinformation from other sources
- To communicate parents’ values regarding sex

Perceived efficacy of talking
- Talking to children about delaying sex can make a difference
- The quality of the parent-child relationship affects the efficacy of any communication
- Forbidding children to have sex will only make them more curious
- Other strategies, such as monitoring children, may be more effective than talking

Perceived barriers to talking about sex
- Perception that children are not ready to hear about sex
- Not knowing how to talk about sex
- Parents’ lack of time or energy
- Children’s lack of receptivity
- Parents’ embarrassment or discomfort
- Not having thought about the need to talk about sex
- Dysfunction in some families
- Language and cultural barriers between parents and children

Factors facilitating talking about sex
- Having a good relationship and open communication with children
- Creating opportunities to talk about sex
- Talking to children about sex when they are young
- Using books
- Talking about what is happening in children’s sex education classes
- Using religious teachings and the church community as supports

Parental embarrassment or discomfort
Parents’ lack of time or energy
Children’s lack of receptivity
Parents’ embarrassment or discomfort
Not having thought about the need to talk about sex
Dysfunction in some families
Language and cultural barriers between parents and children

RESUL TS
Four themes emerged in the focus group discussions: parents’ perceptions of the threat to their children from sex-related issues, benefits of talking to their children about sex, barriers to such communication and facilitators of such communication (see box).

Perceived Threat of Sex-Related Issues
Participants generally perceived that compared with the world of their childhood, today’s world exposes children to more negative influences and forces them to deal with more risks at younger ages, from sex to violence to drugs. With regard to sex, participants felt that the main factors placing children at risk are the media and peer pressure. They expressed concern about the ready accessibility of pornography on the Internet and cable TV, the explicit sexual content of music and video games, and the sexual overtones of advertising. Some commented that the influence of the media is especially pernicious because it is so pervasive. One woman remarked:

“Every time you turn around, everywhere you go it’s around you. They’re selling sex. . . . Every song you hear on the radio, everything is sex.”—White mother, Raleigh

Many participants said that peer pressure is also a major influence and that the pressure is worse than it used to be because more children are engaging in sexual behavior at younger ages. One father explained:

“When I was in junior high school, the kids that were sexually active were few and far between, and now it seems that the ones who aren’t sexually active are the ones who are few and far between. So there’s a lot more pressure.”—White father, Raleigh

Some participants noted that the potential consequences of sexual activity have become much more serious because of the risk of AIDS. As a white father in Denver said, “Unlike when all of us were growing up, it can be a life-or-death issue now.”

Participants were also concerned about the risks posed by new technologies, such as text messaging, the Internet and social networking sites. For example, many worried about the potential for children using the Internet to be exposed to sexually explicit content or to be reached by sexual predators. Some were concerned about sexually provocative photographs or comments that they had seen on their children’s or their children’s friends’ MySpace pages. Many participants felt that these new technologies make it more difficult for parents to monitor what is going on in their children’s lives.

Parents’ perception of preteenagers’ sexual risk varied somewhat across groups. In general, New York parents perceived the highest risk because of their own experiences, as well as their observations of their own and other children. For example, several parents in New York had been teenage parents themselves, and four of them indicated in the questionnaires that they thought their preteenager had already had sex. (In contrast, none of the parents in Raleigh or Denver thought their preteenager had had sex.) A risk mentioned only by black parents was that their daughters had reached puberty at a young age. Black parents said that as a result, their preteenage daughters already look like grown women and attract inappropriate attention from older boys and men.

Perceived Benefits of Talking About Sex
Motivations. Given their concerns about the threat of sex-related issues, it is unsurprising that participants were nearly unanimous that parents should talk to their children about sex. One of the main reasons cited was to protect children from potential negative consequences of sex, including STDs and pregnancy. Some participants were especially motivated to protect their children because they had experienced negative consequences of unsafe sex in...