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### A true love story

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## **Chapter 4**

### **“Let’s Talk about Love”**

#### **A Mixed-Methods Diary Study of Everyday Parent-child Conversations about Romance and Sexuality**

Wieke Dalenberg, Greetje Timmerman, & Paul van Geert

This chapter is based on:

Dalenberg, W.G., Timmerman, M.C., & Van Geert, P.L.C. (submitted). “Let’s talk about love” A Mixed-methods Dutch Diary Study of Everyday Parent-child Conversations about Romance and Sexuality.

## Abstract

The present study examined young people's own perceptions of parent-child conversations about romance and sexuality. A total of 66 young people (*Mage*=15.3) reported on their conversations with their parents in a mixed methods diary over a period of one year. Two of the fundamental orientations found in Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT), conversation and conformity orientations, were used as a basis for qualitative analysis. Results showed that only 32% of the participants reported at least one conversation about sex-related issues. These sex-related conversation topics involved mainly romantic topics (i.e. initial romantic experiences and romantic relationships). Girls reported significantly more sex-related conversations with their parents than did boys. In addition, most of the sex-related conversations of the girls were with their mothers. Conversation orientation was more determinative than conformity orientation in terms of how the parent-child sex-related conversations were experienced; conversations about sexuality elicited significantly more avoidance behavior compared to conversations about other topics. Three parent-child communication patterns emerged from the data. These patterns showed that the sex-related topic does play an important role but not in every young person's life.

*Keywords: Parent-child conversations about romance and sexuality, Mixed-methods diary study, Family Communication Pattern Theory*

## **Introduction**

Although the development of sexuality is a lifelong process, sexual development changes rapidly in adolescence. Young people are expected to deal with numerous unfamiliar situations in a short period of time; rapid physical changes, the emergence of romantic and sexual desires, and pressures from peers to have sex are typical issues that confront young people. Parents may support their children directly by providing information, and by helping them to interpret messages about how to deal with romantic and sexual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). Parents can have a significant effect on their children's sexual attitudes and behaviors (Dilorio et al., 2003).

Talking about sexuality is often challenging for parents and young people due to the sensitive nature of the topic (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008; Jerman & Constantine, 2010; Widman, Choukas-Bradley, Helms, Golin, & Prinstein, 2014). Such conversations are frequently referred to as "the big talk" (Martino, Elliott, Corona, Kanouse, & Schuster, 2008). However, there is no such thing as one crucial conversation about romance and sexuality. Parents tend to guide their children in their sexual development in an ongoing conversation over time. Using a diary study, this research project explores, from the perspective of young people, whether and how sex-related conversations with parents occur in everyday life, and how these conversations relate to other everyday conversations.

### **Parent-child conversations about sexuality**

The Dutch are known for their sexually liberal culture (Braeken, 1994; Schalet, 2011). The Netherlands generally achieves better sexual health statistics than the United States of America or the United Kingdom (Parker, Wellings, and Lazarus 2009; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). In contrast to US families, most Dutch parents frame sexual experiences as a normal activity between young people, provided they are in a steady relationship and use contraception (Schalet, 2000; Schalet, 2004; Schalet, 2011). Sexuality remains, however, a very personal and sensitive topic, even in the Netherlands.

Researchers are not eager to use methods that capture parent-child conversations about romance and sexuality in the natural environment, because these conversations do not occur regularly enough (Lefkowitz, 2002). Since the Netherlands is one of the countries with pragmatic and sex-positive government policies, and Dutch parents say it is important to talk with their children about sexuality (Schalet, 2011; Weaver, Smith, &

Kippax, 2005), we reasoned that a Dutch sample could be suitable for capturing naturally occurring parent-child sex-related conversations.

Overall, parental conversations about sex-related topics are infrequently compared to conversations on other topics such as school (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011). A recent study carried out in the Netherlands indicated that young people frequently discussed romantic experiences and relationships (boys 78%; girls 89%) with their parents, followed by sex-related topics such as birth control (boys 56%; girls 71%), and preventing STDs (boys 52%; girls 57%) (De Graaf, Kruijer, Van Acker, & Meijer, 2012). Another Dutch study showed that, when sexual topics are discussed between young people and their parents, the most common topic is romantic relationships (De Looze, Constantine, Jerman, Vermeulen-Smit, & Ter Bogt, 2014).

Studies in the USA and the Netherlands showed that, on the whole, girls and older children have more frequent communication about sexuality with their parents than boys and younger children (De Looze et al., 2014; Dilorio et al., 2003; Gillmore, Chen, Haas, Kopak, & Robillard, 2011; Widman et al., 2014). On the whole, mothers are more likely to talk about sexuality with their children than are fathers (De Looze et al., 2014; Dilorio et al., 2003). However, Dutch boys talk more frequently with their fathers about sexuality, and Dutch girls talk more frequently with their mothers (De Graaf et al., 2012). A Dutch study among 12- to 16-year-olds showed that mothers talked more about romantic relationships, and the use of contraceptives and condoms with older children compared to younger ones (De Looze et al., 2014).

In addition to identifying the topics discussed in conversations about sexuality, research is increasingly focusing on *how* parent-child conversations about sexuality are experienced by the young people themselves. The Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) identifies two fundamental dimensions within parent-child communication: *conversation orientation* and *conformity orientation* (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011; Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). First, *conversation orientation* involves unrestricted conversations about a wide array of topics. When a family scores high on this dimension, the parent and child spend a considerable time talking to each other. These parents believe that frequent communication with their children is their main means of educating them. In contrast, a family scores low on this dimension, if the parent and child avoid talking to each other. In general, young people frequently avoid talking about sexual experiences with their parents (e.g., Afifi et al., 2008; Baxter & Akkoor, 2011; Daddis & Randolph, 2010). Parents' comfort in talking about sexual topics is positively associated with the number of various sexual topics discussed (Jerman & Constantine, 2010).

Second, *conformity orientation* involves the degree of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. Parents with a high degree of *conformity orientation* believe that

family members should subordinate their personal interests or opinions to those of the family. Typically, within parent-child conversations, such parents are the ones who promote certain attitudes and beliefs. The voice and opinion of the parent is considered to be more important than the child's; parents try to constrain the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of their child so as to conform to their own.

Observational studies among Latino and European American mother-child dyads studied real-life sex-related conversations and showed that mothers tended to dominate conversations about sexuality more than they did in conversations about other topics (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996; Lefkowitz, Romo, Corona, Au, & Sigman, 2000). One could posit that dominance is associated with *conformity orientation*. A study of 14- to 17-year-old North-American young people revealed that young people are less inclined to talk about certain topics, when their view differs from that of their parents (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006). Research shows that sex topics score low on *conversation orientation* and intermediate on *conformity orientation* compared to other topics (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011). However, conversations about dating scored as intermediate, with respect to both *conversation orientation* and *conformity orientation*, when compared to other topics (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011).

Previous studies on parent-child conversations about sexuality have been typically characterized by three limitations. One of these limitations was the use of a questionnaire with a pre-determined list of topics used to study parent-child conversations. Studying real-life sex-related conversations generates knowledge about a greater range of topics than the selection of items within a questionnaire would be able to encompass (Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2000; Lefkowitz & Stoppa, 2006). The second limitation was that this research was primarily concerned with intercourse-related aspects of sexuality. The romantic experiences most studied are manifested experiences, such as dating and romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Daddis & Randolph, 2010; Dilorio et al., 2003; Martino et al., 2008). There is little research that has focused on a broader operationalization of sexuality, including topics about initial romantic affiliations (such as having a crush on someone) (Collins et al., 2009; Dilorio et al., 2003; Martino et al., 2008). Finally, most of the previous studies have paid attention to the frequency of sex-related communication at a given point in time. In order to better understand young people's subjective experiences, it is critical to focus on how young people experience naturally occurring parent-child conversations in everyday life over a longer period of time.

### **This study**

The goal of this study was to explore everyday parent-child conversations about sexuality by applying *conversation* and *conformity orientations* to interpret real-life conversations and examine their relationship with conversations on different topics. It was explored to what extent and about which sex-related topics young people and parents talk about in everyday life. In addition, young people's experiences of their everyday sex-related conversations with their parents were compared to conversations about other topics. In this way, we aim to contribute to theory development on family communication about sexuality.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data for this study were collected as part of the larger Project STARS (Studies on Trajectories of Adolescent Relationships and Sexuality), a longitudinal research project on the romantic and sexual development of young people. The diary data consisted of three waves of data collection over a one-year period. The sample consisted of 123 participants (81 girls, 42 boys) in the first wave (W1, February/March 2012) and 66 participants (48 girls, 18 boys) in the third wave (W3, October/November 2012). In order to calculate the attrition rate, the sample at the first wave (W1) and last wave (W3) were compared. The attrition rate was 46% (40% for girls and 57% for boys). Only the 66 young people who participated in all three waves were included in this study.

Average age was 15.3 years at W1 (*range* = 12-17.5) and 16 years at W3 (*range* = 13.3-18.3). All participants were high school students: 26% of the participants were enrolled in vocational training, 33% in higher secondary education, and 41% in pre-university education. These are the three main educational levels found in high schools in the Netherlands. All participants were of Dutch nationality and reported their sexual orientation as (predominantly) heterosexual.

### **Procedure**

Participation was voluntary, and the selection criterion was being a high school student (aged between 12 and 18), because young people develop sexually during this period through exploring manifest experiences (e.g., De Graaf et al., 2012). Via acquaintances and

colleagues of the first author, six high schools were approached by e-mail, telephone, and through school visits. In addition to written and oral information about the research project, motivated young people and their caregiver(s) received an invitation to voluntarily participate in the study, and were asked to return a registration form to the first author. Motivation was important, since the study design was time-consuming (i.e., regular reports over one year). Only young people with written permission from their caregiver(s) participated in the study.

Participants were asked to complete weekly diaries in three waves of six weeks, each separated by a two-month break, over the course of one year. Three data collection periods with breaks were chosen because pilot studies revealed that a shorter time frame would overburden the participants. Each week, participants were asked to describe a parent-child conversation (that had taken place the previous week) in an online weblog diary via a secure survey website. E-mail addresses and usernames were collected separately to guarantee anonymity.

Participants could ask questions and request advice or help after each diary entry, out of ethical considerations. This support was provided in close collaboration with a mental health institution so referral to a support service could be offered if required. The few participants who did ask questions were not included in the study's sample for the purposes of this paper. To increase participants' motivation for the study, the first researcher sent out newsletters, New Year's greetings, and personally answered incoming e-mails from the participants. The participants were compensated for their participation by a gratuity that increased over the course of the study (EUR 5 at W1; EUR 7.50 at W2; EUR 10 at W3). The study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Psychology of the University of Groningen.

## **Measurements**

Because of the innovative nature of the diary study, two pilot studies were conducted prior to the current study. The diary was completed once by 183 participants (*age range*: 12-to 17-years-old) and 5 participants (*age range*: 12- to 16-years-old) completed the diary every second day over a two-week period. These pilot studies showed that the participants understood the questions and were motivated to report private personal experiences. Marginal revisions were made to the wording of the questions and the design as used in this study (i.e., the time between each diary entry was changed to one week instead of every second day).

Data collections started with a short questionnaire to collect demographic information, such as age, gender, and education. A semi-structured weblog diary was used



to obtain everyday parent-child conversations. The participants were asked to describe everyday conversations with their parent(s) about their romantic and sexual experiences: “Did you have a conversation with your father and/or mother about being in love, flirting, sex, intimacy, romantic relationships, or any other related topic?” Participants were encouraged to describe the conversation (“What exactly was it about? What was your point of view? And what was your parents’ point of view? Please describe the conversation.”). A subsequent closed-ended question asked who the participant had talked to (father, mother, or both). At the end of each diary entry, the participant was encouraged to add any information about the conversation without limitations regarding the length of the text.

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative analyses were performed using t-tests and chi-square analyses to test differences between subsamples (i.e., participants who reported at least once versus participants who reported no sex-related conversation). With respect to the mixed-methods approach, Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used to code and analyze the diary descriptions of specific topics and emerging dimensions (Boeije, 2010). The CCM is a stepwise comparison of the content of the diaries, yielding their main themes and patterns. The qualitative analysis involved three steps: open, axial, and selective coding. First, out of a small sample, every diary report was studied to determine what exactly had been described by the participant, and this then resulted in tentative codes. Second, axial coding involved applying these tentative codes to the rest of the sample. Third, selective coding involved structuring the data by focusing on the study aims. The validity of the data was managed by collaboration, reflection, and discussion in terms of whether the code names really reflected the content of the reports. Most of the reports had clear informational content. Vague descriptions of experiences were discussed, and dismissed or included in existing codes, resulting in adjustments within the coding scheme. Inter-observer reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa. Values > 0.70 were considered to be reliable. We identified the importance of the themes by calculating the frequency of the codes.

**Topics.** All conversations about sexuality, broadly defined, were coded as Sexuality (WHO, 2012). All conversations that could not be coded as sexuality were coded as Other (e.g., conversations about school). All sex-related conversations were selected for further coding. Each conversation was coded into one of the following subtopics: Initial Romantic Affiliations, Romantic Relationship, Explicit Sexual Behavior and Contraceptive Use, and Other (see Table 1).

**Family Communication Pattern Theory.** Participant's experiences of everyday conversations about sexuality with their parents were compared to experiences of conversations about other topics. This was done by exploring whether *conversation* and *conformity orientations* had occurred in the diary descriptions of everyday conversations. The overall difference between sex-related and other topics vis-à-vis these orientations was quantitatively examined using chi-square analyses.

*Conversation Orientation.* We categorized conversation reports that displayed an orientation regarding whether they were or were not talking to each other within a conversation. Participants' conversation reports that showed a reluctance to talk to their parents were coded as an Avoidance orientation. Participants who were willing to talk to their parents were coded as an Approach orientation. The dimension Avoidance vs. Approach category ( $\kappa=0.88$ ) approximated the *conversation orientation* of FCPT.

*Conformity Orientation.* The second category was whether the conversations were characterized by any Conformity Claims on the part of participants' parents. The report was coded as a Conformity Claim, when the parent mentioned a restricting message (i.e., constraining the participant's behavior). No Conformity Claim was coded when the participant did not report a restriction from the parent. The dimension Conformity vs. No Conformity Claim is comparable with the *Conformity Orientation* of FCPT ( $\kappa = 0.8$ ).

**Parent-child communication patterns.** In what way conversations about sexuality or other topics differed from each other for a participant within one year was studied. In addition, we assessed whether participants with the same pattern could be grouped. The relationship between the codes was explored by constructing conversation patterns with the use of State Space Grids (Lewis, Lamey, & Douglas, 1999). A State Space Grid (SSG) is a method that quantifies observational data into a graph with two nominal variables. SSGs were developed specifically for examining longitudinal change in interaction processes: In this study, this consisted of the one-year diary reports of each participant. SSGs are person-orientated; the method is useful for looking at differences in how conversations about sexuality and other topics are experienced on an intra-individual level. In addition to identifying content-specific changes (e.g., avoidance of sexuality topics), this method can discover changes in the stability of parent-child conversations (e.g., whether the participant avoids sexuality topics for each conversation). For this study, SSGs were particularly beneficial for exploring the different conversation patterns by presenting how participants' conversations clustered in certain regions of the graph and changed over time.

Quantitative analyses were performed using SPSS version 20.0. The number of participants reporting a topic at least once was presented as "*n*," and the number of diary reports as "reports," followed by the percentage of *n* and percentage of diary reports (for

example:  $n = 1$ , 5%; 1 report, 4%). Quotations of individual participants were illustrated by numbers, from P01 for participant 01 to P66 for participant 66.

## Results

### Topics of everyday parent-child conversations about sexuality

Approximately one-third of the participants ( $n = 21$ , 32%) wrote at least once about a sex-related conversation with their parent(s) over a period of one year (2 boys; 19 girls). Most of the participants did not describe any sex-related conversations at all. The participants who talked at least once ( $n = 21$ ) about sexuality with their parents and those who did not ( $n = 45$ ) were compared.

*Table 1: Explanation of parent-child sex-related conversation topics and number of participants and reports*

Topic	Explanation	n	% n	Reports	% Reports
Initial romantic affiliations	Having a crush on someone, liking someone special, receiving attention.	7	33%	13	28%
Romantic relationship	Activities, doubts, starting and ending a romantic relationship.	16	76%	27	60%
Contraceptive use	Condoms, birth control, contraceptive use.	1	5%	2	4%
Explicit sexual contact	From French kissing to having actual sexual intercourse or thinking about physical sexual contact.	3	14%	3	7%
Other		1	5%	1	2%
Total <sup>2</sup>		21	100%	46	100%

<sup>1</sup>Total number of  $n$  and diary reports. For  $n$  and %  $n$  the total does not correspond to the total number of participants for the specific topics mentioned due to the possibility of multiple topics being reported for each participant.

Girls reported significantly more conversations about sexuality than boys (girls:  $n = 29$  no conversation vs.  $n = 19$  at least one conversation; boys: 16 no conversation vs. 2 at least one conversation;  $\chi^2(1, N=66) = 4.892, p = 0.027$ ). However, age did not significantly differ among participants who talked about sexuality with their parent(s) ( $M = 15.5, SD = 1.14$ ) and those who did not ( $M = 15.5, SD = 1.14; M = 15.2; SD = 1.5; (t(8) = 0.791, p = 0.432)$ )).

More than half of the sex-related conversations (28 reports, 61%;  $n = 13, 62\%$ ) were held with the mother of the participant. About one-fourth (12 reports, 26%;  $n = 8, 38\%$ ) of the sex-related conversations were with the father, and thirteen percent (6 reports, 13%;  $n = 7, 33\%$ ) were with both the mother and father. Most sex-related conversations (28 reports, 61%;  $n = 13, 62\%$ ) were between mothers and daughters, followed by father-daughter conversations (10 reports, 22%;  $n = 7, 33\%$ ) and parents-daughter conversations (6 reports, 13%;  $n = 6, 28\%$ ). Both boys (2 reports, 4%;  $n = 2, 10\%$ ) reported that they had a conversation with their father about sexuality.

The subsample of participants, who did describe sex-related topics ( $n = 21$ ), reported a total of 46 sex-related conversations; these were classified into five categories: Romantic Relationships, Romantic Affiliations, Sexual Contact and Contraceptive Use, and Other (see Table 1 for coding categories, explanation, and number and percentage of participants, and reports). In general, the conversations were characterized by romantic aspects of sexuality and personally relevant topics. Furthermore, the conversations were with one or both of the parents, or with all family members.

**Romantic aspects.** The majority of the sex-related conversations were about romantic aspects of sexuality: Romantic Relationships (27 reports, 60%;  $n = 16; 76\%$ ) and Initial Romantic Affiliations (13 reports, 28%;  $n = 7, 33\%$ ). Participants informed their parents about general and personal issues. An example of a general issue is an opinion about romantic relationships in general. For example, a 14-year-old girl (P01) wrote:

“Oh, my mother just wanted to know what my opinion was about having boyfriends in general.”

However, participants reported mostly about issues that were personally relevant for them, such as talking with their parents about their current or former romantic partner. A 15-year-old girl reported (P06):

“My mother and I talked about my boyfriend. Last time, he felt really down. So, we talked about that. I really want him to feel better, you know.”

With respect to Initial Romantic Affiliations, most parents asked about a personal issue, such as whether their child was romantically involved with someone, for example, a 14-year-old girl reported (P05):

“She [mother] wanted to know what my relationship with a boy was. She asked whether it was a friendship or more... I honestly told her that I really, really like him.”

Other personally relevant conversations involved asking for advice, for example, a 14-year-old girl wrote the following (P09):

“It [the conversation] was about me thinking that a boy did not like me anymore. He acted differently in a conversation we just had from how he acted just a few days before. (...) I hoped my mother could give me some advice on what to do in this situation.”

The sex-related conversation was not always solely with the parent(s). Naturally occurring sex-related conversations were dyadic (i.e., one parent and child), triadic (i.e., both parents and child) or group conversations (i.e., all family members). Hence, everyday sex-related conversations with parents could typically co-occur with other family members, for example, a conversation during dinnertime. A 15-year-old girl mentioned (P03):

“My brother wants to find a boyfriend for me. We talked about it with my parents during dinnertime. Actually, it was pretty funny... because he thinks I immediately like everybody he comes up with. Afterwards, it made me think... I wish I wasn't the only one in the family who has no relationship going...”

**Sexual aspects.** Participants reported the least about Sexual Behavior (3 reports, 7%;  $n = 3$ , 14%) or Contraceptive Use (1 report, 4%;  $n = 1$ , 5%). Any report that had the slightest content about explicit sexual contact was coded as Sexual Behavior. For example, a 15-year-old girl reported about a conversation with her parents, in which they referred to physical features of girls in relation to kissing, and this was coded as Sexual Behavior (P07):

“(...) A few of my friends have kissed for the first time, but I haven't, not yet. So, I'm jealous. (...) My parents told me that it's nothing serious if you kiss someone you never met before at a party. (...)”

Still, I would really like to kiss someone, and I don't care whether I have to find out afterwards whether he'll be my boyfriend or not (...)"

A 15-year-old girl mentioned using birth control (P08):

"I started using birth control. My mother actually thought it was not a good idea. But she just has to know she can trust me and that I know what I'm doing."

### Everyday parent-child conversations about sexuality versus other topics

Thematic coding resulted in two types of coding of conversation quality that resembled *conversation* and *conformation orientations* of FCPT (Table 2 lists the number of topics and FCPT orientations of parent-child conversations over a one-year period).

Table 2: Number of topics and quality of one-year parent-child conversations

Topic	Coding category for quality of conversation							
	Conversation Orientation				Conformity Orientation			
	Avoidance		Approach		Conformity Claim		No Conformity Claim	
Reports	%	Reports	%	Reports	%	Reports	%	
R&S (46)	13	28% <sup>1</sup>	32	70% <sup>2</sup>	16	33% <sup>2</sup>	32	67% <sup>2</sup>
Other (106)	6	6% <sup>1</sup>	84	79% <sup>2</sup>	43	40% <sup>2</sup>	63	60% <sup>2</sup>
Total <sup>3</sup> (152)	19	13%	116	76%	59	38%	93	62%

R&S romantic and sexuality-related topics

<sup>1</sup> Significant difference between Avoidance experience of conversations about R&S vs. Other ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $N=157$ ) = 14.981,  $p < 0.001$ ).

<sup>2</sup> No significant difference between Approach experience of conversations about R&S vs. Other ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $N=157$ ) = 2.38,  $p=0.123$ ).

No significant differences between Conformity Claim of conversations about R&S vs. Other ( $\chi^2$  (1,  $N=152$ ) = 0.452,  $p=0.501$ ).

No significant difference between No Conformity Claim of conversations about R&S vs. Other

<sup>3</sup> Total number (percentage) of diary reports for quality of conversation, irrespective of topic. The total percentage does not correspond with the total percentage of the reports of R&S and Other due to the division by total number of diary reports (152) instead of division by total number of R&S (46) or Other (106).

**Conversation orientation.** The Avoidance vs. Approach coding category approximates the *conversation orientation* of FCPT. Overall, many conversations had an Approach orientation, while only a few conversations had an Avoidance orientation: 76% (116 conversations) were Approach conversations, compared to 13% (19 conversations) scored as Avoidance conversations. Twelve percent (18 conversations) could not be classified as either Avoidance or Approach.

Avoidance was significantly more often experienced within sex-related conversations compared to Other conversations, respectively, 28% (13 out of 46) vs. 6% (6 out of 106) ( $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 14.981, p < 0.001$ ). However, sex-related conversations did not significantly differ from other conversations with respect to the number of Approach orientations ( $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 2.38, p = 0.123$ ). Participants approached 79% of the other conversations (84 out of 106), and they approached 70% of the sex-related conversations (32 out of 46).

In case of Avoidance, participants were very obvious in their description of avoiding the conversation. For example, a 14-year-old girl mentioned (P02):

“She [mother] wanted to talk about dating. At that point I wanted to end the conversation and I really did stop talking.”

Another example was a 15-year-old boy who avoided the conversation (P04):

“They [parents] thought I was sending too many text messages to a girl. I didn’t want to talk about it and went upstairs.”

The abovementioned examples show that participants were quite brief in their descriptions of avoiding sex-related conversations with their parents. Instead, in many Approach conversations participants wrote detailed stories about the sex-related conversation with their parents. Participants mentioned explicitly that they had talked with their parents. For example, a 15-year-old girl mentioned (P05):

“My mother thought I was going steady with a boy, but it wasn’t true. (...) So, I made it perfectly clear that it wasn’t happening!”

**Conformity orientation.** The coding categories Conformity vs. No Conformity Claim were associated to the *Conformity Orientation* of FCPT. A total of 39% (59 conversations) were coded as Conformity Claim and 61% (93 conversations) as No Conformity Claim (Table 1.2). Thirty-five percent of sex-related conversations (16 out of 46) and 41% of other conversations (43 out of 106) could be coded as Conformity Claim. Sex-related conversations did not significantly differ from Other conversations with respect to Conformity Claims ( $\chi^2(1, N = 152) = 0.452, p = 0.501$ ).

Conversations containing a Conformity Claim were, for instance, parents encouraging their children to postpone having a romantic relationship, to end a romantic relationship, or to spend less time with their romantic partner. One example of a conversation that was categorized under the Conformity Claim of postponing a romantic relationship was that of a 14-year-old girl with her father (P18):

“We talked about having a romantic relationship. He [father] said I was too young to have a romantic relationship; I thought I wasn’t. We discussed this issue.”

Another 15-year-old girl’s request for her boyfriend to sleep over was declined (P06):

“My mother is going away for the weekend. I really wanted my boyfriend to sleepover so he can help me babysit. But my father wouldn’t allow it. I really didn’t like that (...).”

No Conformity Claim was coded, when the participant did not report a comment that indicated a restriction from the parent. An example of a No Conformity claim in the parent-child conversation was described by a 14-year-old girl in her diary report (P21):

“She [mother] asked me about me and a boy, whether it was just a friendship or more than that. I said that I really, really liked him.”

The abovementioned example shows that the participant did not report any restrictive comments (i.e., Conformity Claims) from the parent.



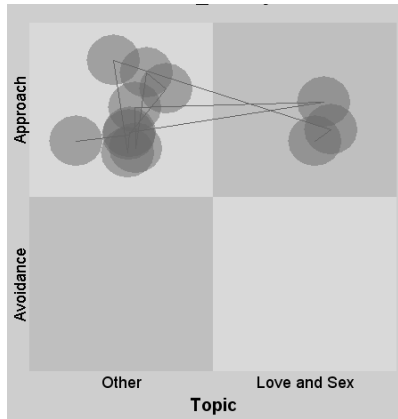


Figure 1.1 Approach is one out of ten unique State Space Grids that visualizes how one individual experienced talking about R&S in comparison to talking about another topic with the parent ( $n = 10$ ). The figure, that is, the State Space Grid, consists of all reported conversations (i.e., blue dots) within one year for one participant. X-axis is Topic (Other vs. Romantic and Sex-related topics); Y-axis is Orientation (Avoidance vs. Approach).



Figure 1.2 Avoidance is one out of four unique State Space Grids that visualizes how one individual experienced talking about R&S in comparison to talking about another topic with the parent ( $n = 4$ ). The figure, that is, the State Space Grid, consists of all reported conversations (i.e., blue dots) within one year for one participant. X-axis is Topic (Other vs. Romantic and Sex-related topics); Y-axis is Orientation (Avoidance vs. Approach).

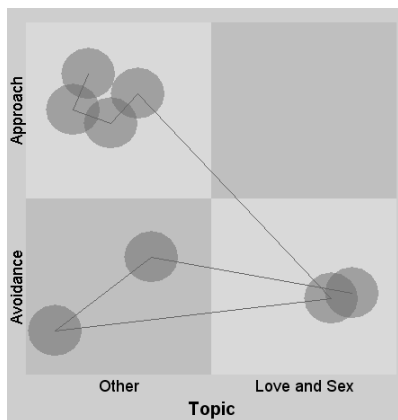


Figure 1.3 Avoidance-Mixed ( $n = 3$ ) is one out of three unique State Space Grids that visualizes how one individual experienced talking about R&S in comparison to talking about another topic with the parent. The figure, that is, the State Space Grid, consists of all reported conversations (i.e., blue dots) within one year for one participant. X-axis is Topic (Other vs. Romantic and Sex-related topics); Y-axis is Orientation (Avoidance vs. Approach).

### **Parent-child conversation patterns: Sexuality vs. Other**

As shown above, participants significantly avoided more sex-related conversations than other conversations. In contrast, conversations about Sexuality and Other did not differ with respect to Conformity Claims. Therefore, the dimension Avoidance vs. Approach was chosen to examine parent-child conversation patterns. In order to construct parent-child conversation patterns, we selected the group of participants who reported more than 4 parent-child conversations over a one-year period. As a result, a total of 17 participants were selected out of the subsample of 21 respondents. This selection consisted of 1 boy (17 years old) and 16 girls (average age=15.6 years old).

With the use of State Space Grids (Lewis, Lamey, & Douglas, 1999), the pattern of parent-child conversations for each individual over a period of one year was visualized (Figures 1.1-1.3). The one-year reports of the participants were constructed separately by using a State Space Grid for each individual participant. We used two dimensions to define the possible states of the parent-child conversation pattern, namely on the x-axis Topic (Sexuality vs. Other topics) and on the y-axis Avoidance vs. Approach Orientation. Avoidance vs. Approach Orientation was chosen, because Sexuality significantly differed from other conversations with respect to this dimension indicating that this dimension reflected the different experience of sexuality vs. other conversations. The patterns of the parent-child conversations over a period of one year were described in terms of transitions from one state to another. A state is a match of topic of conversations (Sexuality vs. Other) and Orientation (Avoidance vs. Approach) of a conversation at one moment in time, in one diary report. Each blue dot in the figure reflects a diary report. Each parent-child pattern was analyzed. The individual patterns that were similar were grouped together. Some participants experienced Sexuality and Other conversations similarly, while others experienced Sex-related and Other conversations differently. Three parent-child conversation pattern groups were found in the data: (1) Approach, (2) Avoidance, and (3) Avoidance-Mixed groups (Figures 1.1 - 1.3).

First, for most ( $n = 10$ ) participants, sex-related conversations did not differ from Other conversations with respect to Avoidance vs. Approach (Figure 1.1). These participants all showed an Approach orientation, regardless of whether the conversation was about sexuality or another topic. Participants within this group talked with their mother, father, or with both of their parents together. There was no specific sex-related topic (i.e., Initial Romantic Affiliations, Romantic Relationship, Contraceptive Use, Explicit Sexual Contact) that was characteristic for this group.

Second, another group of participants ( $n = 4$ ) consistently reported an Avoidance orientation for the reported sex-related topics (Figure 1.2). However, for Other topics, these participants could consistently be categorized under an Approach orientation. The

participants within this group reported talking with their mother, father, and both parents together. With respect to the reported sex-related topics, all four participants reported only talking about Romantic relationships with their parents, not Initial Romantic Affiliations, Contraceptive Use, or Explicit Sexual Contact.

Finally, three participants could not be grouped into either of the two typical patterns (Figure 1.3). These participants showed a more unstable pattern. They reported Avoidance orientation with respect to Sex-related and Other topics. In addition, they also reported Approach orientations for Other conversations. Participants in this group were labeled as Mixed-Avoidance. Again, the participants reported talking with their mother, father, and both parents together. Concerning the sex-related topic of conversation, one participant reported conversations about Initial Romantic Affiliations, one about Romantic Relationships, and one about Explicit Sexual Contact.

## **Discussion**

Using mixed-methods, this diary study explored which sex-related topics were prevalent in everyday conversations between young people and their parents, and how these sex-related conversations are experienced in real-life, over a one-year period. In general, the results showed a large number of conversations about romantic aspects (i.e., Initial Romantic Affiliations and Romantic Relationships) of sexuality and about person-relevant topics. Furthermore, everyday sex-related conversations occurred not only in a dyadic form (parent and child) but also triadic (parents and child) or group conversations (e.g., all family members during dinner). With respect to the quality of the conversation (presence/absence of Conformity Claims), no differences were found between sex-related and other conversations. Young people's avoidance did play a unique role in naturally occurring sex-related conversations with parents (compared to other conversations); however, avoidance of sex-related conversations was not evident for every young person. Three groups of participants could be identified: Most young people were in the Approach group and consistently evaluated talking about sexuality as being equal to talking about other topics; young people in the Avoidance group showed a consistent pattern where talking about sexuality with their parents elicited avoidance behavior (however, other topics elicited approach behavior); and young people in the Mixed-Avoidance group appeared to have a mixed pattern of approaching and avoiding sex-related and other topics of conversation.

The results of our study clearly demonstrate the importance of romantic issues in everyday parent-child sex-related conversations, since romantic issues were the most intensely discussed in the diaries. The diary results reinforce previous questionnaire research, which demonstrated that sex-related conversations were mostly about romantic relationships (De Graaf et al., 2012; De Looze et al., 2014). Previous research about parent-child conversations and sexuality focused mainly on manifested romantic relationships and sexual behavior (Collins et al., 2009; Dilorio et al., 2003). Although this study showed that young people appear to talk about initial romantic affiliations, this continues to be an understudied topic within romantic and sexuality research (Collins et al., 2009).

Consistent with the literature, this study's diary data of everyday sex-related conversations shows that girls report more conversations with their parents than boys (De Looze et al., 2014; Dilorio et al., 2003; Gillmore et al., 2011; Widman et al., 2014). In further agreement with previous studies, most of the sex-related conversations of the girls were with their mothers (De Graaf et al., 2012; Dilorio et al., 2003). Consistent with the research literature, all of the boys reported only father-son conversations (De Graaf et al., 2012). However, this last finding should be interpreted with caution, since only two boys in this study reported sex-related conversations.

In contrast to what might be expected based on the research literature (De Looze et al., 2014; Dilorio et al., 2003), our study showed that the subsample of  $n = 21$  participants, who reported at least one sex-related conversation with one or both of their parents, were not older than the rest of the sample, who did not report a sex-related conversation with one or both of their parents ( $n = 45$ ). Since younger young people have, on average, fewer manifest experiences with sexuality than older ones (De Graaf et al., 2012), it might be that the opportunity to report conversations about initial romantic affiliations in our diary study explains this result. Questionnaires do not always contain a broad range of sex-related conversational topics, including initial romantic affiliations.

Theoretically, the qualitative analysis resulted in two types of coding and illustrated that the two fundamental orientations of FCPT are applicable to young people's diary descriptions of *everyday* conversations with parents. The dimensions Avoidance vs. Approach and Conformity Claim vs. No Conformity Claim emerged in the diary data and approached an operationalization of *Conversation Orientation* and *Conformity Orientation* of FCPT, respectively. This study supports and extends the two dimensions of FCPT to the domain of real-life experiences of sex-related and other conversations in everyday life.

Although the prevalence of Avoidance in the everyday conversations was relatively minor compared to the presence of Conformity Claims, Avoidance was more intensely manifest in sex-related conversations (28%). In fact, only a few topics other than sex-

related ones triggered Avoidance (6%) in everyday life. Avoiding sex-related topics with parents has been documented as a typical feature of adolescence (Afifi et al., 2008; Baxter & Akkoo, 2011; Dilorio et al., 2003; Jerman & Constantine, 2010; Widman et al., 2014). This diary study has supported previous research that shows that sex-related topics also play an important role in avoiding *everyday* conversations with parents.

Earlier research revealed that Dutch parents are relatively open to sex-related conversations (Schalet, 2011). Our diary study extends these findings by showing that, from the perspective of young people, Dutch parents do not engage in more restrictive messages within sex-related conversations (i.e., conformity claims) than restrictive messages in other everyday conversations. Previous research in China (Wang, 2016) and the USA (Schalet, 2011) did demonstrate many restrictive messages from the parents, specifically when it came to sex-related conversations. Cultural differences could account for these results, since the Netherlands is well known for its open and sex-positive culture (Parker et al., 2009; Weaver et al., 2005).

This study demonstrates consistent parent-child communication patterns over a one-year period, which shows considerable variability among the lives of young people. These findings suggest that it is important to adapt sex education programs to the existing knowledge and skills of the family. For example, the young people in the Avoidance group could focus on specific sex-related communication skills instead of acquiring general communication skills (since they only avoided sex-related conversations).

### **Strengths, limitations, and conclusions**

This study was limited by the small sample size of predominantly heterosexual Dutch girls of native-born parents. The purpose of this study, however, was not to make generalizable claims about all Dutch young people's everyday parent-child conversations about sexuality. Rather, our intent was to contribute to theory development on family communication about sexuality on the basis of the analyses reported here. Even though the core of the study was based on a small sample, the sample did give us the opportunity to study how the conversations were experienced by young people in real life. The analysis of individual parent-child communication patterns contextualizes development as it is lived. Still, in order to extend this methodological and analytic approach, future research could replicate this study using a larger sample.

FCPT questionnaires measure overall communication in the family, not in each real-life conversation. Instead of a continuous scale to operationalize the orientations, the diary descriptions only provide for coding dichotomously. Future studies on real-life conversations could focus on a more exact operationalization on a continuous scale with

the use of additional closed-ended questions. Nevertheless, the spontaneous emergence of the two fundamental orientations of FCPT in young people's own descriptions of real-life conversations with their parents further supports the FCPT, and extends the orientations of FCPT to everyday conversations.

Young people's everyday diary reports consisted of fewer sex-related conversations between young people and parents than expected from a representative Dutch survey among 12- to 25-year-olds (De Graaf et al., 2012). Although we expected that a Dutch sample would be highly suitable for carrying out this study, because of the pragmatic and sex positive government policies in the Netherlands (Schalet, 2011; Weaver et al., 2005), only 32% of the sample reported having at least one everyday sex-related conversation during the one-year period. Apparently, an open culture does not equate to frequent conversations about sexuality between parents and children. It seems that sexuality remains a sensitive topic of discussion, even in the Netherlands.

We surmise that the participants were not opposed to reporting sex-related conversations, since they did volunteer to participate in the study. Instead of using a pre-determined list, we asked young people to reproduce a conversation they had experienced. Maybe in real life young people experience fewer of these kinds of conversations than they think, or the conversations they did have may not have seemed significant enough to report. However, the explorative results did provide unique initial insights into how young people remember recently experienced everyday sex-related conversations with their parents.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study is the first to demonstrate how naturally occurring sex-related conversations with parents are experienced by young Dutch people with a non-minority background. Our results suggest that future studies based on sex-related conversations between parents and children could broaden the research by incorporating romantic and personally relevant topics (instead of featuring solely intercourse-related topics) and by obtaining information about who young people talk to in their family (e.g., one parent, two parents, all family members).

While studies have examined avoidance of parent-child communication about sexuality, few have assessed individual patterns of parent-child sex-related conversations in relation to other conversations. Findings from this study indicated that young people are able to have stable conversation patterns with their parents, irrespective of the conversational topic, suggesting the need for additional research on parent-child conversation patterns and the role of individual differences in how sex-related conversations are experienced. Our next step is to explore how young people's experiences of everyday sex-related conversations are related to their sexual development (Dalenberg, Timmerman, Kunnen, & Van Geert, 2016).

