



## CHALLENGES OF CHILD SEXUAL TRAINING IN IRAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Mahboubeh Sharifi<sup>1</sup>, Shahnaz Kohan<sup>2</sup>, Soroor Arman<sup>3\*</sup>, Amir Hossein Banki Poor fard<sup>4</sup>, Fatemeh Mohammadi<sup>5</sup>

1. *PhD of Reproductive Health, Student Research Center, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran, Yasuj University of Medical Sciences, Yasuj, Iran.*
2. *PhD of Reproductive Health, Assistant Professor, Nursing and Midwifery Care Research Center, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran.*
3. *Child Psychiatrist, Professor, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Behavioral Sciences Research Center, School of Medicine, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran.*
4. *PhD of Philosophy, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Ahl Al-Bayt, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran.*
5. *PhD of Reproductive Health, Student Research Center, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran.*

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** In spite of the agreement on the necessity of sexual training and education for children and adolescents and its obvious impact on the health of the individuals, it faces many challenges in Iran. Parental resistance against the sexual education of the children and in turn, the information bombarding of kids and teenagers via numerous available media and the environment outside the home has increased the complexity and difficulties of this training dimension. For a successful sexual training of children and the youth, it is necessary to identify and resolve the relevant problems. This study has dealt with exploring challenges of children's sexual training in Iran through a qualitative approach. **Materials and methods:** This study was designed with a qualitative content analysis method. Forty six eligible participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Data collected through 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 9 individual interviews. FGDs and interviews transcripts were analyzed using conventional content analysis with an inductive approach. **Results:** Data analysis led to the emergence of four main categories; factors associated with parents, factors related to the socio-cultural context, factors related to media, and the unavoidable environmental factors as sexual training challenges. **Conclusion:** Despite efforts over the recent years in the field of sexual education and training across different strata, the Iranian community still faces numerous challenges in different dimensions in this field, including family, media, environment and socio-cultural context. For a successful sexual training of children, a comprehensive plan for regulating various challenging factors is a necessity.

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### Introduction

Proper sexual training and education in the ages of childhood and adolescence helps people in the future to go through physical and developmental processes of puberty in a healthy manner [1, 2] and experience satisfactory marital life in adulthood [3]. International agreements such as the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, the Fourth International Women's Conference in 1995, and the World Summit for Children in 2002 stressed the right of children and adolescents to receive sexual information [4]. But despite the clear reasons and adequate studies about the necessity of sexual

**Corresponding Author:** Soroor Arman, Child Psychiatrist, Professor, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Behavioral Sciences Research Center, School of Medicine, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, Isfahan, Iran. Email: [arman@med.mui.ac.ir](mailto:arman@med.mui.ac.ir)

education and training [3, 5] and the important role of parents [6], there are still some challenge in many societies [7] and many countries face social and cultural resistance in the planning and implementation of sexual education at different levels of society. Most academic sources as well as the parents consider the sex training equal to sex education [8], and avoid it due to various concerns including the immaturity of children to know the sexual issues [6, 9] and children premature engagement in sexual activities [1, 7, 10]. While the studies identified the role of parents in the sexual training and provided the necessary information to the children [2]. But the two basic problems of the parents in this field are the lack of sufficient awareness and knowledge on one hand [11] and the concern and anxiety of the consequences of education such as early childhood awareness in the field of sexual affairs on the other hand [2]. The sexuality is under the influence of biological, genetic, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious, spiritual [3, 12] and social factors and family values [13]. Nowadays, one of the most important cultural challenges of communities is the access to new and rapidly growing global technology, media and communication [13] particularly during the recent few years. In the past years, the people via access to satellite networks were exposed to cultural and information bombardment and today, with the arrival of smart cell phones and easy Internet connections and expansion of the Internet network in all parts of the country with consequential formation of social networks and cyberspaces with abundant and varied capabilities and easy data transfer has been completed, and the users of different ages while unable to do sufficient analysis and detect right and wrong contents or good and bad contents, are exposed to the flood of information and in the meantime, sexual images and information are of interest to the users [9]. So, while the parents ignore their duty to conduct sexual training and education of their children, the kids acquire much information on this [11] from multiple sources that are mostly invalid [5, 14]. Iran is no exception to this rule of the social and cultural changes. However, few studies have examined the attitude of society towards the sexual training of children and the factors associated with it. It also seems that the available knowledge for understanding the different dimensions of children's sexual training in the social and cultural context of the country must be expanded and updated and qualitative research will lead to in-depth information about the research field and clarify the different aspects of complex human phenomena [15]. The present study examined the challenges in the sexual training of children in Iran with a qualitative approach.

## Materials and Method

This study is a qualitative research with conventional content analysis method that was conducted with naturalistic paradigm. The participants were parents who had a child under 12 years of age, child healthcare providers (such as pediatric psychiatrists, nursery trainers, midwifery and reproductive health experts), and training services providers (such as religious experts, psychologists and sex therapists). The selection of participants was started as they became available and continued with purposeful sampling. The researcher referred to health care centers, kindergartens, cultural centers, etc. and talked to individuals qualified to take part in the study. After they agreed to take part, a personal interview or participate in the FGD, their phone number was obtained. The time and place of interviews or FGDs was determined on the basis of the taste and convenience of participants. On the day of the interview, they submitted a written informed consent and they were free to quit at any time if they did not desire to continue cooperation. The interviews and FGDs period was between 40 to 90 minutes and at the end, the participants' contribution was acknowledged and gifts were presented to them. In this study, all participants were Shiite Muslims, but a huge difference in the amount of adherence to religious beliefs caused the discussions to be interactive and different opinions were expressed.

Semi-structured interviews and FGDs guided with several questions such as: "Please tell us about your experiences in your interaction with children in area of sexual training? In your opinion, what are the factors that affect children's sexual training in our context?" Based on the opinion of the participants, the other questions were asked and conversations were recorded.

The conventional content analysis method which proposed by Grandheim and Landman [16] were used. Interviews and discussions were transcribed immediately and after reading several times, first the compact semantic units were written, then the codes were extracted from compact semantic units, then the similar codes were grouped and the sub-categories were created through inductive method and finally the main categories emerged.

To ensure the data accuracy we used four criteria: credibility, reliability, transferability and verifiability, such as selecting participants with a maximum of diversity, review of the extracted codes by participants and experts in qualitative research, review of the results of the study by some individuals (with the same features of the participants) who did not participate in the study, in terms of parallels between their experiences and the results of the research.

## Results

Six FGDs and 9 depth individual interviews were held with 46 participants including 26 parents, 7 pediatric psychiatrists, 2 religious experts, 7 reproductive health and midwifery experts, 2 clinical psychology experts and sex therapists and 2 pediatric nurses. Data analysis led to the emergence of four main categories: factors associated with parents, factors related to the socio-cultural context, factors related to the media and unavoidable environmental factors and each formed several sub-categories (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The main categories and subcategories resulting from analyzing the participants' opinions about children sexual training challenges in Iran

Main categories	Sub-categories
1- factors associated with parents	Unawareness about sexual growth and development process of the child
	Inability to give the appropriate response to child's sexual questions
	Lack of skill in handling child's sexual behaviors
2- Factors related to the socio-cultural context	Taboos of talking about sexual issues
	Community unpreparedness to face cultural transition
3- Factors related to the media	Spreading the use of various media
	Cultural conflict resulting from access to the media
	parental inability to control the media
4- Unavoidable environmental factors	the lack of parental control over the outdoor environments
	Difference in families' approaches to sexual matters

### 1. Factors associated with parents

The participants said that since parents undertook a major part of sexual training of the children, many of the challenging issues relates to them. Unawareness about sexual growth and development process of the child, inability to give the appropriate response to child's sexual questions, and lack of skill in handling child's sexual behaviors form the main category of parents' factors.

#### 1.1 Unawareness about sexual growth and development process of the child

Unawareness about sexual growth and development process of the child was the most fundamental problems that parents faced in the field of sexual training of their children. Part of this ignorance was related to lack of knowledge about sexual growth process and steps that a child naturally passes through during the development process.

"I saw my daughter got naked several times and looked at her organs. I do not know it is natural in this age nor should I react?" (A 5-year-old girl's mother)

From the perspective of participants, what has fueled the consequences of this ignorance is that the parents failed to discern normal and abnormal cases. Often the parents confront a normal behavior in child and create unpleasant consequences in the character of the child, and on the other end of the spectrum, a group of parents ignore the deviation of the child from normal behavior and take no action to improve the situation for their child.

"Many of the behaviors that parents perceive as unnatural in the child are physiological behaviors, but parents see them as a perverted and obscene behavior because parents do not have a good knowledge about this." (A sex therapist)

"My son sometimes lies on his belly and grinds his groin on the ground. This is a perversion in my and other's opinion and I am concerned but I do not know what should I do?" (Mother of a 4-year-old boy)

#### 1.2 Inability to give the appropriate response to child's sexual questions

According to participants another issue of the parents is their incapacity in the methods of responding to the children's sexual questions and curiosity. In this respect, some of the parents by giving irrelevant responses to their children set the stage for creation of training conflicts in the future of the child.

"One of the problems with mothers is about the kids' questions. Usually these mothers do not know what to say and give false and bogus answers to the kids' questions." (Reproductive health specialist, who has a girl and a boy)

And on the other end of the spectrum, some parents by providing more details than the child's growth capacity provide the substrate for the child's problems and deviations.

"A kid's mother in her answer to the child's question that had asked about how women got pregnant said dads urinates on moms and they get pregnant. I do not know whether this is the appropriate answer to a 6-year-old kid?" (Reproductive health and midwifery specialist, mother of 2 boys).

#### 1.3 Lack of skill in handling child's sexual behaviors

The last issue related to the parents is lack of necessary skills of parents to deal with their children's sexual behaviors. Therefore the parents who can detect abnormal behaviors in their children are faced with the problems in controlling such behavior. One of the problems is the proper reaction method at the time of observation of child behavior. In these cases, some parents create more problems for their child by punishment and accusation.

"My son masturbated twice a day at the age of four or five, every day. Lied face down and rubbed his abdomen to a surface. We were so worried and did not know what were we going to do? I had to punish him several times". (Mother of an 8-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl)

Also, the parents often did not know when and where to get help and treatment.

"I see my child go through the day repeatedly touching and stimulating his genitals with hand. I do not know should I do something for this problem? If I have to see a doctor what doctor should it be? By the way, is there a treatment for this problem?" (Mother of a 5-year-old boy)

## **2. Factors related to the socio-cultural context**

The participants said that parental training behavior has taken root in the social and cultural context of society and this has a significant impact on children's sexual training. The sub-categories taboos of talking about sexual issues and community unpreparedness to face cultural transition makes up this main category.

### **2.1 Taboos of talking about sexual issues**

One of the most important cultural issues associated with the sexual training of children is taboos related to talking about sexual issues in the Iranian society and this causes limitations in sexual education of different groups of society, including parents and children and leads to a lack of parental awareness and skill in the field of sexual training for children.

"There are a lot of cultural sensitivities about sexual issues, the related issues are viewed with fear and they avoid these areas. For example, schools or cultural centers tightly supervise any education presented to children about sexual and gender issues!" (Reproductive health specialist)

The taboo nature of sexuality education and talking about sexual issues makes even children's healthcare providers lack sufficient skills and abilities to help the parents.

"I am a midwife and I work in the health centers. I frequently encounter mothers who ask me about sexuality training of their kids and I can't provide the right education. That is because in our community sex is a taboo and even I did not receive training to teach these matters."

### **2.2 Community unpreparedness to face cultural transition**

Another socio-cultural issue that plays a role in the sexual training of children is the rapid cultural changes in society. While due to increased use of the media, the culture of the people is changing but the society is not prepared to encounter these cultural changes.

"For managing of sexual issues in society we have still a long way to go. That is, the community was just trying to understand the dangers of satellite then the Internet entered our living space, and it had not come to terms with the Internet yet when mobile and cyberspace entered. There has not been a good protection about coping with the hazards of these media especially in sexual matters yet." (A male religious expert)

The result of this rapid change is the conflicts between generations, i.e. the parents educate their children with the cultural teachings of the previous generations, but this child during the growth process faces different issues resulting in conflicts and unconventional behaviors.

"In recent years, new communication devices were able to make quick changes in the people's knowledge and attitudes. This is not just about sexuality issues but just about everything. The new generation is so different from us like heaven and earth." (A female pediatric psychiatrist)

Some participants stressed that proportional to the changes of generations and based on their needs, sexual topics should be refined based on the values of society and then the community and parents receive such education.

"In the face of changes in the daily issues we have to accurately define the culture and ethics and norms of community again. We must determine that in our community how we should behave regarding these (sexuality) issues and what should we teach our children to grow in accordance with our values." (Reproductive health specialist)

## **3. Factors related to the media**

The participants highly emphasized the impact of media on children's sexual training. According to their statements, spreading the use of various media, cultural conflict resulting from access to the media and parental inability to control the media are factors related to the impact of the media.

### **3.1 Spreading the use of various media**

The first problem in relation to the media is the increasing spread of the use of the media in Iranian society. The participants in this study said that the use of different media such as satellite, Internet, and virtual networks has become very common in Iranian families.

"The media have now completely entered the family space, all ages have access to the phone, especially child and teenage generation that are more vulnerable. If we pay attention, we see that all the media have some sexual content. Even children's cartoons like Tom and Jerry show romantic and sexual scenes to kids." (Reproductive health specialist, mother of a 12-year-old girl)

Participants expressed their concerns about the inevitable media intrusion into the family privacy and its values and that there is no way to control its consequences at the disposal of the family.

"Nowadays, people cannot be stopped of having a smart phone or denied access to the various media. But the problem is that if a person as a member of a large group, has access to a pornographic video clip, who can distribute it to all of this population easily and without any considerations, there is no way to prevent that." (A male sex therapist)

### **3.2 Cultural conflict resulting from access to the media**

In terms of participants, the media by opening doors to other cultures cause a change in people's behavior. In the field of sexual training for children families face the existing cultural differences between Iran's Islamic and Asian culture and Western and

European countries. Showing sexual behaviors in media which is not accepted in the culture of Iran was one of the problems expressed by participants.

“The media that are often Western try to promote their country’s sexual and behavioral norms, while the sexual behavior norms in our country are very different than other countries and we should pay special attention to them in the sexuality education.” (A female sex therapist)

Most parents said when a child views and learns such behavior in the media, the families will not be able to predict and control their children's behavior.

“The other issue is inconsistency of our culture with foreign media such as TV channels and mobile and the Internet. We act at home another way and our children see other behavior in the media and wonder between the choices.” (Reproductive health specialist)

### **3.3 Parental inability to control the media**

It seems, parents cannot monitor the content of different media and the way to use the media, is a key factor in the problems associated with the impact of media on children's sexuality training. Participants said that parents cannot control the use of media in the presence of a child and nor may control the content of the media used by child.

“The 6-year-old kids and below at home are more engaged with satellite and TV and we cannot control these things. The TV is constantly on and many programs and episodes are bad for children. Even if we control these things, when we go to family and friends’ homes who watch the satellite, we cannot control anymore.” (Mother of a 5-year-old girl)

## **4. Unavoidable environmental factors**

Finally, another part of sexual training’s challenging factors are unavoidable environmental factors. This category consists of two sub-categories of the lack of parental control over the outdoor environments and difference in families’ approaches to sexual matters.

### **4.1 The lack of parental control over the outdoor environments**

According to the statements of the participants, a part of the factors associated with sexual training of children is the children's interactions in environments outside home. The school environment and the family of neighbors, friends and relatives are examples of this.

“Our living and socializing environment affect the sexual behaviors of our child; we must choose the environment with our own consciousness. In our community the selections of housing or socializing takes into account for child training issues.” (A male religious expert)

What happens in these environments is unpredictable and uncontrollable for parents and in some cases leaves them with major problems in the field of sexual training of their child. The participants proposed an alignment of these environments to remove potential problems for the children.

“The school and community and media should all be in one direction without excesses and wastage. Education and training, family, friends and peers have a key role and should all move in one direction.” (Reproductive health specialist)

### **4.2 Difference in families’ approaches to sexual matters**

In relation with the lack of parental control over the outdoor environments, the most problematic issue is the existence of families whose approach to child sexual training is very different with parental values. The results of the study showed that in the meantime families have three approaches. Some completely yield to the stream of modernity and the influx of imported modern world thoughts and opinions and train their children in all areas such as sexual issues freely and openly and believe in free and comfortable experience of all the matters by the children. The second group are opposite the first group and stay with their traditional and religious beliefs and try to convey their beliefs and values to their children, and because of the vast impact of the environment on the children, they are faced with several conflicts. The third group is passive parents who are immersed in their community trend and mostly due to ignorance and confusion have no specific strategy for child training.

“All parents want to train their children according to their own values, but today this is out of parent’s hands because the kids receive things outside the home environment that can be totally in conflict with family values.” (Clinical psychology expert)

The child encounters adults and children of families with different values, and will have unexpected experiences that create several problems in the path of sexual training. Access to various media, watching sexual behaviors, and receiving information ahead of the developmental stage are such cases.

“Sometimes in the different environments large amounts of sexual information floods the child’s brain which does not fit the cognitive development and age and confuses the child and causes unnatural behaviors in later years.” (A pediatric nurse)

## **Discussion**

This study examined the challenges associated with the sexual training of children in Iran. The results showed that four categories of factors related to parents, socio-cultural context, media and unavoidable environmental factors are issues that make challenges to children sexual training in Iran.

In this study the first influential factor in children's sexual training are factors associated with parents. The results showed that parents as the first [17] and foremost child trainers [1, 6] have several problems such as the lack of enough knowledge about the normal process of growth and development of the child sexuality [12], inability to interact with the child in the context of

answering to its sexual questions and lack of sufficient skills in child sexual behaviors management. Parents have insufficient information in the context of various stages of natural growth and development of children, which will be more pronounced in the aspect of sexual growth and development due to the limitation of access to reputable educational sources and taboo of sexual affairs [18]. This applies to children's questions and curiosity and the parents did not have valid educational resources and during their childhood, their parents have treated them badly so do not have anything to convey to their children [9]. The other reason of this problem in Iranian culture is embarrassment and shame when talking about sexual issues and several studies confirm this [6, 11]. The studies acknowledged that although parents usually undertake children's sexuality training with interest and concern but may repeatedly need support in terms of information, motivation and strategies to help them in obtaining optimum results [19]. Another study also shows that despite the important role of parents in providing sexual health information to children, they may be inexperienced and anxious to do this [1] so the quest for cohesion and strength of the family has a protective effect [20]. Of course, in recent years, some efforts for sex education have started all over the country that with respect to the vastness of Iran it seems very minimal. The result of this unawareness and confusion is the fear, worry and uncertainty of parents in recognizing natural developmental behaviors from abnormal behavior resulting in the inability of the parents in the management of natural and unnatural sexual behaviors of children, such as sexual curiosity and watching and manipulating the genitals and masturbating and childish sexual games and even for the educated people with related education, this inability is abundant. The studies state that intervention with the aim of encouraging parents regarding sex education should emphasize on understanding of children's sexual development stages by parents [9]. Other existing challenge according to the results of the study was factors associated with cultural and social platform. Nature of taboo associated with sex issues in Iranian society, deep cultural changes over the recent years and the lack of readiness of the society to face them were major challenges in this category. In Eastern societies, and especially the Iranian society, despite extensive changes in recent years [13], because of shame and modesty and cultural beliefs, many taboos [4, 11] and various restrictions in the field of sexual issues and its education exist that hinder consistency in sexuality education and training. The studies show that feeling embarrassed [6] or uncomfortable situation of parents [9] are some of the communication barriers between parents and children when talking about sexual matters. A study in Iran also showed that talking about sex issues is a socio-cultural taboo [7]. Of course, this study believes that such taboos are mostly cultural not religious and it seems cultural resistance is very important relative to religious prohibition. The religion of Islam has no taboos within the context of sexual issues, and according to the existing teachings, Muslims during different eras raised their sexual problems and asked questions easily which received responses. However, in the field of sexual education one should pay attention to society's cultural conditions [21]. One of the reasons for cultural taboos of sexual issues is parental and community concern about sex discussions and removing its shameful aspect among kids and teenagers. Also another challenging factor is diversity of family opinions and values, which has made the work difficult for families and professionals associated with sexual education and training. In fact, in the recent years, the cultural changes happened so fast and surprisingly that the community had no opportunity to establish harmony and compatibility with these changes completely and properly.

The results showed that another very important and effective factor in sexual training during recent years was the media and the factors associated with it. This very fast pace of information and communication technologies in the past few years [7], has given the community a deep shock caused by its multiple and partially destructive impacts. The first influential thing was the spreading use of varied media by different people in the near and far areas of the country. The use of the Internet, particularly in the mobile and smartphones and the membership of social networks and a flood of true and false information is more effective than the rest of the media. The studies also show that mass communications challenge the ethical standards and values of teenagers by distributing sexual content [11]. A major challenge in this field is the children's curiosity about sexual matters and searching these contents on the Internet and on the opposite side, the lack of parental skills in controlling the various media especially the Internet space and smartphones used by the children. In recent years, for various cultural reasons, the cell phone is used from an early age and children in these ages due to learning capacity, get familiar with different features of this media easily but their parents for a variety of reasons, including everyday struggle and boredom and impatience caused by them and reduced learning potential, cannot be ahead or at least at pace with their children to become familiar with these technologies and this causes the inability to monitor and control the activities of their children. In a study one of the obstacles that parents could not talk about sexual matters was shortage of time or energy [9]. Also the studies show that the content used by the media may affect early sexual behavior. Parental restrictions on sexual media outlets may cause more protection against premature sex compared to other constraints or watching along with parents [22]. Another study also mentioned the media as both a catalyst and a barrier [23]. According to the results of this study, the last challenge was the unavoidable environmental factors. The participants expressed that at an early age and before entering school or kindergarten, they had more control over children's training and behavior but with the growth of the children and their entry to places outside of the home such as kindergarten and school and more interactions with their friends and peers, their vulnerability to the outside environment was considerably increased and they acquired different information from different sources that are out of parental control. A study stated that the today's world exposes the children to negative impacts like sexual matters and the most important risk factors for children are media and peers pressure [9]. Of course, contrary to this view some studies introduce friends as a protective factor for teenagers but at the same time believe that friendship in lower ages may not always have a good prognosis [4]. In another study the peer age-group is classified as a catalyst of sex education [23]. On the other hand, as we mentioned earlier,

due to rapid cultural changes in recent years, the families have large differences in perspective and attitude and approach towards sexuality issues and this is confirmed by several studies in Iran. So, when the child's communication range is increased, they face extensive differences and conflicts between themselves and the friends and peers and their families.

## Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that despite recent efforts over the recent years about sexuality education and training across the different strata of the community, the Iranian society still faces numerous challenges in various dimensions, including the family, media, environment and cultural and social aspects. Perhaps the main reason for this problem is the inability of striking a balance between providing sexuality education on one hand and preserving the religious and cultural beliefs and values (that are highly prized in Iranian society) on the other hand. So, it is essential that the experts and specialists in the related disciplines involved with sexual education define and explain the concepts and various sexuality issues and teach them based on scientific principles and compliance with the social and cultural values.

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