The Dynamics of Eros: Teenagers and Socialization to Sexuality in Italian Atypical Families

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Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the ways in which parents / adults and natural and adopted children, within nuclear and atypical families communicate and operate modes, dynamics, and experiences related to teenagers' intimate sphere. To this aim, our analysis identifies the different variables at play and their interrelation in defining the various modalities employed in different family types. The transition from the patriarchal to the "emotional" family has caused important changes related not only to the family's internal dynamics, but also to the autonomy of its individual members, particularly with regard to the sexual sphere. The starting point is a specific reflection on the sexuality of adolescents who, as we try to prove through the literature review, in this era is open to new forms of empowerment and emancipation that cause parents'/adults' educational strategies and models to be rethought. We pay particular attention to the rules by which the children's sexuality is managed in atypical families – particularly disrupted and / or recombined ones – in which it is possible to observe, as shown by in-depth interviews to parents, specific mode that escape any efforts of categorisation and cast new light on the dynamics underlying the socialisation of gender and sexuality in contemporary families.

Keywords: atypical families, teenagers, sexuality

Introduction

This paper aims at analysing the ways in which parents and adults in atypical families1 relate to their adolescent children, natural and / or acquired, with regard to the concerns raised by their first love and sexual experiences. Set against the background of relational tensions – resulting also from family transitions – we analyse the difficulties experienced by parents

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1 With the expressions “atypical”, “recombined”, “non-traditional”, “extended”, “post-nuclear” or “polinuclear” referring to families, we here mean family types where the original nucleus, made up of mother, father, and child(ren) is first disintegrated following separations and divorces (by contrast, we did not consider situations of post-widowhood) and then reassembled with other members, also coming from similar situations of separation / divorce with children. Furstenberg Jr. and Cherli (1991) also talk about “blended” and “binuclear” families. With the term “nuclear family”, instead, we mean, following Talcott Parsons, the family made up by parents and child(ren), where the latter, once reached adulthood, leave the family home, thus dissolving its nucleus, in order to form in turn a new family. This cycle is repeated in every generation (Parsons e Bales 1955).
and their former and new partners in transmitting rules, and more generally in the modalities of sexual communication with the teenage children, as well in interacting with them.

The idea is to see how the changes resulting from the redefinition of family configurations affect the ways to manage issues related to this particular stage of teenagers’ life. The analysis is based on the statements from adults-parents, members of single-parent and recombined families, in order to identify the complexities most commonly faced by parents.

Sexual education and sexuality management in atypical families: a review

Sexuality is a core aspect of adolescents’ lives, not only because of pubertal development, but also for educational, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Porrovecchio 2012). Teenagers’ collective imaginaries about sexuality are closely linked to the parents' moral standards, which are handed down to the children through communication and family relationships (Hampton et al. 2005). As Miller (2002) points out, the transmission of parental values about sexuality to children has a positive effect in promoting better health and sex life. The parental support and supervision has a beneficial impact not only on the sexual sphere, but also on the behaviour in general. In the communities and neighbourhoods which practice social mechanisms of socialisation and supervision of young people there is a decrease in sexual precocity (Browning, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2004).

Presence, control and parent-child dialogue influence sexual practices of adolescents, a (lower) frequency of sexual intercourse, the number of partners, an increase in the use of contraceptive methods and therefore a lower risk of unwanted pregnancies and of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Several authors point out that students who think they have good communication with their parents about sexuality, in fact, have less sexual encounters (Miller, Benson and Galbraith 2001; Rosenthal, Senserrrick and Feldman 2001).

Although not many studies that have dealt with this issue, investigations revealing the dynamics of management and education of adolescent children about sexuality in atypical families are of paramount importance. Undertaking a review of these studies, we find a pioneering one in the one by Inazu and Fox (1980) who, investigating the sexuality of adolescent children of cohabiting couples, revealed that daughters of unmarried partners were more likely to sexually debut earlier than teenagers from traditional families. Following studies (Thornton 1991; Laumann et al. 1994; Lauritsen 1994; Meschke and Siberesien 1997) confirmed that unlike nuclear families, atypical families have a different approach and show greater sexual precocity by adolescents. However, these studies suggested that it is not the family structure as such that directly influences the earlier and increased sexual activity of children, but that an essential role is played by procedural variables such as the context, mother-children relationship and interactions, parental control, and the attitude and discussions of the mother on sex. For some of these scholars (like Thorton, 1991) early sexual debut of the daughters of broken families and single or unmarried parents was linked to the parent(s) function of regulating behaviours, and thus to parental control capabilities, which was estimated to be greater in traditional families. A separation and / or divorce not only brings about the lack of presence of a parent in the household, but it also reduces the time spent between the custodial parent and the child, in the face of the increase in hours to be devoted to paid work.

More recent researches (Calhoun Davis and Friel 2001) showed that adolescent children of divorced parents may begin their self-discovery process before their peers. Divorced mothers delegate more responsibility to both sons and daughters. The highest level of autonomy is considered to be one of the causes of problematic behaviours at this age.

Simon and Furman (2011) found a direct effect of parental separation on a greater willingness in the family to address issues related to feelings and sexuality, especially where one of the parents (particularly the one living in the family house) enters a stable romantic relationship. This aspect is highlighted also in the direct relationship between separation and precocity of the first sexual experience, which is confirmed by the need of the young persons to swiftly acquire autonomy from their parents, to form their own emotional experiences, especially if the parents create new households (ibid.).

Another effect of the single parent situation may lead to the parent's loss of authority. Losing respect for the mother or father, children increase their interaction with the group of peers as well as its influence. This effect also plays in recombined families, where acquired parents are assigned less authority than the biological parents, lowering their degree of control on adolescents (ibid).
The sexual behaviour of adolescents is also regulated by family culture and values. Parental disapproval of certain behaviours and the rules transmitted to children were considered as related to the (older) age in which teenagers sexually debut (Resnick et al. 1997; Pick and Palos 1995). In agreement with the theory of greater openness in sexual matters by mothers and single-parent daughters, Thornton (1991) noted that single mothers following a divorce are more permissive in sexual matters, in addition to the fact that adolescents from remarried families have had more sexual experiences compared to children of single parents. On the possible explanations of the phenomenon, the researcher hypothesized that mothers of reconstituted families in the post-separation phase are more sexually active than divorced single women as they are willing to embark on a new relationship. Remarried mothers then passed on to their children a more open and permissive attitude with regard to romantic relationships.

**Traditional and atypical families: how do the dynamics of eros change?**

In order to investigate some of the trends described above, and thus to understand the kinds of problem involved in the management of children's sexuality during the teenage years, we interviewed parents of both traditional and atypical families in the Campania Region (Italy). We should point out that, given the approach employed¹, we can not in this context talk about results and observations which are generalizable to the broader population, but rather, more appropriately, about assumptions that in the future will have to be evaluated through a more complex research approach, also a standard one. This is especially true if we want to assess to what extent some "structural" changes affecting the contemporary family can somehow affect the way parents relate to their teenage children².

With regard to the methodology, we carried out 20 interviews, some of which have involved pairs of parents – also considered separately to compare the statements – and parents taken individually. The sample comprises many different situations: from the most traditional types, such as the nuclear family, consisting of two parents (married or not) living together under the same roof with their natural children, to more complex situations, such as those raised by single-parent families (for example separated mothers with children) or recombined (made up of previous marriages partners who live together with their children from previous relationships).

With regard to the questions, the interviews were aimed to cover several aspects of the respondents' experience, such as: the management of the first romantic relationships of teenager children – in terms of targeted speeches, curfews, autonomy and freedom granted – communication with them about sexuality, and, in the case of atypical families, the inherent dynamics of the parents' love life and socialization modes with the children; and finally the viewpoint of cohabiting adults whose partner has teenage children. When analysing the stories we tried to intercept the prevailing family models, with the associated attitudes. From this decoding of narratives it was possible for us to grasp the similarities – always relative – on the attitudes, values, beliefs, and orientations of the various parents / adults on the issues explored.

Considering the results, the first element to emerge is that most parents try not to interfere directly in the sexual life of their children, independently from the kind of family considered. It is known that puberty marks the beginning of the first speeches in the sphere of affectivity and sexuality between parents and children³, which for our respondents take more the shape of a *Tea talk*⁴ rather than a real moment of discussion according to the *Big talk* model (Hepburn 1983). Attitudes range from

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¹ We are here talking about an exploratory research, aimed at acquiring greater understanding of a situation and providing guidance for future investigations. Thanks to the exploratory research, the researcher increases her familiarity with the problem and thus arrives at formulating hypothesis and conjectures on it. Research data are considered qualitatively, therefore results do not aim to represent a general phenomenon (Corbetta 1999).

² A very important aspect if, for example we want to analyse the issue of authority and thus of the change in the degree of control that would happen when shifting from a traditional to an atypical family. Moreover, we should not overlook the influence on the educational models adopted of other variables such as: the educational level of both parents, the socio-economic status of the family, as well as its social capital (Ribolzi 2012).

³ In the various cases analysed the mother figure is of paramount importance, while the father very rarely enters the sphere of emotional and sexual familiarity.

⁴ A level of communication on sexuality and contraception characterised by exchange of information akin to afternoon chats in front of a cup of tea, including in the conversation events occurred to friends or notions learned at school. It is different from the Big Talk, instead intended and outlined as the first big conversation on these topics, aimed at providing clear and detailed information on each of these topics.
the search for the right strategy to create an atmosphere of closeness and intimacy and strategies oriented towards a more direct and intrusive control on the children's privacy.

Some of the parents interviewed are more oriented towards talks aimed at admonishing against risky behaviours, without entering into the merits of the issue, while others try to establish a more direct connection, while respecting the privacy of the children, with a purposeful dialogue on intimate relations and the bodily, hormonal, and psychological changes happening in the various stages of life. A pretty clear fact is the tendency on the part of traditional families parents – higher than that of parents from atypical ones – to share, with more or less flexibility, the idea that parents and children have to maintain a certain distance when it comes to sexuality, avoiding a complicity that would induce the teenagers to confuse the roles and consider the parents almost as friends.

Sandro last month, with his current girlfriend [...] had a problem that she [...] [her period] was four or five days late and he was worried and sought advice from me, but what could I say? I said, "Sandro, pretend that you told me nothing, because at this point I'm a mum, what can I say? Even if I have always told you to be careful, there are various contraceptives, this and that, if I've told you once I've told you a thousand times, and when you come and tell me something like this, what can I tell you? I mean, I can't tell you anything, what's the best thing to do... think for yourself, Heaven forbid she's expecting a baby you've ruined your life" [...] he, at 21, he has ruined his life, plus they are always fighting [...] however, he wanted to ask me and I didn't even know what to tell him. However, his father doesn't know this. (Antonietta, traditional family, an adopted son and a daughter in the process of finalising adoption)

For these parents the family friendly model is suspended when the discussion focuses on topics related to sex. Despite their emotional closeness with the children, adults in traditional families, regardless of their values, have troubles in playing a different role than the conventional one, in which parents are against sex between minors no matter what. In this perspective, they believe that parents should not encourage opportunities where children can cultivate their own space in which to explore eroticism with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

it has happened that a girl spent the night here because Sandro was here and I found it out later, and I said at this point nobody sleeps in my house any more [...] because I don't want to be like an accomplice, because when I talk with the mother of one of Ilaria's friends, and she says "she's coming to sleep at your place"., that is, she wants to know if we are going to be there or not, what kind of family we are. "Don't worry madam", this and that, and then I find out that she came to be with Sandro, this doesn't suit me at all. [...] (Antonietta)

However, for some respondents a more understanding approach towards their children's sexual experiences may be more functional, as is clear from the statements of mothers and fathers of atypical families. With regard to situation that can conceal a risk factor, they try to prefer good sense to moral preconceptions. Carmela, single mother who lives with her two children, a boy aged 19 and a girl aged 14, effectively summarizes the educational strategy in her statements:

For my son, who is the firstborn, not because he is male, I prefer that "if you have to be with a girl you stay at home, with condoms, because of the diseases, because of the risks that there is no need to run in adolescence, rather than in the car. " [...] I am mother to a daughter. If my daughter is sleeping with her partner, with her boyfriend at his place it makes me happier than thinking that they need to go somewhere should the need arise, but my daughter hasn't asked me anything today like my son didn't ask me anything when he was 14.

In the light of a more open position on sex between minors, we are led to believe that some of the dynamics characterising atypical families favour the development of an educational model encouraging teenagers towards greater autonomy and responsibility. In this context it is perhaps easier to set up a more mature and direct communication, where also topics more susceptible to shame, such as "sexual intercourse", "sex", "condom", "pregnancy", "STDs" are freely talked about. This attitude focused on responsible freedom is not just about hypothetical situations, but also about concrete circumstances which are managed accordingly to this mindset:

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1 This being an exploratory research, it can currently be considered a mere hypothesis which will have to be explored in the future by means of a more complex methodological approach that, starting from a sample of the population, will allow for a generalisation of the differences existing between the two types of family here considered.
My daughter and her boyfriend [...] were in the room, I was relaxed, before entering I knocked to ask if they wanted something, I found them sitting at his desk chatting. Not being repressed, they do not need to hide. (Carmela)

Sexual orientation

The understanding attitude of atypical families also applies to the sexual orientation of children, about which parents do not have particular concerns: whether they are homosexual or heterosexual it does not make much difference, what matter are happiness and personal fulfilment.

If you are homosexual, as a mother I would definitely try to understand the dynamics of this, but I would not interfere. [...] For me a happy homosexual child is better than a sad child with a straight partner. [...] I want a happy, serene child, rather than a repressed son, sad or frustrated because he's homosexual. [...] [The sexuality of my children] I have no worries about. I rather worry about their personal, cultural, professional growth. (Carmela)

Again, this calm approach is not limited to hypothetical speeches, but is concretely implemented in a genuine socialization, based on understanding. Whenever doubts arise, parents prefers to talk with their teenage child in explicit terms to dissolve the uncertainties:

My daughter began to play rugby, and thus, at the right time, as she was 12 years old, we have also dealt with this thing. I asked her, "you're starting to grow, you are developing, how do you feel about sexuality? Do you like your (girl)friends, do you share much? "And she said "no, mum, I like boys". I asked her plainly, "but you have homosexual friends?" And she told me this. My daughter, if she speaks, speaks freely. (Carmela)

Language and modesty

With regard to the form and content of speeches related to the emotional and sexual sphere, two main registers emerged. The first one belongs to parents in those families employing a more politically correct language in these speeches, whose communication style is in line with the principles of common morality. The most uninhibited and direct terms are mainly used in a negative sense, to connote a behaviour considered incorrect. Thus the word "sex" in employed in speeches aimed at raising the girls' awareness towards risks of "predation" and boys' awareness towards the risks of an unwanted pregnancy. It is believed that sexuality is something to protect children from, underestimating its recreational-erotic aspect.

When she tells me she met a boy [...] she tells me so and I say “be careful [...] because these guys nowadays want only that". She knows everything [about contraception] because well these boys, what do you think, one starts dating you when you're 16, do you think he's going to marry you? I say [...] you've started dating this Salvatore, who is sixteen years old like you, he's as young as you are [...].

Ilaria, it's up to you, I mean, you're with this guy, then you're with another guy, and then with another one, the way of being together, I mean, you understand the problem, that is, if you have sex with a boy, at this age, and then another, and another, and another, at the end you'll find yourself alone. Alone, because you know how it is. Boys talk and say "she's been with all of them". It's like that, you know. [...] (Antonietta).

Other parents, by contrast, resort to a more explicit language, not only because of their wider vocabulary, but also because their vision of sexuality is not stigmatized a priori; thus exploring sexuality in more open and conscious ways by means of a few strategies:

[Anna, who is 12] knows what condoms are, she knows it – I think – because at school they took some classes on sexual education. [About a more] direct speech, le'ts say that with her Mum she had a little more direct one, yes. An example: [...]
I remember that once we were in the car and Anna point-blank (laughs) asked me a question, she's clever [...] – and Marta [his former wife] was prompt in adopting the best choice - she said: "dad, please, explain: what's this bucchino [blow job]?" And I, you know I was not prepared (laughs), and caught by surprise I said, "But what did you understand? What did you understand? It's he holder (in Italian bucchino, with an O), the thing you put at the end of the cigarette. Have you ever seen those movies from the '30s?". What did she do? [...] At the same time, on the same day, she asked the same question to her mother. Mum argumented very clearly and then told her plainly what it was [...] of course trimming and adorning, given Anna's age, needing some censorship, however, she made her understand! What it was. Two days later (laughs) I drove Anna to school, she put her hand on my leg and said [joking] [...] "What was the bucchino [blow job], then, the cigarette? Yeah, sure" (laughs). (Carlo, separated father of a 12 year old daughter)

We must point out that the two styles are not specific to a certain family type. The factors orienting towards a register rather than to another are not to be attributed to the family type, but rather to cross-cutting aspects, such as the level of education and more generally to the cultural capital of the family¹. These aspects will also have to be clarified further in the future, through a more complex research approach.

The love life of parents

In an atypical family, as mentioned above, it can happen more frequently to discuss sexuality, also because of the parents' love life; the more open and equal educational model, leads parents to clarify the nature of the relationships they are establishing with people outside the family entourage. A single parent or a separated one, if committed in a new stable relationship, tends to make the children take part of what is happening in his or her life. Secrecy is limited to the most "free" relationship experiences and is adopted for two purposes: both to protect the children from further sorrow after the separation of their natural parents and with an educational function. Despite the willingness to recognize the sexual needs of their children, divorced parents try not to inculcate a misconception about love freedom. They are willing to grant teenagers opportunities for empowerment, but at the same time they are cautious and filter their private and romantic life.

They have never seen me. That is, I have had a foreign partner. He is the only man who came into my house and whom they met and they knew he was my partner. But since he never shared our daily have life they have never “felt” him, they have never considered him either an intruder or part of the family. For sure they knew that I had a relationship with this person, they saw me happy, they knew that when I went to Greece I was with him, I went there more when they saw more of their father, so they spent their weekends with their father and I went to Greece, or during the holidays, the summer vacations. (Emilia, separated, mother of a 17 year old daughter and a 14 year old son)

Most of the time, parents omit the flings and occasional flirtations. They are also concerned that children, having witnessed a family breakup, may underestimate the value of a couple's solidity and steadiness. Therefore they tend to make their love status known to the children only when they establish long-term relationships.

Perhaps a relationship of her mother, simply put, as I do, would probably not be much tolerated by Anna, and then what could happen? My ex-wife, with the fear of this eventuality, employs strategies that are probably wrong because maybe she says "I'm going to Salerno with the lawyers". She [the daughter] understands very well that she's not going with the lawyers, but instead she's going with someone. (Carlo)

The value of love and a stable relationship is not underestimated in situations of separation and divorce. On the contrary, because of the previous failure in matrimony they try and give their children a good example of sentimental relationship. If and when they decide to bring home the new partners, thus actually evolving the family from a disintegrated / single parent mode to a recombined one, as a first step they tend to handle the choice as a family affair. Although adults do discuss and decide how to act beforehand, they nevertheless look for ways to involve the children.

¹ As Bourdieu (1978) points out, every family transmit to its children, in both direct and indirect ways, a specific cultural capital and a specific set of values – implicit and deeply internalised – contributing, among other things, to define attitudes towards cultural capital and the school. Traditionally, the education level of parents compared to that of children is considered among the indicators of cultural capital as an expression of family cultural conditioning.
We discussed a bit between us, but not in detail and it all came by itself, very naturally. I went to the house to do small chores and I stayed later and later: dinner and after dinner, and even later and one day with the girls in the house she said "do you mind if Marco stays the night?" and it was quite natural like that, the girls did not object. (Mark, 31, lives with Rosa, 42, separated and mother of two daughters aged 11 and 14)

Parents privilege a clear and direct communication, in all its channels, whether verbal or non-verbal. Honesty and frankness therefore become a fundamental feature in order to both establish a relationship of trust and as feedback to understand how the children feel.

I haven't talked much to them about it, I simply went public. We showed ourselves to them as a couple, we held hands, we exchanged a few kisses with them present. [...] I had mentioned to my daughters that I was seeing a man, but then we immediately went public. (Rosa)

let's say that the time between them meeting me and me moving in with them was very short and with the girls nothing has changed, they have not had a wary attitude because I was immediately introduced as the boyfriend, not as a friend, that is, I haven't tried to steal their trust in other ways. (Marco)

Freedom and taboos between the adults and the partner's children in recombined families

A typical feature of recombined families, and therefore not of other family types, is the role and meaning of the new adult in the house with the partner's children, in particular for the issues here analysed. Natural parents do not seem to overestimate the concerns about the interaction between their children and their new partners. Lack of kinship does not necessarily become an obstacle to family intimacy. In some cases, preliminary talks are not considered necessary to prepare the partners to move in and interact with the children. Relationships and dynamics are thus left to happen spontaneously, just as in a traditional family.

Apart from the fact that I know who I've let into the house, I told him not to think about any of this [concerns about the relationship with the girls], that the more taboo are established in the couple and in the home and the more taboos he'd find himself burdened with. That's why from the very first day we slept in the same bed, myself, Marco and my youngest daughter, who still sleeps with me. (Rosa)

From the point of view of the partners newly entering the house, if he / she feels integrated and part of the family, he / she then acts with familiarity in domestic spaces. In which case there are not any more particular concerns about interaction with children at home, not even teenage girls.

Daily frankness and spontaneity therefore extend themselves also to issues related to modesty. If living together solidifies ties and promotes confidence, one must know how to gain the trust of the family, even by having no fear of fuelling a fake suspect. The threat of malice, at least for the cases considered, does not represent a problem if people act with awareness and seriousness. The adults took in new families we interviewed prefer to act without taboos or restrictions, within the limits of respect. They believe that in a family you should feel free and safe, thus imposed and self-imposed constraints would be detrimental to family harmony.

[When the daughter of his partner is alone on the sofa] I have no problem sitting there too, though I avoid being too much around her, more for a personal and modesty matter, but not because she asks so. We have no problem walking around in a bathrobe if necessary, maybe even in underwear, but without exaggeration. I walk around the house in my undergarments, but I never go shirtless, and the same goes for the older girl. [...] If she is wearing only her underwear she tries to avoid me, let's say she's ashamed, but she never ran away [...] it's the same modesty I have created, that I don't have with the younger one. I do not change my underwear in front of her, but if I have to change my shirt and remain bare-chested for a moment it's not a problem. If she wants to huddle in bed, if she wants to hug me, I put the shirt on, I try not to have too much contact, let's say.

However, we must not give in to the misunderstanding that in this type of family, the issues here considered do not raise tensions. However these tensions, among other things, are difficult to bring out through a research technique as intrusive as the in-depth interview (Corbetta 1999). It is just logic to keep in mind that for these areas of experience, parents omit
some facts, both because of modesty and to preserve, to both their eyes and those of the interviewer, a good self-image and a good opinion of their educational model.

Conclusions

According to a less authoritarian education model, the family interviewed, with one exception, consider outdated and ineffective an educational style based on prohibitions, parental authority, and emotional detachment, preferring constructive dialogue to prohibitions. The cases analysed point out some lines of continuity as well as differences between the approaches used by different family types. In practice, rather than being in contrast with the traditional ones, atypical families have special features which can not be juxtaposed to other previously known forms, whose dynamics are not yet fully explored. The educational models proposed about these issues, turn out to be cross-cutting and transverse with respect to the type of family considered and, therefore, are simultaneously present in all family types considered.

It is still widespread and persistent an "authoritative or self-referential" educational model that discourages teens from undergoing more adult experiences, such as cultivating sexual experiences and sleep under the same roof with their partners. These parents intend responsibility as avoiding specific situations that would give their children the opportunity to prematurely experience eroticism, since, in this perspective, boys and girls must be protected from all risks associated with sexual practices. A model focused mainly on what to avoid, not on participating in the specific situation with targeted advice. They opt for the idea that the parent must remain a parent, and that even though they feel the empathy it is not recommended for them to enter the concrete events of boys and girls, sometimes also in order to avoid responsibility in the event of inappropriate behaviour.

On the opposite side, we find an educational model more inclined to not diminish, nor to hinder the attraction of sexual pleasure experienced by teens, who are granted more opportunities to experience sexuality. It recognizes the power of libido – "I see it as an instinctive need, I mean, I speak of that side. I acknowledge that side as our animal part, in terms of instinctive part. Also for them [the children]. (Carmela)". This model, therefore, is not closed in on itself in a detached attitude, delegating the educational and formative function to the peer group and other agencies of socialization, in the hope that at the right time their children may mature by themselves a healthy understanding of sexuality. This open model is more functional to the management of concrete experiences, and it hypothetically can be found more often in atypical families; probably because of their family situation, parents in atypical families feel compelled to provide more explanation to the children about certain issues, particularly on sex and / or intimate relationships, as if being raised in a broken family led to greater maturity of the children. Once the children reach puberty, these adults make a more thorough job in terms of explanations. It is as if both sides implicitly know that the topic of romantic relationships is particularly felt in their family context, and therefore they need a more mature approach with regard to socialization on these issues. In talking to children / minors about emotional-romantic relationships, parents and their new partners provide an idea closer to the adult perspective, in which detailed attention is given to the sexual component. For this reason adults in post-nuclear families believe that they can not just talk about it in general terms, merely explaining to the children what are the most appropriate behaviours to minimize the risks, but they should instead treat the teenager as a conscious subject of their choices, and not as an immature kid that playing too big a game for his age.

It is assumed that the family break up has led to overcoming some aspects of marital relationships related to the tradition, then extended to the children's relationships and behaviour. This would explain the greater openness of atypical families compared to traditional ones, which in their heterogeneity share an educational approach more connected to the conventions and more afraid to experiment with forms of openness to emotional and sexual needs of adolescent children. Atypical families unfold a series of dynamic as yet unexplored, that can emerge for these issues through other types of approaches; considerations suggested by the statements from parents on social forums, where thanks to anonymity they express more freely their concerns on sexuality within these new family configurations. The concern expressed about a possible emotional involvement among the teenage children of previous marriages living under the same roof, for example, is just one of the possible problematic situations that parents in atypical families are facing and that social research may in the future help clarify.

A well-suited example for this case is that of Terra, a mother whose fear regards the possible attraction between her daughter and his partner's son. She says it is a general issue, but that she fears could actually take form in her very house:
In the case of children and stepchildren, not siblings, but of different sexes, at least one in the teenage years, would you be concerned about some possible relationship between the two? I point out that it's not my case, as my daughter still very young and my stepson if he could he’d strangle her, but it's a question I asked myself thinking about teenagers or as said one adolescent and the other nearly so, in short, 13-14 years.. with hormones at full speed. ¹

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¹ The online forum mentioned here is the “Forum of acquired parents and extended families. To feel less alone in this chaos!”, providing a virtual space where parents of recombined families, joined in an online community, discuss topics regarding their reassembled family. The statement quoted here was published on June 16, 2009, [http://www.genitoriacaquisiti.net/viewtopic.php?t=1433&sid=ed6de1179f4a1eef26f0d2228fb3c4c](http://www.genitoriacaquisiti.net/viewtopic.php?t=1433&sid=ed6de1179f4a1eef26f0d2228fb3c4c)


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