

Communication problems? The role of parent-child communication for the subsequent health behavior of adolescents *

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Abstract

We contribute to the literature on the determinants of socioeconomic health disparities by studying how the health behavior of adolescents may arise from the degree of communication between parent and child. Parent-child communication may function as a mediator between family background and subsequent poor health behavior, potentially reconciling previous mixed evidence on the relationship between child health and social status. Using data from a unique German child health survey we construct an index of parent-child communication quality by comparing responses to statements about the children's well-being from both children and their parents. Applying the constructed communication measure in a continuous treatment empirical framework, allowing for estimation of non-linear effects, our results show that improved parent-child communication monotonously reduces the smoking prevalence of adolescents by as much as 70%, irrespective of social background. More complex relationships are found for risky alcohol consumption and abnormal body weight.

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Keywords: child health; health behavior; communication; intergenerational transmission; socioeconomic inequality; continuous treatment effect

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