

Introduction

- Sexual socialization includes the implementation of parent-child sex communication (Jerman & Constantine, 2010).
- Open and warm parent-child sex communication is associated with positive youth sexual outcomes, including less permissive sexual beliefs (Overbeek et al., 2018), less sexual activity (Hutchinson & Montgomery, 2007), and more consistent contraceptive use (Harris et al., 2013).
- Previous research suggests parent-child sex communication may be a means of transmitting parental values regarding sex to children (Jaccard et al., 2002), yet little empirical work has been done to establish the relationship between parental efforts in conveying sexual values to children, children's internalization of these values, and the child's subsequent sexual behavior.
- Our study sought to fill this gap by investigating whether parental efforts at teaching their child to adopt specific sex-initiation values are related longitudinally to the child's sex behavior, and whether this relationship is explained by the child's report of their own sex-initiation values.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between parental efforts at teaching their child to adopt certain sex-initiation values, the child's reported sex-initiation values one year later, and the child's sex behavior two years later?
- Do the child's reported sex-initiation values explain the relationship between parental efforts at teaching sex-initiation values and the child's sex behavior two years later?

Methods

Sample:

Participants included 620 US mothers (*M*<sub>age</sub> = 41.44, *SD* = 16.1) at Wave 1 of a longitudinal study about Healthy Sexuality, 467 of their US children at Wave 2 (52.46% female, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 15.58, *SD* = 1.72) and 456 of those children at Wave 3 (50.88% female, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 16.41, *SD* = 1.78)

Measures and Sample Items [reporter]:

**Casual Sex-Initiation Value [mother & child]:** It is okay for my child to hook up and have sex with someone they only recently met. (I am willing to hook up and have sex with someone I only recently met). (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

**Marriage Sex-Initiation Value [mother & child]:** Couples should wait until they are married before they have sex. (For me, I want to wait until I am married before I have sex.). (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

**Parental Warmth [mother]:** I give comfort and understanding when my child is upset. (1 = Never, 5= Always)

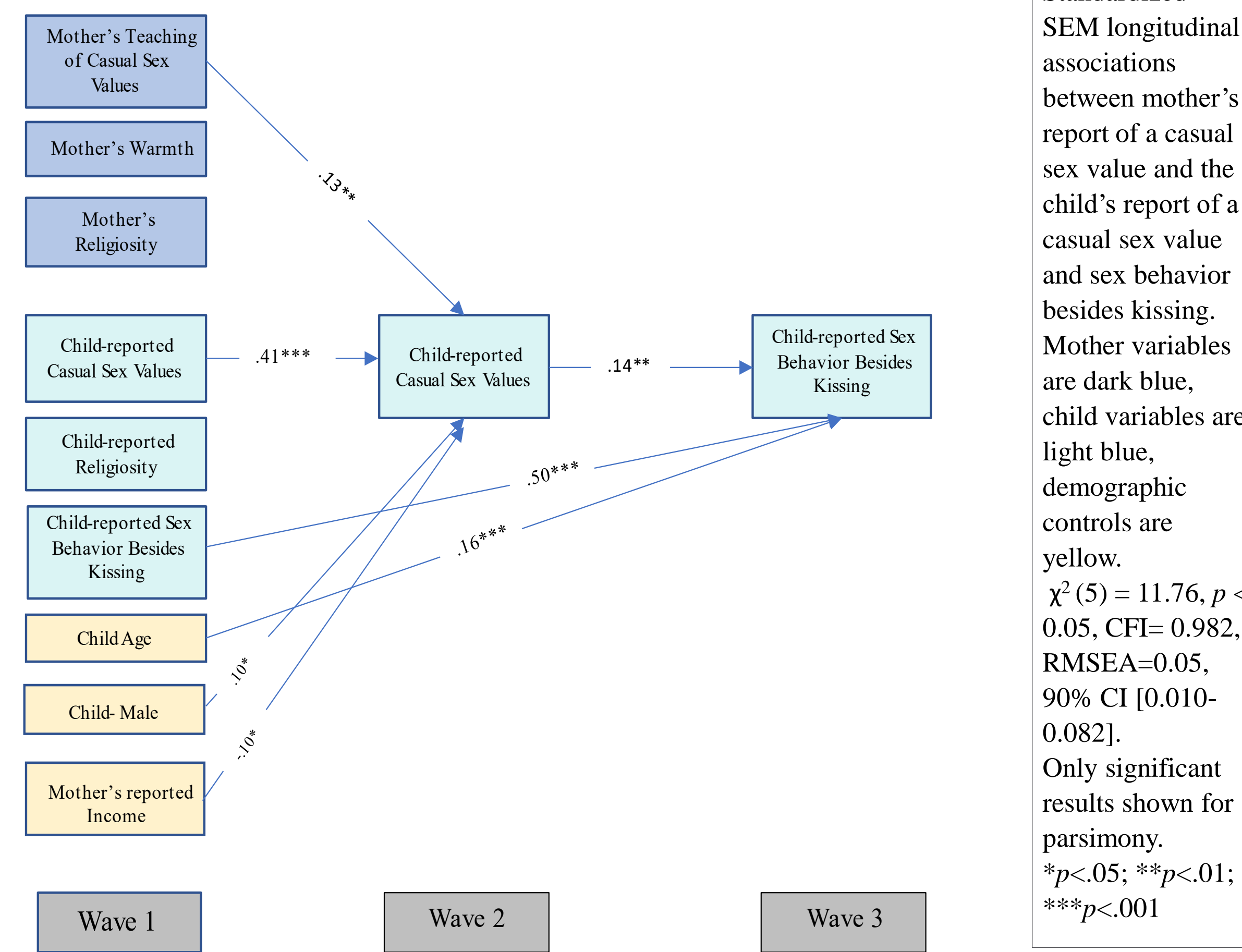
**Sex Behavior [child]:** Have you ever engaged in sexual behavior, besides kissing? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)

**Religious Importance [mother & child]:** How important is religion to you? (1 = Not at all important, 5 = Very Important)

**Demographics measured:** Child age; Child sex assigned at birth; the mother's reported income (1 = Less than \$20,000, 9 = \$500,000 or more)

Results

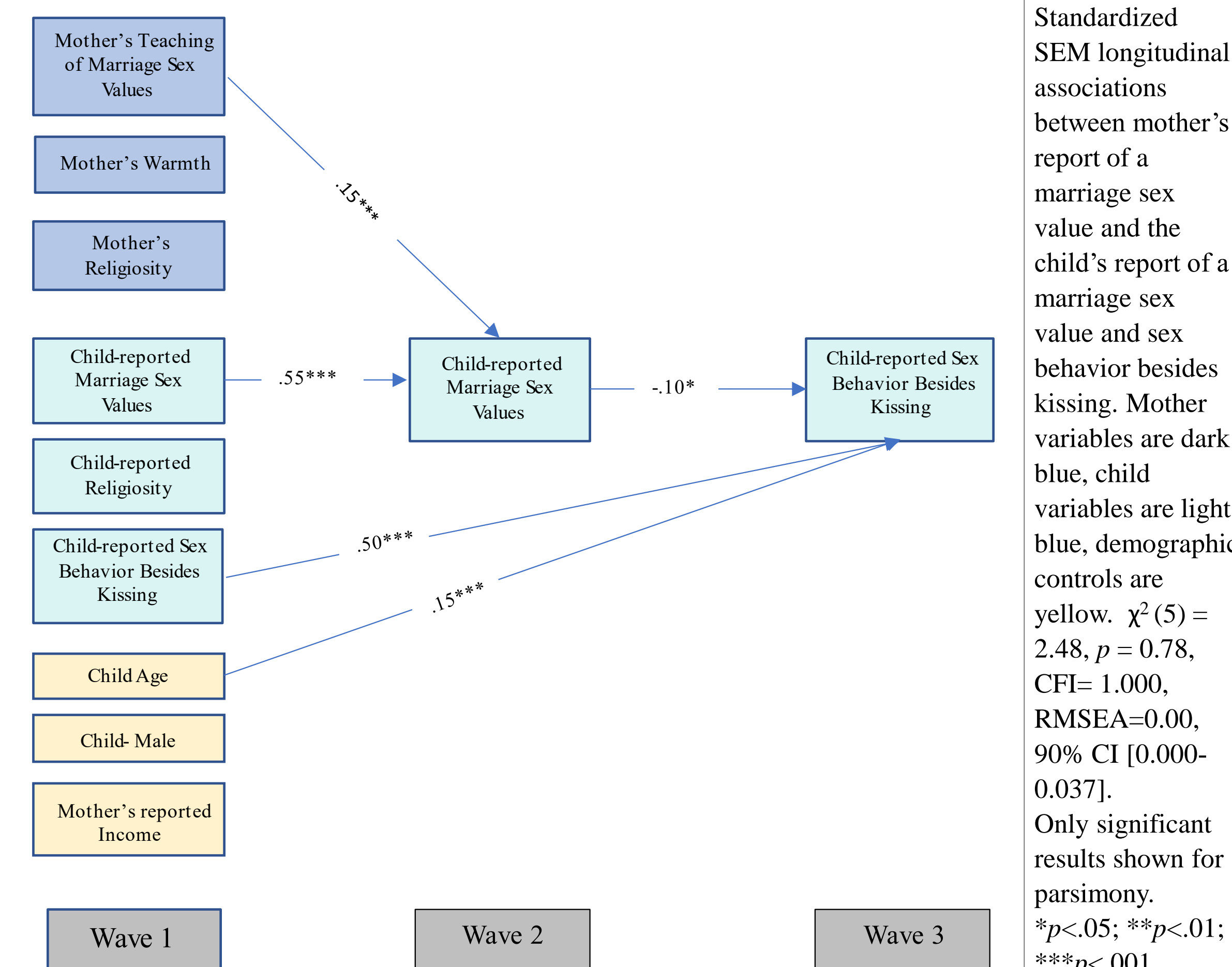
Figure 1: Casual Sex Values



Note: Standardized SEM longitudinal associations between mother's report of a casual sex value and the child's report of a casual sex value and sex behavior besides kissing. Mother variables are dark blue, child variables are light blue, demographic controls are yellow.  $\chi^2(5) = 11.76, p < 0.05, CFI = 0.982, RMSEA = 0.05, 90\% CI [0.010-0.082]$ . Only significant results shown for parsimony. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Path analyses using structural equation modeling were estimated for both casual sex-initiation (casual) values and marriage sex-initiation (marriage) values. See figures 1 and 2 for casual and marriage results, respectively. The indirect effect calculated with bootstrap resamples was nonsignificant for the effect from mother's teaching of casual values to child reported sex behaviors,  $ab = 0.009, 95\% CI [-0.002, 0.020]$ , as well as from mother's teaching of marriage values to child reported sex behaviors,  $ab = -0.006, 95\% CI [-0.0128, 0.0006]$ .

Figure 2: Marriage Sex Values



Note: Standardized SEM longitudinal associations between mother's report of a marriage sex value and the child's report of a marriage sex value and sex behavior besides kissing. Mother variables are dark blue, child variables are light blue, demographic controls are yellow.  $\chi^2(5) = 2.48, p = 0.78, CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = 0.00, 90\% CI [0.000-0.037]$ . Only significant results shown for parsimony. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Discussion

- Our study sought to fill the gap in research concerning how parental teaching about sex-initiation values is longitudinally related to their children's reported sex-initiation values and subsequent sex behavior.
- Our results reveal that mothers influence their child's sex-initiation values internalization, and that child values influence their sexual behavior. Given that a hallmark of internalization (where an individual adopts a value for their own), is the values-congruent behavior of the individual (Grusec, 2011), these results are congruent with past research on socialization processes within families.
- These associations hold independent of the parent-child relationship quality (van de Bongardt et al., 2014), the religiosity of both the parent and child (Regnerus, 2005), and demographic factors including child age, sex, and SES (Flores & Barroso, 2017).
- When mothers report teaching their child a casual sex value, their children report believing in casual sex values a year later and are more likely to be sexually active a year after that.
- Similarly, when mothers report teaching their child a marriage sex value, their children report believing in marriage sex values a year later and are less likely to be sexually active a year after that.
- The indirect paths from the mother's sex-initiation values to the child's sex behavior were nonsignificant. Considering the stability of the child's reported sex behavior from wave 1 to wave 3, these results suggest that sexual behaviors remain quite stable over time, over and above a mother's efforts at teaching their children to adopt certain sex values.
- Male children were more likely than female children to report casual values, but no difference was found for marriage values. These results may be explained by past research indicating gender differences in the ways parents discuss sex with children, where daughters receive more cautionary advice, and sons receive more sex-positive messages (Flores & Barroso, 2017)
- Mothers who reported higher incomes had children who were less likely to report a casual sex value, but this pathway was nonsignificant when looking at marriage values. These results differ from past research suggesting lower-income families often favored more restrictive messages about the timing of sex, whereas higher-income families had more discussion about condom use (Teitelman & Loveland-Cherry, 2004). Future research should consider multiple group analysis to see if these income differences vary by biological sex, or other confounding factors.
- Finally, age positively predicted sex behavior two years later for both casual and marriage values. Given that the majority of adolescents become sexually active before the age of 18 (CDC, 2017), increases in sexual activity with age could be considered normative (Arbeit, 2014).
- Future research about sexual values transmission and internalization would benefit from investigating father contribution to children's values, and from evaluating how values-teaching may interact with other aspects of multidimensional parent-child sex communication (Rogers et al., 2020), including frequency of sex topics, how open or controlling a parent communicates, and whether the parents is proactive or reactive in their communication.