

RESEARCH

F ACTS and FINDINGS

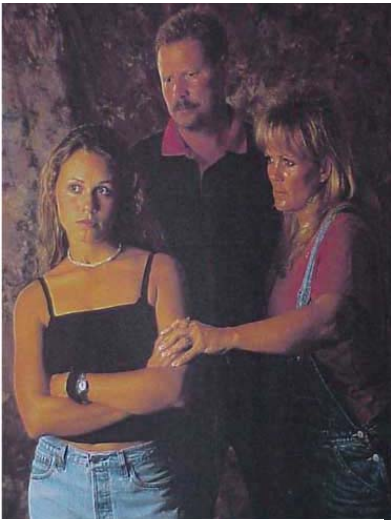
A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester, and the NYS Center for School Safety

March 2002

Parent-Child Relations in Adolescence

Parent-child conflict increases as children move into adolescence. Although this trend is not inevitable, it is common and can be quite distressing for parents and adolescents. Both can feel baffled about what happened to the good old days of family harmony. Adolescents may see their parents as having turned harsh, controlling, and irrational. Parents may wonder why their formerly cooperative and responsible children now seem hostile and destructive. These perspectives often feed on one another, increasing misunderstanding on both sides. Many parents and adolescents report a decrease in closeness during this time.

In most families, conflict is more likely to be about clothing, music, and leisure time than about more serious matters such as religion and core values. Family conflict is rarely about such major issues as adolescents' drug use and delinquency. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that in about 5 million American families (roughly 20 percent), parents and adolescents engage in intense, prolonged, unhealthy conflict. In its most serious form, this highly stressful environment is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including juvenile delinquency, moving away from home, increased school dropout rates, unplanned pregnancy, membership in religious cults, and drug abuse (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In general, conflict increases in early adolescence, reaches its height in mid-adolescence (ages 14-16), and declines in late adolescence (ages 17-18).



Many of the changes that define adolescence can lead to conflict in parent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents gain an increased capacity for logical reasoning, which leads them to demand reasons for things they previously accepted without question, and the chance to argue the other side (Maccoby, 1984). Their growing critical-

thinking skills make them less likely to conform to parents' wishes the way they did in childhood. Their increasing cognitive sophistication and sense of idealism may compel them to point out logical flaws and inconsistencies in parents' positions and actions. Adolescents no longer accept their parents as unquestioned authorities. They recognize that other opinions also have merit and they are learning how to form and state their own opinions. Adolescents also tend toward ego-centrism, and may, as a result, be ultra sensitive to a parent's casual remark.

The dramatic changes of puberty and adolescence may make it difficult for parents to rely on their children's preadolescent behavior to predict future behavior. For example, adolescent children who were compliant in the past may become less willing to cooperate without what they feel is a satisfactory explanation. Parents, accurately perceiving that children are behaving differently than in late childhood, may take this behavior in their adolescent children as resistant and oppositional. They may then respond to this perceived lack of cooperation with increasing pressure for future compliance, which adolescents experience as a reduction in their autonomy, just when they want more.

Changes in adolescents' environments outside the family may also bring new stresses back home. The transition from elementary to middle school and then from middle to high school can be stressful even when it is eagerly awaited. Young people move from a social setting in which they are the oldest and most competent to one in which they are physically the smallest, the least experienced, the lowest status, and have the fewest privileges. They have to master a new set of academic expectations and social arrangements. The growing importance of peers and the emergence of romantic attachments introduces a whole new set of potential stressors, including some that lead back to parents: "*Everybody* wears clothes like this." "Why can't I go with Jeff in his car?"

Although not necessarily the cause of adolescent-parent conflict, adolescents' relationships with their parents are certainly affected by parenting style. Dozens of studies have indicated that children whose parents were *authoritative* -- warm and firm -- demonstrated higher levels of social competence and maturity than children who had been raised by permissive, authoritarian, neglectful, or indifferent parents (Baumrind, 1991). Authoritative parenting, which is the combination of consistent parental responsiveness and demandingness, has been linked by many studies with positive emotional adjustment, higher school performance, and overall maturity in childhood and adolescence. In contrast, parents whose style is not authoritative may encounter new difficulties when their children enter adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

One under-appreciated dimension of parent-child relations in adolescence is that parental changes can contribute greatly to the dynamic. Certainly adolescents change greatly as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood, but their parents also change—both in responses to their children and in response to challenges in their own lives. In one study, 40 percent of parents of adolescent children reported two or more of the following difficulties during a child's transition to adolescence: lowered self-esteem, decreased life satisfaction, increased depression, increased anxiety, and more frequent negative thoughts about middle age

(Steinberg, 2001). The parents of adolescents are usually in midlife, when they face the prospect that their future lives may not get a lot better than the present. Just as their children are bursting with idealism, they may feel increasingly pessimistic. Similarly, middle age can bring declines in physical vigor and attractiveness, which can seem all the harder to bear when one's children are blooming. A couple that has worked together effectively to raise children may find their relationship strained by the new demands of parenting adolescents.

In order to assist with parent-child relations in adolescence, researchers recommend the following (Steinberg, 2001). First, in order to further understand their child's behavior, parents obtain basic information about the developmental changes of adolescence. Second, in order to adapt to their child's changing needs, parents have basic information about effective parenting during the adolescent years (see Baumrind, 1991). For example, research has determined that although authoritative parenting styles are effective both in childhood and in adolescence, that there is an added dimension of "psychological autonomy granting" that is crucial in adolescence—that is, the extent to which parents permit adolescent sons and daughters to develop their own opinions and beliefs. The opposite of psychological autonomy granting, namely psychological control, can become intrusive or overprotective (Steinberg, 2001). Third, in addition to understanding how their adolescent children are changing, parents need to understand how they and their family are changing (see Baumrind, 1991).

With the goal of providing parents of adolescents with this type of information, it would be wise to develop a large-scale, thorough, ongoing public health campaign to educate parents of adolescents, as has been done already for parents of newborn babies.

References

- Baumrind, D. (1991). Effective parenting during the early adolescent transition. In P.A. Cowan & E.M. Hetherington (Eds.), *Advances in family research* (Vol. 2). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Laurson, B. (1995). Conflict and social interaction in adolescent relationships. *Journal of research on adolescence*, 5, 55-70.
- Maccoby, E.E. (1984). Middle childhood in the context of the family. In W.A. Collins (Ed.), *Development during middle childhood*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Steinberg, L. (2001). We know some things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 11(1), 1-19.
- Steinberg, L., & Morris, A.S. (2001). Adolescent development. *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, 83-110.

You Are Invited to Join ACT-L



ACT-L is the Upstate Center of Excellence ACT for Youth Listserv. It will allow us to share information about the ACT for Youth project in a proactive way, and will allow you to post information to Community Development Partnerships and to the Upstate Center of Excellence. A listserv is a great way to share information, news, training opportunities and special events. It also provides participants with the opportunity to post and discuss challenges and invite others to engage in a collective problem solving process. There is no charge for using the ACT-L listserv and anyone is welcome to join.

In its most basic form, a listserv is a mailing list that provides a group of people with a mechanism to communicate electronically through a single e-mail address. Whenever someone sends an e-mail message to a mailing list address, that message goes out to everyone subscribed to the list. Electronic mailing lists can make communication and networking a lot easier.

To subscribe, send the following e-mail message to:

listproc@cornell.edu

In the body of your message, type: **subscribe ACT-L yourfirstname yourlastname**

Once approved (approx. one week), you will receive a "Welcome Message" that describes the meaning and purpose of **ACT-L** along with various commands which allow you to digest e-mail messages, unsubscribe from the list, etc.

The listserv is not intended for commercial use or solicitation of clients.

**ACT for Youth
Upstate Center of Excellence
Cornell University
Family Life Development Center
N206 MVR Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853**