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# Parenting Adolescents

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## Parenting Adolescents

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**Abstract:** The period of adolescence is often thought to be one of intense stress and turmoil. Yet many parents and teens negotiate this developmental stage without extreme family conflict and without sacrificing close relationships. This review summarizes a portion of the literature on parent-adolescent relationships, focusing on monitoring and control of adolescent behavior and parenting style. Basic principles to emphasize when working with adolescents and parents are also included.

**Keywords:** Parenting, parenting style, parental monitoring, adolescents

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### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence was once conceptualized as a period of extreme turmoil. Hall (1) referred to this developmental stage as one of "storm and stress;" and Anna Freud's (2) characterization of adolescence as a time of "sturm and drang" also reinforced the idea that the ages between twelve and twenty are inevitably riddled with extreme emotion and conflict—both internally and with the outside world. More recently, researchers have come to view adolescence as a time of transition, but not necessarily of tumultuous change. Most youth mature to adults, and negotiate the developmental tasks of adolescence, without rebellion and psychological problems. In approximately three-quarters of families, children move through adolescence without major difficulties (3). Relationships with parents remain positive and adolescents eventually adopt values more like those of their parents than different from them (4). Larson describes adolescence as a time of transition and transformation, but not disengagement, during which teens negotiate more symmetric relationships with parents—a time of independence in the context of

connectedness (5).

Just when parents feel most frustrated and powerless, their continued presence provides a stable and nurturant force in this period of rapid change. Despite cultural differences in families and social mores, research consistently demonstrates the importance of parents to adolescent development and adjustment. Studies in East and West Germany (6) and in Australia (7) found that adolescents who perceived their parents as supportive had lower levels of delinquency and depression. Studies of youth living in mainland China (8) and in Taiwan (9) demonstrated the importance of parental warmth and involvement in such varied psychological outcomes as decreased anger and defiance, and fewer psychosomatic symptoms. Conflict between parents and adolescents living in Hong Kong (10) was related to the adolescents' self-esteem, life satisfaction, and hopelessness. Adolescents in Croatia (11) had lower rates of substance use, when parental monitoring and involvement were higher. In fact, these characteristics of parental behavior (i.e., supportive, warm, and involved) have been found to be more

important than the configuration of the family (e.g., single vs. dual parent) in a study of Canadian youth (12). In a study of urban adolescents in Columbia, a strong positive bond with parents mitigated against substance abuse and delinquency even in a culture in which drugs are readily available (13).

The developmental tasks of adolescence *of becoming autonomous and establishing identity*, inevitably lead to some degree of conflict and tension within families. Adolescents want to make independent decisions and be in charge of their lives, but often are not yet ready to assume equal responsibilities. Finding their way to a distinct identity often involves experimenting with new behaviors, questioning parents' beliefs and values, and coming to their own conclusions about social and religious issues. This does not mean that teens will reject parental values, but simply that they must come to their own decisions about what they believe and integrate these values as their own.

Early adolescence seems to be an *especially critical time in the parent-teen relationship*. Conflict between teens and parents is most intense and frequent during this period, and marital satisfaction is at its lowest ebb during this time (14); parents have an average of seven minutes alone together. At the same time, family time with adolescents is decreasing; time spent with parents after 13 years is one-half that spent before ten (14). In early adolescence, teens spend more time alone in their rooms; as they grow older, time in family activities continually decreases while time with peers increases (5). The physical changes associated with entry into puberty trigger changes in the parents (15). Parents often expect more mature behavior and become *more upset when their children do not meet these expectations*. During this time, teens' increasing sexuality may create distance even in relationships that were previously

close. These are feelings teens keep to themselves or share with friends. This increasing distance may be difficult for parents to accept—both because they miss the more intimate and dependant relationship they once had, and also because they worry about experimentation with risky behaviors. Finally, the physical changes of adolescence can trigger *unexpected emotions in the parent*. Steinberg hypothesized that what has been labeled as "mid-life crisis" in adults may actually be prompted by the oldest child's emergence into puberty leading parents to reflect and question their progress toward life goals or to re-evaluate the goals themselves. The adolescent's physical maturity and emerging sexuality can evoke feelings of loss of youth or worry about aging as well. In this article, we examine factors associated with changes in the parent-child relationship during adolescence (15).

### MONITORING ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR

Is close parental monitoring beneficial to adolescents? The answer is not as clear-cut as we might expect. Monitoring refers to parents' actions to acquire information about teens' whereabouts, activities, and companions. It includes both active supervision of activities and movement, as well as information solicited by asking questions of teens, their friends, and parents of friends.

In several studies, monitoring has been linked to positive outcomes, especially better academic achievement, and in fewer externalizing problems such as delinquency and substance abuse, and for females, less depressed mood (11,16). When the importance of communication and monitoring were contrasted in a study of Hispanic and African-American youth (14 - 16 years), monitoring was the more important variable in limiting deviant behaviors such as drug use, school suspension, and arrests

(17). The beneficial effects of monitoring have been attributed to protecting the adolescent from the negative influence of unsavory peers and deterring rule breaking.

Yet, there can be adverse effects to close monitoring and supervision of teens. When teens perceive parents as controlling and intrusive, the outcome is poorer adjustment, not better. Although parents assume that higher levels of supervision will discourage risk taking behavior and limit exposure to deviant friends, once adolescents feel that they are being controlled, parents' efforts to exert control are linked to poorer adjustment. In examining the role of parental supervision, Kerr and Stattin (18) have concluded that it is an adolescent's free disclosure of information, rather than parents' active tracking, that predicts both markers of adjustment and delinquency. Voluntary self-disclosure was the strongest predictor of low norm breaking as well as positive social-emotional outcomes such as better relationships with teachers and higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms and school problems.

The practical implication of these studies is that parents' efforts to guide teens by close supervision of activities, whereabouts and friendships often produce the opposite effect, largely because they drive questionable behavior underground and produce in the teen feelings of being controlled. This feeling is antithetical to the teen's strivings for autonomy and independence. Parents need to realize that although adolescents do not need the direct supervision needed by a younger child, they still benefit emotionally and intellectually from positive contact with parents (14).

#### **PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL VERSUS MONITORING**

When parents attempt to exert too much control of their adolescents' behavior and activities, the result is most frequently damaging to the relationship between them.

This is particularly true when parents try to regulate areas teens consider personal, such as dress and friendships. Negative psychological control refers to manipulating the parent-child bond by withdrawing love, inducing guilt, negative comments of criticism, ridiculing, or shaming, and over protectiveness. Adolescents are striving to develop their own ideas and to have greater ownership of decisions affecting their lives. When control is exercised in a negative psychological way, the development of healthy autonomy is impeded; teens do not develop adequate means to regulate their own behavior and emotions, but rather focus on responding to parents' actions. To counter parental control, teens may purposely defy or passive-aggressively sabotage parents' efforts, and they are slow to develop a healthy sense of self-confidence. Conger and Conger (19) concluded that parents who are either unwilling or incapable of changing their behavior to accommodate the changing needs of a developing adolescent may paradoxically contribute to the child's adjustment problems.

#### **THE RECIPROCAL NATURE OF PARENT ADOLESCENT INTER- ACTIONS**

Parents and teens exercise a reciprocal influence one another in their interaction styles (10,19,20). Over time, many teens and parents become increasingly negative toward each other (20). Once a pattern of negative interaction is established, the cycle is difficult to break. When both adolescent and parent use coercive negative behaviors in problem solving, the interactions are likely to deteriorate and grow more negative (20). This is not only damaging to the relationship, but to the parents' goal of helping teens become effective, flexible problem solvers (19). Reciprocal influences are most prominent under conditions of adolescent negativity. Reuter (20) found

that having a disruptive, inflexible young adolescent (seventh grader) in the home, parents grow less nurturant over time. Nevertheless, parent influence seems to be the more important factor (10,19,20). So much so, that when parents use coercive, harsh and inconsistent strategies, providing a teen with professional help to learn to communicate better will be ineffective, unless the parents also commit to change. The Congers maintain that "parents of a disruptive, uncooperative adolescent who maintained a nurturant approach to child-rearing could eventually break or avoid being drawn into a pattern of reciprocal negativity" (19).

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE PEER GROUP

During the 1960's and 70's both popular press and scientific journals placed more weight on peer influence than that of the family in determining adolescent ideas, values, and behavior. This view evolved out of observation of similarities between teens and their friends, concluding that peers networks pressured individuals to conform. The concept of peer pressure implies that friends are pitted against parents for the loyalty and mind of the teen. Although peers do influence adolescents, the effect is stronger for daily behaviors and transient attitudes than for personality or values. Parental influence is deeper and more enduring for long-term outcomes such as occupational and educational attainment and religiosity (21). With increasing age, from adolescence to young adulthood, similarity with parents grows stronger.

The similarity between adolescents and their friends is more likely due to active selection by teens to be with others who are like them (21,22). Teens have many social groups from which to choose in both school and community settings. Parents are often tempted to forbid teens to associate with peers who they believe will lead their

children astray. But exercising this level of control is most often an ineffective strategy because it is difficult to monitor, encourages deception, and worsens feelings of antipathy in the adolescent.

However, parents do play an indirect role in the choice of friends through events earlier in the child's life in which they steer children toward certain activities and groups. According to Collins and colleagues (21), parenting style in early childhood also plays a role: "The chain of events that leads some adolescents into antisocial peer groups begins at home during childhood. The links in this chain include exposure to harsh and coercive parenting, which contributes to the development of aggression and to academic difficulties in school; these problems, in late childhood, lead to the selection of antisocial peers....much of what appears to be peer influence is actually the end result of familial influence at an earlier point in the child's development." (p. 222) Thus, parents and peers exercise complementary influence on teens.

### PARENTING STYLES

Just as for younger children, supportive parenting helps adolescents realize the best in themselves and construct positive relationships with others. Given teens' increased interest in their peers and drive to become independent of their parents, what constitutes supportive and effective parenting at this age? Much of the research has concentrated on specific behaviors that parents use to decrease undesirable or increase desirable behaviors in their children. However, a number of researchers posit that it is not the individual behaviors or strategies employed by the parents that matter, but rather an overall style that creates an emotional context for specific parenting behaviors (15,23). For example, the behavior of setting a curfew can be either a punitively controlling maneuver or a limit that takes into consideration the

child's developmental needs. The model of Baumrind (24) was based on the idea that the job of a parent is to socialize the child to conform to the demands of others while helping the child maintain a sense of personal integrity. Within this, she identified three types of parental control that were qualitatively different: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. Maccoby and Martin (25) extended Baumrind's typology by characterizing parenting style along two dimensions: demandingness—the ways in which parents expect compliance and social children, and responsiveness—the parent's recognition of the child's individuality and sensitivity to the child's unique needs. This schema yields four-part typology for characterizing parenting style.

1. Parents who employ an *authoritative* parenting style are high on both dimensions. They combine expression of love and affection with expectations for appropriate behavior and consistent enforcement of standards. These parents communicate respect for adolescent autonomy by taking into consideration the child's opinions and promoting individuality and independence.
2. Parents with an *authoritarian* style—high on the dimension of demandingness and low on sensitivity—expect adherence to parental standards, exert control and restrict autonomy, but lack emotional warmth. The authoritarian style has been linked to adolescents' feeling of being controlled and devalued.
3. *Permissive* parents are responsive, and their relationships with their children are warm and accepting. However parental control, limits, and expectations are lacking.
4. *Neglectful parenting*, which lacks both warmth and behavioral expectations, yields the most worrisome outcome of adolescents at highest risk for behavioral problems including delin-

quency, drug and alcohol use, and early initiation of sexual activity.

In many studies, characteristics of the authoritative parenting style has been linked to positive psychosocial outcomes such as greater autonomy, self esteem, academic achievement, and less delinquency, psychiatric morbidity, and substance abuse (5,25, 26,27,28). Steinberg (15) maintains that parenting style exerts its influence by providing a context for specific parenting behaviors and interactions. Thus, it is not just what parents do, but how they do it that matters. An authoritative parenting style is beneficial, because parental nurturance and involvement make adolescents more susceptible to parental influence. The supportive relationship combined with structure facilitates development of self-regulatory skills, and the verbal give and take in parent-adolescent communication foster cognitive and social competence. In families in which an authoritative style exists, the parent-adolescent interaction is transformed, and high conflict is avoided. Authoritarian parenting, in contrast, often increases resistance to parental input, such that parent behaviors that would be considered productive on face value, like school involvement, actually result in greater conflict. Can parenting style be transformed? The following discussion on parent-adolescent conflict proposes changes in the way in which parents approach interactions with teens.

### CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS

Less than ten percent of families endure serious relationship difficulties characterized by chronic escalation of arguments over serious issues (30). Parents typically are more bothered by the negative affect generated in daily conflicts than are teens, and are likely to remain troubled far longer and take longer to recover (15). Nevertheless, in most families, conflict does not

undermine the quality of attachment between parents and adolescents. In fact, a limited amount of conflict may benefit families by stimulating change that brings adolescent and parent viewpoints closer together, and by creating some emotional distance that allows adolescents to differentiate themselves from parents. Whether conflict has an adaptive function depends on how disagreements are perceived, discussed, and resolved. If parents make no adjustments and are critical, harsh, or demeaning during conflict, then difficulties are likely to become more exaggerated and adolescent adjustment is poorer. When parents use direct, arbitrary force and withdrawal of love or affection in response to undesirable behaviors, conformity to parental expectations is lower and risk for problem behaviors increases (31).

Many studies that relate parent-adolescent conflict to poor adolescent adjustment have been cross-sectional and thus unable to determine whether high conflict precedes maladjustment or is a response to a poorly adjusted adolescent in the home. In a study of adolescents in Hong Kong, Shek (10,32) found that high levels of conflict, especially with fathers, predicted greater dissatisfaction with self and life and more psychiatric symptoms one year later.

When in the midst of a disagreement with teens, Sells (33) suggests the following strategy. First, listen closely to the adolescents' perspectives. Acknowledge feelings by labeling them or with a noncommittal phrase. This does not imply that you agree with the teen or condone the disputed behavior. Resist the temptation to solve the problem for the teen. Avoid lecturing and criticizing. Anticipate that teens will try to provoke parents to lose control of the situation by "pushing their buttons;" although it is tempting to react with equal emotional intensity, when teens become inflamed, it is important for parents

to remain collected and rational. If the confrontation escalates, e.g., a teen uses foul language or threatens violence, "exit" and "wait" until tempers cool. Finally, it is important to restore good feelings once the conflict is over.

Greene (34), writing about inflexible and explosive children, agrees that parents and teens may need "time out" from each other during heated disagreements. However, this is not the time-out used with younger children, such as restricting a child to a room or chair, as this is typically not useful for teens. Rather, parents' withdrawal from conflict signals that they are remaining in control of their emotions, and does not mean that they are "giving in."

Greene also recommends that parents prioritize their goals when confrontations are frequent and intense. He instructs parents to create a list of behavioral priorities, then categorizes these into three "baskets." Basket A contains a limited number of behaviors, such as those that are harmful to people or property; those that are illegal; school attendance. Basket C contains behaviors that parents would like to see but do not deserve a conflict, such as what teens wear or eat. Most behaviors belong in Basket B—they are high priorities, but ones in which parents and teens can negotiate a compromise, such as curfews and activities. Through the discussion and the negotiation process, parents are helping teens learn to handle frustrating situations, generate alternative solutions to a problem, and think through the consequences of their actions.

## SUMMARY

Across cultures, theoretical models, and research questions—a repeating thread accentuating the importance of the adolescent-parent relationship surfaces. Whether the issue is one of the qualities of the relationship that promote willing self-disclosure, thus facilitating parental aware-



ness of adolescent activity or the ability of parents to be sensitive to changing needs for independence in the context of dependence, studies point to the inherent importance of the parent-child relationship as a *foundation upon which healthy development is built*. Although adolescents' relationships with their parents emerge from those set in earlier years, parents can effect changes in their relationships with their adolescents even as they strive toward greater individuation (3). The balance between family ties and autonomy must constantly be "recalibrated" to take into account the advances in adolescent development, changes within the family, and expectations within the society (28).

#### **GUIDELINES FOR PARENTING AN ADOLESCENT (30,33,34)**

1. Respect privacy. Do not go through rooms, backpacks, or emails. Invading privacy breaks a trusting relationship and models undesirable behavior (sneakiness). Parents of teens who are engaging in seriously inappropriate behaviors are obvious about this, and parents will know without snooping in their rooms.
2. Allow give and take in discussions.
3. Avoid lecturing and criticism; never use sarcasm or belittling.
4. Give limited amounts of advice. Too much advice undermines teens' ability to problem solve for themselves and implies parents do not believe they are capable of finding solutions. If asked for advice, first listen, then ask the teen's ideas about possible solutions.
5. Try not to react to moodiness and ill-temper with negativity. This only sets up an escalating negative interaction. Be matter of fact when setting limits.
6. Set clear standards for behavior.
7. When behavior is inappropriate, use a step approach: First let the teen know specifically what the behavior was and that there will be a consequence on the next occasion; reach an agreement with the teen about appropriate consequence; impose consequences consistently, but without argument.
  - a. A good consequence is related to the inappropriate behavior; has a limited duration that lets the teen know there is another chance; can be monitored and enforced *consistently*, and is one the teen has been warned will occur.
  - b. Do not expect teens to understand or agree with your point of view or to admit that you are correct.
  - c. When teens lie about breaking limits, focus on the behavior itself, rather than the lying.
8. Remain involved in daily life without being intrusive or overprotective.
9. Be prepared for changes in levels of involvement—teens wanting to be close or receive help, followed by wanting to be alone or only with peers and wanting to solve problems for self.
10. Continue to provide warmth and acceptance during this period of disruption and shifting relationships.

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## BITS 'N PIECES

### Deliberate self harm in adolescents: self report survey in schools in England

**Objective:** To determine the prevalence of deliberate self harm in adolescents and the factors associated with it. **Design:** Cross sectional survey using anonymous self report questionnaire. **Setting:** 41 schools in England. **Participants:** 6020 pupils aged 15 and 16 years. **Main outcome measure:** Deliberate self harm. **Results:** 398 (6.9%) participants reported an act of deliberate self harm in the previous year that met study criteria. Only 12.6% of episodes had resulted in presentation to hospital. Deliberate self harm was more common in females than it was in males (11.2% v 3.2%; odds ratio 3.9, 95% confidence interval 3.1 to 4.9). In females the factors included in a multivariate logistic regression for deliberate self harm were recent self harm by friends, self harm by family members, drug misuse, depression, anxiety, impulsivity, and low self esteem. In males the factors were suicidal behaviour in friends and family members, drug use, and low self esteem. **Conclusions:** Deliberate self harm is common in adolescents, especially females. School based mental health initiatives are needed. These could include approaches aimed at educating school pupils about mental health problems and screening for those at risk.

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