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CHANGES IN THE PARENTAL BOND AND THE WELL-BEING OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Frits van Wel, Tom ter Bogt, and Quinten Raaijmakers

ABSTRACT

Changes in the parental bond and the well-being of adolescents and young adults were investigated in this longitudinal study among Dutch youngsters aged 12 to 24 years (their ages ranged from 15 to 27 years when they were assessed for the second time three years later, and from 18 to 30 years when assessed for the third time). A total of 1,078 adolescents/young adults (459 males and 619 females) participated. We found a curvilinear pattern in the bond between daughters and their parents. For most of the boys, there was a deterioration in the parental bond during the transition from early to mid-adolescence, which does not subsequently improve. The general conclusion, however, is that adolescents and young adults maintain a rather good and reasonably stable relationship with their parents. Parents prove to be of lasting importance for the well-being of their growing children. For adult children, the parental bond appears to be as important for their well-being as having a partner or a best friend.

INTRODUCTION

Parental Bond

According to studies from various countries, the vast majority of adolescents maintain a good relationship with their parents (Offer et al., 1988; Steinberg, 1990). After adolescence, adult children also usually remain on good terms with their parents (Thornton et al., 1995). A strong and secure parental bond does not need to be an obstacle for adolescents as they strive to become independent (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985, 1986). On the contrary, it actually stimulates this process. Parents continue to provide guidance and support for most adolescents who are learning to stand on their own feet (Greenberg et al., 1983; Kenny, 1987; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). According to Youniss and Smollar

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(1985), during adolescence the relationship between the generations is transformed from one of relatively unilateral authority to one of cooperative negotiation.

Most studies of the parental bond cover a limited age range. Even though the bond may remain reasonably strong and stable, according to some studies there is usually a deterioration in the early and middle phases of adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Paulson & Sputa, 1996; Steinberg, 1987, 1988, 1990), whereas other studies report an improvement in late adolescence and early adulthood (Feldman & Gehring, 1990; Thornton et al., 1995). However, it is very rare that a curvilinear pattern has been proven in a single study, and even in such cases, it has been from a cross-sectional or a partly cross-sectional, partly longitudinal perspective (Van Wel, 1994; Van Wel, Linssen, & Abma, 2000). The level of conflict between parents and adolescents—which does not necessarily imply a negative relationship—also seems to suggest a curvilinear pattern (Montemayor, 1990).

Some researchers have studied the parental bond without differentiating between mothers and fathers (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Kenny, 1987; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), whereas others have emphasized that children, as a rule, have a closer relationship with their mother than with their father (LeCroy, 1988; Thornton et al., 1995). Females and males may have different parental bonds. It has sometimes been found that adolescent females do not have as good a parental bond as do males (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Other studies, though, reveal that the reverse is also true (Kenny, 1994). Generally, however, there is little or no difference reported between the parental bonds of the two sexes (Nada Raja et al., 1992; Windle & Miller-Tutzauer, 1992).

Influences of the Parental Bond

Many studies highlight the fact that parents play a key role in the well-being and functioning of adolescents (Rice, 1990), whether in the development of identity (Allen et al., 1994), a positive self-image (Wenk et al., 1994), life satisfaction (Leung & Leung, 1992), social competence and other skills (Paterson et al., 1995), or emotional problems such as psychological stress and depression (Lasko et al., 1996; Nada Raja et al., 1992; Siddique & D'Arcy, 1984; Whitbeck et al., 1993) and problem behavior (Windle & Miller-Tutzauer, 1992). Some studies show that the quality of the parental bond has psychological effects when viewed longitudinally (Allen et al., 1994; Burge et al., 1997; DuBois et al., 1992; Whitbeck et al., 1993).

The positive effects of the parental bond on young adults (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Roberts & Bengston, 1993) and adult children (Amato, 1994; Barnett et al., 1991; Barnett et al., 1992) have not been studied exhaustively, but the available data reveal that the parental bond remains of considerable importance. Some authors suggest that the parents' influence on their children's well-being diminishes as the children grow older (Greenberger & Chen, 1996); others assert that it continues unabated (Paterson et al., 1994). The classical idea of adolescence as a phase of growing detachment from parents and heightened orientation to peers would imply that the influence of peers would increase in comparison with that of parents (Meeus et al., 1997). However, when examining critical studies, it becomes apparent that in the various stages of life, the influence of parents on the self-image and psychological well-being of their children carries more weight than that of peers (Greenberg et al., 1983; Leung & Leung, 1992; Lasko et al., 1996; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Paterson et al., 1994). Nevertheless, the influence of peers can be significant, especially regarding certain risky behaviors such as the use of drugs (Kandel, 1974, 1990). However, parental monitoring may counterbalance the negative influence of peers on substance use (Bogenschneider et al., 1998).

The influence of the mother may be more important than that of the father (Field et al., 1995) or vice versa (Allen et al., 1994), but the effects of the bond with the mother and the father on the well-being and functioning of adolescents are usually the same (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Paterson et al., 1994; Wenk et al., 1994). The effects of the parental bond may also be gender-specific. It usually has been found that the relational variables have a stronger impact on the psychological functioning of girls and women (Lopez et al., 1992; Scheier & Botvin, 1997).

Irrespective of the quality of the relational network, tensions in the process of becoming an adult may have some negative effects on the well-being of children. These age effects may be stronger for females than for males. For instance, from early adolescence onwards, females are inclined to feel more depressed than males (Lasko et al., 1996; Nada Raja et al., 1992; Petersen & Hamburg, 1986; Scheier & Botvin, 1997; Ruble et al., 1993); in particular, the middle and later phases of adolescence show peaks in terms of feelings of depression (Gotlib & Hammen, 1992).

Research Questions

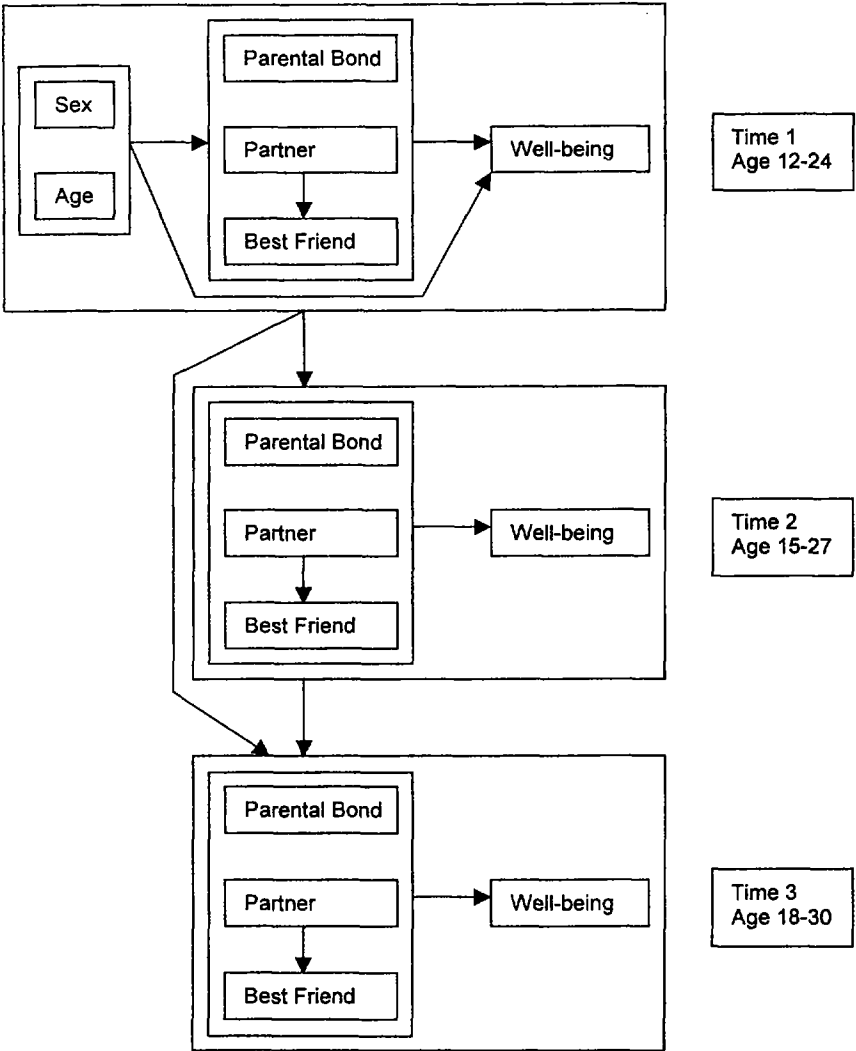
From this survey of critical studies, it is evident that both the parental bond with growing children and the influence it has on their well-

being have rarely been studied longitudinally over a long time span. In this article, we present the results of longitudinal research on the parental bond and well-being of Dutch adolescents and young adults aged 12 to 24 years (their ages ranged from 15 to 27 years when assessed for the second time three years later, and from 18 to 30 years when assessed for the third time another three years later). We first examined whether the curvilinear pattern in the bond between these youngsters and their parents, as was found in the first cross-sectional measurement (Van Wel, 1994), can be replicated longitudinally. A part cross-sectional and part longitudinal test by means of the first two measurements confirmed this pattern for females over a period of three years, but not for males (Van Wel, Linssen, & Abma, 2000).

Second, the influence of the parental bond on the well-being of adolescents and young adults was investigated from a longitudinal perspective. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. Measurement 1 included five variables that possibly influence the well-being of the respondents (at that time, their ages varied from 12 to 24 years): sex, age, and the three relational variables, namely parental bond, having a partner, and having a best friend. The model also investigated the influences of sex and age on these last three variables. Regarding the relational variables, we did not expect that the quality of the parental bond would have any influence on having a partner or best friend. However, having a partner could be at the cost of friendship. The same connections were explored in measurement 2 (three years later) and in measurement 3 (another three years later). Finally, in this longitudinal design we were especially interested in the influences of the variables of measurement 1 on those of measurements 2 and 3, and the influences of the variables of measurement 2 on those of measurement 3. Assuming that the parental bond is of lasting significance, we predicted that this bond would have a continuing positive influence on the well-being of adult children. It is likely that the connection will be less strong when they reach adulthood; however, research relating to this issue is not unanimous. We sought to systematically compare this influence on their well-being with the possible positive effects of having a best friend and a steady relationship. We predicted that these intimate relationships with peers would be of growing importance for the well-being of youngsters. Nevertheless, compared to a best friend or partner, we expected that parents would still be equally important for the well-being of young adults.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model: Well-being of Adolescents and Young Adults



Sample

The data for this study were gathered from three questionnaires used in the Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development, a longitudinal project. The participants were randomly selected from two representative national panels (Meeus & 't Hart, 1993). A total of 3,394 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 24 years participated in the first measurement in 1991 (26% refused to participate). When the second measurement was taken in 1994, 1,966 respondents again participated (the drop-off in participants amounted to 42%). These respondents were contacted again in 1997; 1,301 young people between the ages of 18 and 30 responded (compared to the first measurement, the drop-off in participants amounted to 62%). The respondents who stopped participating in the study did not differ from those who completed the three questionnaires in terms of their responses regarding three of the four dependent variables in the 1991 survey (parental bond, general well-being, and friendship; respondents who were in steady relationships in 1991 had a lower drop-off rate). Males and older respondents had a higher drop-off rate in the second and third measurements than did females and younger respondents. A total of 1,133 adolescents/young adults (475 males and 658 females) responded all three times to statements about their relationships with their living parents; 1,078 adolescents/young adults (459 males and 619 females) had no missing scores on any of the variables presented in the conceptual model. The majority (74%) of these 1,078 respondents were living with both of their parents at the time of the first measurement; six years later only 40% were doing so. The percentage of children in single-parent families or with divorced parents rose from 10% in 1991 to 12% in 1997. Adolescents/young adults living independently grew during that period from 20% to 57% (on average, they left the parental home when they were approximately 20 years of age).

Measurement

A *parental bond* scale developed by Van Wel (1994) was used to examine youth-parent relations. This 8-item scale measures the degree to which young people (a) identify with their parents (in matters of opinion and taste: "I often have the same opinions as my parents"; "My taste and preferences are usually the same as my parents"), (b) view their parents as good role models (in their lifestyle and approach to child rearing: "In the future, I want to adopt my parents' way of living"; "Someday I will raise my own children just as my parents have raised

me”), (c) accept their parents as educators (from whom they can accept criticism and learn: “When my parents criticize my behavior, I take it to heart”; “I can still learn a lot from my parents”), and (d) value their parents as friends and as persons with whom they can communicate (“I count my parents among my best friends”; “I can communicate extremely well with my parents”). Responses range from 1 = entirely disagree to 5 = entirely agree. In psychoanalytic terms, the scale indicates the extent to which parents serve as their child’s identification object or ego-ideal, as well as the degree to which parental authority is viewed as an instrument of learning. The currently more egalitarian quality of relations between the generations is captured in scale items concerning the degree of friendship and communication between youths and parents. Cronbach’s alpha for parental bond was .88 in the first assessment and .86 and .87 in the second and third assessments, respectively.

The *well-being* of the respondents was examined using the Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965). Adolescents and young adults evaluated their general well-being on a scale from 0 = very bad to 10 = very good.

Friendship (of a nonsexual nature) was measured by asking the respondents whether they currently had a best friend (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Finally, *having a partner* was measured by asking the respondents whether they were currently involved in a steady relationship (0 = no, 1 = yes).

RESULTS

Parental Bond

Using a cross-sectional design, the results of the first measurement in 1991 suggested a slight, yet significant, temporary deterioration of the bond which is usually rather positive between males/females and their parents during adolescence (Van Wel, 1994). Using the data from the second and third measurements taken in 1994 and 1997, we examined whether this curvilinear pattern in the bond between young people and their parents could be replicated longitudinally.

Figure 2 (a, b, c, and d) shows the changes in the parental bond for four age groups. For both males and females who were in early adolescence (12–14 years) in 1991, there was a less positive bond with their parents in the middle phase of adolescence (15–17 years); as far as females were concerned, but not males, an amelioration occurred in the bond with their parents in the transition from middle to late adolescence (18–20 years) (Figure 2a; see the footnotes to Figure 2 for

Figure 2a
 Changes in the Parental Bond:
 Age Group 12-14 Years at Time 1

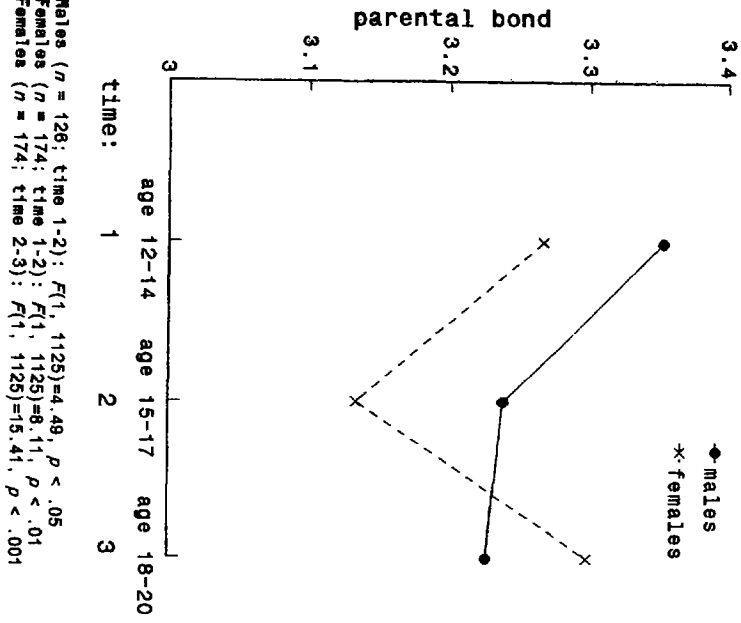


Figure 2b
 Changes in the Parental Bond:
 Age Group 15-17 Years at Time 1

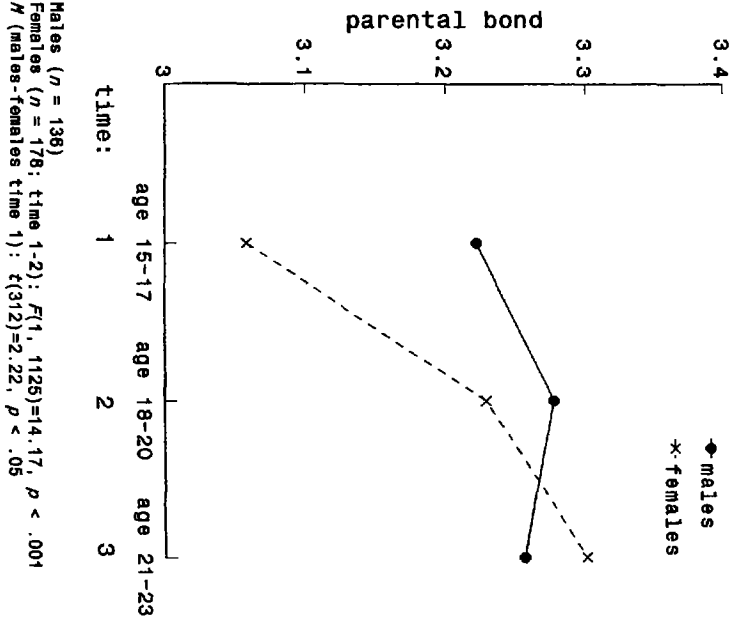


Figure 2c
 Changes in the Parental Bond:
 Age Group 18-20 Years at Time 1

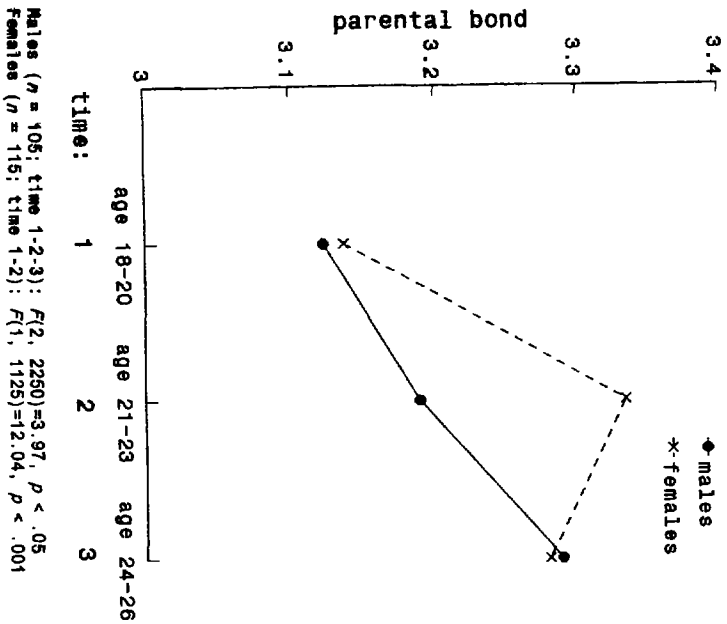
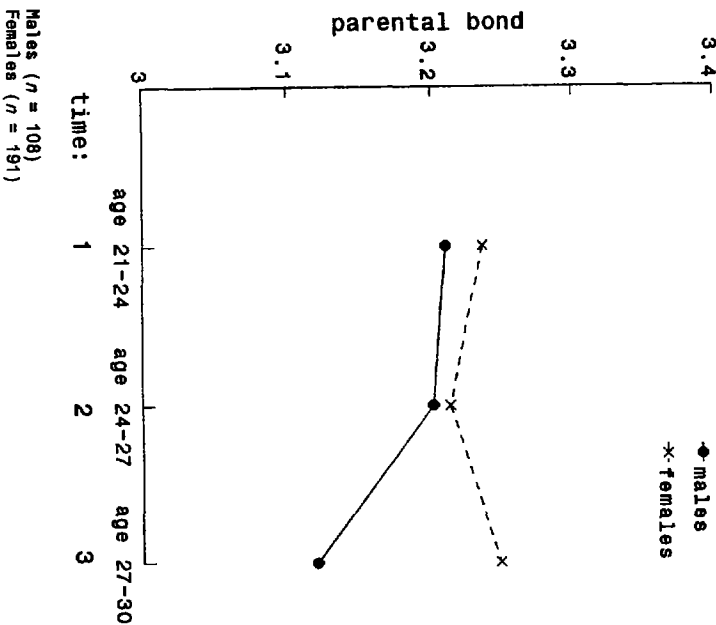


Figure 2d
 Changes in the Parental Bond:
 Age Group 21-24 Years at Time 1



the significant simple main effects during the course of time). Such an improvement also occurred for females who were in mid-adolescence (15–17 years) in 1991, but once again, not for males in the same age group (Figure 2b; in this age group, 15–17 years in 1991, we found the only significant difference between the sexes in their parental bond at the same point in time). Females who were in late adolescence (18–20 years) in 1991 usually had an improved bond with their parents in post-adolescence (21–23 years), but here we found that such an amelioration also occurred for males in the same age group, only it occurred over a longer time span (from 18–20 years to 24–26 years) (Figure 2c). Regarding the oldest group of females and males (who were post-adolescent in 1991), the parental bond was remarkably stable during the following years (Figure 2d).

Our first conclusion is that the curvilinear pattern in the bond between young people and their parents (i.e., a relative deterioration and subsequent amelioration of this bond in the transition to adulthood), initially found cross-sectionally in the 1991 sample, is fully confirmed for adolescent females (age range: 12–20 years) over a period of six years. The amelioration and stabilization of the parental bond of the older female age groups are in harmony with this pattern. For males, we also found that their parental bond became somewhat less positive in the transition from the early to the middle phase of adolescence. For most of the older male respondents, however, the parental bond remained fairly stable.

Well-being

At the time of measurement 1, we found a direct relation between the parental bond of the respondents (ages 12–24 years) and their well-being (Pearson's $r = .22, p < .01$). This relation was still positive three and six years later (measurement 2: Pearson's $r = .13, p < .01$; measurement 3: Pearson's $r = .14, p < .01$). The conceptual model that we then developed for the longitudinal analysis of the relation between the parental bond and the well-being of adolescents and young adults is presented in Figure 1. The relationships between the 14 variables of the conceptual model were examined using LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). A suitable model for the connections within and between the three measurements was obtained ($\chi^2 = 56.30, df = 54, p = .39$; root mean square error of approximation = 0.007; standardized root mean square residual = 0.022; adjusted goodness of fit index = 0.99; critical $N = 1551.74$; the analysis is based on the covariance matrix of the 14 variables by 1,078 respondents). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Path Analysis for Well-being of Adolescents and Young Adults

| | Measurement 1 (1991) | | | | | Measurement 2 (1994) | | | | | Measurement 3 (1997) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|---------|-------------|------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------|------------|---------------|---------|----------------------|------------|---------------|---------|-------------|------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
| | Parental Bond | Partner | Best Friend | Well-being | Parental Bond | Partner | Best Friend | Well-being | Parental Bond | Partner | Best Friend | Well-being | Parental Bond | Partner | Best Friend | Well-being | | | | | | | | | | |
| Influences | D | T | D | T | D | T | D | T | D | T | D | T | D | T | D | T | | | | | | | | | | |
| Background: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sex | n.s. | n.s. | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0.10 | -0.08 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.10 | 0.14 | 0.06 | 0.10 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.08 | 0.17 | 0.10 | 0.12 | -0.06 | n.s. | | | |
| Age | n.s. | n.s. | 0.53 | 0.53 | n.s. | n.s. | -0.20 | -0.16 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.30 | 0.50 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.31 | n.s. | 0.31 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | | | |
| Measurement 1: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Parental Bond | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.21 | 0.21 | 0.53 | 0.53 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.11 | 0.17 | 0.44 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.11 | | | |
| Partner | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | 0.09 | 0.09 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.39 | 0.39 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.07 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.20 | 0.36 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.07 | | | |
| Best Friend | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0.08 | 0.08 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.34 | 0.34 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.13 | 0.22 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | | | |
| Well-being | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.29 | 0.29 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.13 | 0.22 | | |
| Measurement 2: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Parental Bond | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.51 | 0.51 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.08 | | |
| Partner | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | 0.11 | 0.11 | n.s. | n.s. | 0.41 | 0.41 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.07 | | | |
| Best Friend | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.27 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | | | |
| Well-being | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.29 | 0.29 | | |
| Measurement 3: | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Parental Bond | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | 0.11 | 0.11 | | |
| Partner | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | -0.12 | -0.12 | 0.11 | 0.10 |
| Best Friend | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0.08 | 0.08 |
| R ² | 0.00 | 0.29 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.09 | 0.28 | 0.38 | 0.13 | 0.11 | 0.38 | 0.33 | 0.14 | 0.16 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Note. Standardized β coefficients. D = direct effects; T = total effects (indirect effects: T-D); n.s.: non-significant effects (significant effects: t -value $> |1.96|$, $p < .05$, $\beta > |0.05|$).

At the time of measurement 1, the parental bond has a clear positive effect on the well-being of the respondents (age range: 12–24 years). Having a partner and having a best friend also influence their well-being, but these connections are somewhat less pronounced. Furthermore, the well-being of females and especially older respondents is lower than that of males and younger respondents. More females than males have a partner or a best friend, and more older respondents than younger ones are involved in a steady relationship (i.e., have a partner). Contrary to our expectation, there is no negative relation between being in a steady relationship and having a best friend.

At the time of measurement 2, the quality of the parental bond (as measured for the second time) still has a positive effect on the well-being of the respondents (age range: 15–27 years), but this association is less strong than three years before. A good parental bond appears to influence their well-being as much as being in a steady relationship, while there is no longer a connection between well-being and having a best friend. There also are no longer any effects of sex and age on well-being. More females than males still have a partner or a best friend, and more older respondents than younger ones are involved in a steady relationship. In addition, it once again appears that there is no negative relation between being in a steady relationship and having a best friend.

At the time of measurement 3, the parental bond (as measured for the third time) still influences the well-being of the respondents (age range: 18–30 years)—as much as having a partner does and, once again, having a best friend. These intimate relationships with peers are not—contrary to our expectations—of growing importance for the well-being of the older respondents in comparison with the younger ones. The well-being of young adult females appears to be somewhat lower than that of males in the same period. Again, more female respondents than male respondents have a partner or a best friend, while the effect of age on having a partner has disappeared. It is only at this stage of adulthood that having a partner can be at the cost of friendship. Finally, female young adults appear to have a somewhat better bond with their parents than do male young adults.

Comparing the longitudinal effects of measurement 1 on measurements 2 and 3, and measurement 2 on measurement 3, we note a very strong continuity in the quality of the parental bond. This is also true for having a partner or a best friend, but at a slightly lower level. Lastly, over a period of six years, the well-being of adolescents and young adults appears to be fairly stable.

CONCLUSION

Our first research question concerned the longitudinal replication of the curvilinear pattern in the bond between young people and their parents—a pattern that was previously determined cross-sectionally through the first measurement in 1991 (Van Wel, 1994). Using a part longitudinal, part cross-sectional design for the first measurement and the second one in 1994, this pattern could be confirmed for adolescent females over a period of three years, but not for males (Van Wel, Linszen, & Abma, 2000). The present investigation used a fully longitudinal design: three measurements over a period of six years (at the time of the first measurement, the age of the respondents ranged from 12 to 24 years). The curvilinear pattern in the bond between young people and their parents can now be fully confirmed for females (who were in early, middle, and late adolescence at the time of the first measurement), but not for males. For both males and females, the parental bond becomes somewhat less positive in the transition from early adolescence (age range: 12–14 years) to mid-adolescence (age range: 15–17 years). After this transition, the bond remains reasonably stable for most of the males. Females experience greater fluctuations in the relationship with their parents. In particular, in mid-adolescence, this relationship becomes temporarily less positive; however, their parental bond improves in late adolescence. Nonetheless, the extent of the effects of age, albeit statistically significant, is modest. Our findings are consistent with those of other studies, which emphasize that adolescents become independent without seriously harming the rather strong bond with their parents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Steinberg, 1990). Adolescents appear to seek peer-like relationships with their parents (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and according to the findings regarding parental bond presented here and elsewhere (Van Wel, 1994; Van Wel, Linszen, & Abma, 2000), many count their parents among their best friends.

Our second research question concerned the possible positive effects of relational variables on the well-being of adolescents and young adults. The results are in harmony with the mainstream of studies on the parental bond. In accord with the hypothesis that the parental bond is of lasting significance, we found a continuing positive influence of this bond on well-being, although this connection is somewhat less pronounced for young adults than for adolescents. Being in a steady relationship (having a partner) and having a best friend appear to influence the well-being of adolescents to a lesser degree than the qual-

ity of their parental bond. For young adults, the influences of these three relational variables on their well-being are significant at a comparable level; these connections are not very strong, however.

Our general conclusion is that adolescents and young adults maintain a rather good and reasonably stable relationship with their parents over a long period of time (ages 12–30 years). Parents also prove to be of lasting importance for the well-being of their growing children; the parental bond is at least as important as having a partner or a best friend.

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