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## Individuation Revisited: Implications for Parent Education

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PREVIOUS  
ARTICLE



ISSUE  
CONTENTS



NEXT  
ARTICLE



## Individuation Revisited: Implications for Parent Education

### Abstract

Researchers have suggested that adolescents' increase in autonomy is accompanied by maintaining close relations with parents. In this article, we explore this process of individuation from the perspective of mothers. Nearly 900 ( $n=878$ ) white mothers of children aged 2 to 14 were interviewed via the telephone about their child's independence and their perception of parent-child connectedness. Analyses revealed that from the perspective of mothers, while independence increased across childhood, parent-child connectedness decreased. These data suggest the need to support parents in remaining connected to their children as they enter adolescence. Implications of these findings for parent education are considered.

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Researchers agree that a major transformation occurs in the parent-child relationship during adolescence. However, researchers' descriptions and explanations of this transformation have changed dramatically over the years. Most recently, researchers have posited a theory of individuation, which suggests that adolescents' increase in autonomy is accompanied by and even facilitated by maintaining close relations with parents. It has been argued that parents' willingness to remain emotionally close to their adolescent without threatening the adolescent's independence will undoubtedly lead to a positive transformation in the parent-adolescent relationship (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

The present investigation explores how mothers' perspective of this balance of independence and connectedness changes from early childhood through early adolescence. First, we explore the relationship between mother's reports of encouraging their child's independence and the child's age. Next, we explore the relationship between mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness and the child's age.

Research has found that parents tend to emphasize intimacy and connection in daughters and encourage separation and autonomy in sons, who are often perceived as less vulnerable to risks (Feldman, 1982; Leaper et al., 1989; Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002). Thus, we explore gender differences in mothers' reports of their child's independence and in mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness. The implications of these findings for parent education are considered.

## Method

### Sample

While the original sample of mothers in the present investigation was 1,003, due to the small number of questions used to compute the scales utilized in this study, in the present analyses we only include data from mothers who responded to each of the nine questions included in the two scales described below. The final sample included 878 white mothers with a mean age of 46.1

years (range 29-65 years). Nearly 90% of mothers were married for the first time and living with their husbands. Most had completed at least some college (63%); slightly more than half (54%) were employed full-time. One third of the households had a combined family income of more than \$50,000 per year.

When there was more than one child in the home between the ages of 2 and 14 years, the child with the birthday closest to the interview date was identified as the target child for this study. Mothers were asked to respond to interview questions with respect to the target child. For all analyses, mothers were divided into three groups based on the age of the target child. Mothers whose target child was 2-5 years old (mean age=3.8 years) were defined as preschool ( $n=198$ ; 53% girls); those with a target child 6-9 years old (mean age=7.4 years) were defined as school age ( $n=269$ ; 41% girls); and those with a target child 10-14 years old (mean age=12.1 years) were defined as early adolescents ( $n=411$ ; 45% girls).

## **Procedure**

These data were collected in two primarily agricultural counties in one Midwestern state. Random digit dialing was used to select a sample of mothers whose children were between 2 and 14 years old. Telephone interviews were conducted with mothers. Approximately 130 questions were asked during the interview regarding: parenting practices, child behavior problems, discipline strategies, discipline information sources, personality, and family issues. Two components of parenting practices are considered here: mothers' reports of the target child's independence and of parent-child connectedness.

## **Measures**

### ***Independence***

Independence was evaluated by asking mothers how often they had done the following five things in the past 6 months: pushed the child to do his/her best in everything; pushed him/her to think independently or do things independently; let him/her make his own plans for things she/he wanted to do; made sure the child knew what you expected of him/her and how you wanted him/her to act; and explained "why" when you wanted him/her to do something. Mothers responded on a five point Likert scale ranging from 0 = "never" to 4 = "always or almost always." Independence was computed by summing mothers' responses to these five questions. Higher scores denoted mothers' greater efforts in promoting their child's independence. The alpha reliability for this scale was slightly low but still acceptable,  $\alpha = .59$ .

### ***Parent-Child Connectedness***

Parent-child connectedness was measured by asking mothers how often they had done the following four things in the past 6 months: comforted and helped the child when she/he had some kind of problem; hugged or kissed the child or did something else to show their love; talked to the child about things that bothered him/her; and praised the child for things done right or for good behavior. Mothers responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = "never" to 4 = "always or almost always." Parent-child connectedness was computed by summing mothers' responses to these four questions. Higher scores indicated that the mothers felt more connected to the target child. The alpha reliability for this scale was,  $\alpha = .65$ .

## **Results**

The process of data analysis consisted of four steps. First, to evaluate the relationship between mothers' reports of granting their child independence and the child's age, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed with the independence scale as the dependent variable. The ANOVA revealed a significant difference,  $F = 20.90$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that there was a significant increase in mothers' reports of child's independence from preschool to school age youth ( $M = 15.7$  to  $16.2$ ) and from school age to early adolescence ( $M = 16.2$  to  $16.9$ ). Second, independent t-tests were conducted to explore whether there were gender differences in mothers' reports of child's independence. T-tests were conducted separately by age group. No gender differences were revealed.

Third, to evaluate the relationship between mothers' reports of connectedness to the target child and the child's age, an ANOVA was computed with the connectedness scale as the dependent variable. The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in connectedness across the three age groups,  $F = 12.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, post hoc analyses revealed that there was no change in mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness from preschool to school age youth. This finding was attributed to a significant decrease in mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness from school age to early adolescence ( $M = 15.0$  to  $14.5$ ). Fourth, independent t-tests were conducted to examine whether there were gender differences in mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness. Again, t-tests were conducted separately by age group. No gender differences were revealed.

## **Discussion**

The finding that independence increases with age was not surprising (e.g., Bulcroft, Carmody, &

Bulcroft, 1996); however, no gender differences were revealed. Perhaps gender differences in mothers' granting of independence do not emerge until middle adolescence, when youth are seeking more opportunities to stay home alone or spend unsupervised time with peers. The finding that mothers' reports of parent-child connectedness decrease from school age to early adolescence presents a challenge. Some previous research has found a similar decrease (Conger & Ge, 1999); however, Pinquart and Silbereisen (2002) found that while adolescents' reports of connectedness with their mothers decreased during early adolescence, from the mothers' perspectives, there was not a significant decrease.

These data might suggest that as adolescents work to become more autonomous, parents may feel anxious and even inadequate about their parenting (Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988). Consequently, rather than working to remain connected, parents may respond by pulling away (Kelly et al., 1983). Thus, perhaps the decrease in parent-child connectedness during early adolescence may be parents' response to their child's demanding of autonomy. Additional data might have revealed that after early adolescence connectedness increases, and this is just a temporary drop (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2002). Again, contrary to expectation, no gender differences emerged. This may be a positive indication that mothers believe they are working to treat their sons and daughters the same.

## **Limitations**

While these data suggest that more attention needs to be paid to encouraging and supporting parents in remaining connected to their children during the transition to adolescence, several limitations must be noted. First, the sample consisted primarily of white, married, educated mothers living in rural areas. Findings from such a homogenous sample provide little ability to generalize to racially and ethnically diverse families, families with a lower socioeconomic status, and to families living in a suburban or urban area. Further, while independence is valued in the majority of Anglo cultures in the U.S., the process of individuation may not exist or may look very different in different cultures.

Second, this study focused on mothers' reports. Data from fathers, other caregivers, or youth may have revealed a very different story about the process of individuation. Therefore, to get the full picture of the process of individuation, future research should consider the family perspective, including mothers, fathers, other caregivers, and youth.

Third, the measures of independence and connectedness were limited. The alpha reliability, while acceptable, was low. Future research should use measures proven reliable and valid. Finally, this study was cross-sectional in design. Longitudinal research in which participants are assessed multiple times (preferably three or more) at various stages of family development is critical to measuring changes over time in young people's independence and in parent-child connectedness.

## **Implications for Parent Education**

To effectively provide parent education to parents who are parenting teenagers, it is critical that we understand the changes in the parent-child relationship during the transition to adolescence. First, these data, in combination with previous research, suggest that parents and adolescents have different perspectives about their relationship. Parent educators and youth workers would undoubtedly benefit from research incorporating youths' and parents' perspectives as well as building on theories that allow for the integration of family development and youth development.

Second, several studies, including the current one, have revealed that parents report feeling less connected to their teen as the child enters adolescence. Perhaps these data suggest that there is a bi-directional relationship between parents and teens. While parents report disconnecting from their teen, it is quite possible that this disconnection is simply a parental response to the child's behavior (Kerr & Stattin, 2003). Parent educators and youth workers might approach their work from a bi-directional perspective, encouraging parents and youth to consider not only the ways parents impact their youth, but also the variety of ways in which youth impact parents and the larger family system.

Third, parents' reports of disconnecting from their teen might suggest that they question the influence they still have on their teen. Parent education must emphasize to parents that they still matter and, through their children's adolescence and even through young adulthood, continue to play a critical role in supporting and teaching their youth. Parent education must work to provide parents with support to maintain their course through the joys and challenges of adolescence.

Finally, professionals must consider individuation from a cultural frame. For example, in a culture where the family is the primary unit, independence during adolescence may not be viewed as critical to positive development in the same way as it is in American mainstream culture; in fact, it may be viewed as harmful. Connectedness may carry a very different meaning to a parent from a culture in which hierarchy is emphasized as compared to a white parent living in the U.S.

## **Conclusion**

These findings elucidate the need for a continued focus on understanding the process of individuation from a family systems perspective. Families need the skills and support to respond to

young people's growing need for independence in a way that does not threaten the stability of the family system or the family's social and emotional bonds (Collins, 1990). Adolescence is a challenging transition for youth and families, and maintaining strong family relationships is critical to helping young people and their families successfully navigate this transition.

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