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Parent-Teen Relationships and Interactions: Far More Positive Than Not

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Overview *Everyone recognizes that babies and young children need and love their parents. But what about teens? Even an adolescent's own parents can despair and wonder how their loving child has apparently become so rejecting. But "apparently" is a crucial word. Research indicates that not only does parenting continue to be important for adolescents, but also that most adolescents themselves continue to report positive relationships and interactions with their parents.*

This Research Brief *brings together recent results of a nationally representative survey of U.S. teens about the nature of their relationships with their parents and findings from rigorous research studies on the parent-adolescent bond. The evidence presented shows that while the proportion of teens reporting positive relationships with their parents does dip somewhat during the early teen years and while this proportion is lower for parents who live apart from their children, adolescents, in general, respect, admire, and like their parents and enjoy spending time with them. These results from interviews with teens dovetail with research showing the link between the quality of parent-child relationships and a wide range of positive outcomes for teens. Moreover, this research is reinforced by similar findings in industrialized countries elsewhere in the world, which we also report on in this brief.*

TEEN PERSPECTIVES

Data from interviews conducted as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97),[1] allow us to provide a national picture of what adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 report as they move through their adolescent years. Each year between 1997 and 2001, adolescents who were between the ages of 12 and 14 in 1997 (and who were approximately 16-to-18 at the time of the 2001 interview) were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with several statements about their mother and their father:

"I think highly of him/her";

"She/He is a person I want to be like"; and

"I really enjoy spending time with him/her."

Results from the adolescents' responses about their residential parents (i.e., those who lived with, not apart from, their children) in 1999 when they were between the ages of 14 and 17 are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Results about mothers show that:

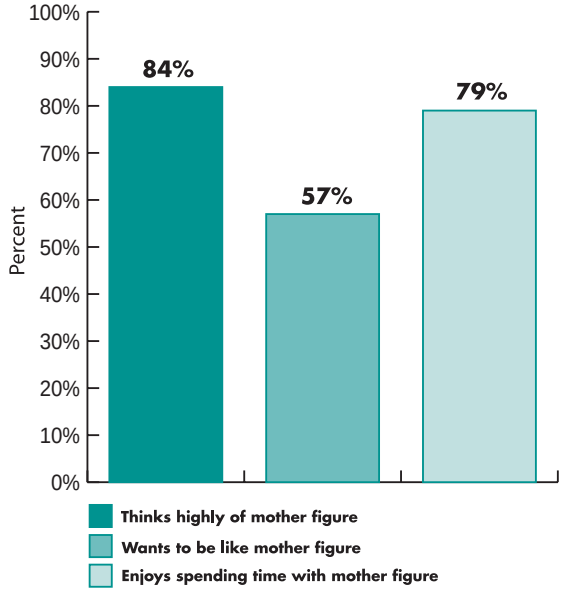
- More than four in five adolescents (84 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they think highly of their mother;
- More than one-half (57 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to be like their mother[2]; and
- More than three-quarters (79 percent) reported that they really enjoy spending time with their mother.

Similar proportions were reported about residential fathers, namely:

- More than four in five adolescents (81 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they think highly of their father;
- Slightly under two-thirds (61 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to be like their father; and
- More than three-quarters (76 percent) reported that they really enjoy spending time with their father.

Figure 1

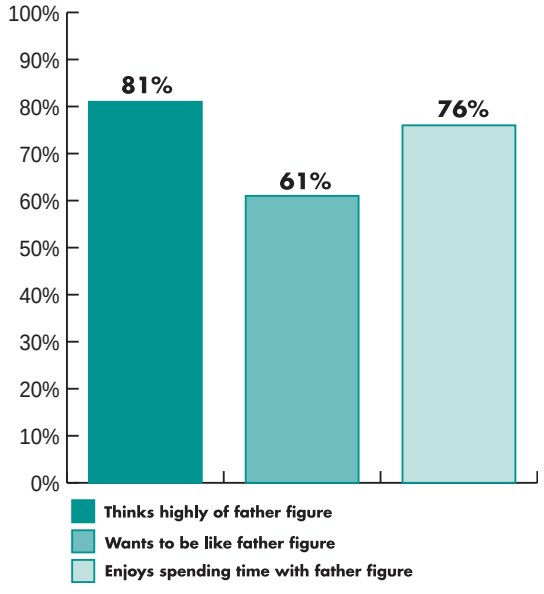
Percentage of Adolescents (Ages 14-17) Who Strongly Agree or Agree with Positive Statements Describing Their Relationship With a Residential Mother, 1999



Source: Child Trends' analyses of National Longitutdinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 1999 wave.

Figure 2

Percentage of Adolescents (Ages 14-17) Who Strongly Agree or Agree with Positive Statements Describing Their Relationship With a Residential Father, 1999



Source: Child Trends' analyses of National Longitutdinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 1999 wave

Looking more closely at the survey results suggests that attitudes towards parents vary by family structure.

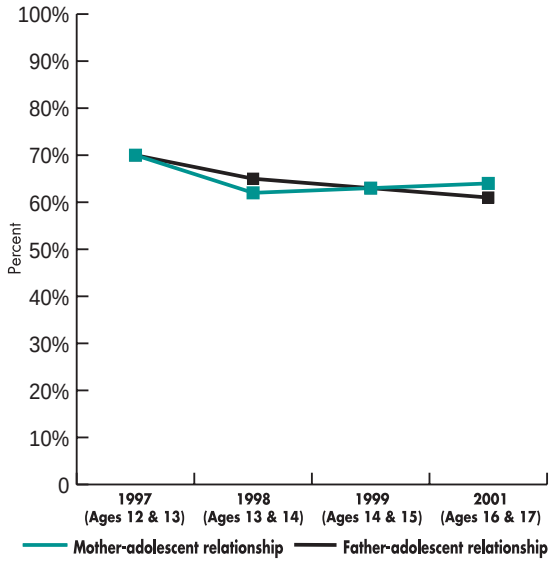
- **Family disruption does seem to matter.** Specifically, regarding residential parents, adolescents seemed more positive about their biological parents than about their stepparents. For example, in mid-adolescence (ages 14-15), the proportion of teens who agreed or strongly agreed that they think highly of their father was 82 percent for biological fathers, compared with 67 percent for stepfathers. Comparable proportions for the statement, "I want to be like [father figure]" were 63 percent for biological fathers and 39 percent for stepfathers; and for the statement "I enjoy spending time with [father figure]," the proportions were 78 percent and 59 percent, respectively. Similar differences were found for positive youth relationships with biological mothers, compared with stepmothers.

There is some support for the notion that children's attitudes towards their parents dip during adolescence, but "some" is the operative word. Figure 3 tracks a summary measure of the parent-child relationship from 1997 to 2001.[3] For a sample of respondents in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth who participated in all rounds of data collection, the figure depicts the percentage of adolescents indicating positive feelings about their residential mother or father as they grew older. The data do show a decline in the proportion of adolescents who state positive feelings about their residential parents on this index from 70 to 64 percent for mothers, and from 70 to 61 percent for fathers as the adolescents grow from 12-to-13 in 1997 to 16-to-17 in 2001. While real, this decline is fairly modest, and, after falling in early adolescence between the ages of 12 and 13 and the ages of 13 and 14, the proportion levels out. In fact, feelings about mothers in the very last year show a slight upward trend, when teens are between the ages of 16 and 17. Moreover, even among adolescents who did not report an overall high-quality relationship with their parents, more than six in 10 of the adolescents expressed at least one positive feeling about their relationships with their mothers and their fathers.

This generally positive pattern is similar to results from other surveys of teens. For example, data from the second round of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)[4] in 1996 indicate that, on average, adolescents in grades eight through 12 said they felt very close to their residential parents.

Figure 3

Percentage of Adolescents Who Report a Positive Relationship with Residential Parents, 1997-2001



Source: Child Trends' analyses of National Longitutdinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 1999 wave

Adolescents in this study reported their feelings on a closeness scale going from 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest category (5 = extremely close; 4 = quite close; 3 = somewhat close; 2 = not very close; and 1 = not close at all). Regarding residential mothers, girls averaged 4.5 and boys averaged 4.3. Regarding residential fathers, boys averaged 4.2 and girls averaged 3.9. Similar to the results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997, scores were substantially lower for parents who lived apart from their children, particularly fathers.[5]

Relationships Matter

The data presented above describe patterns of parent-adolescent relationships that vary but are generally quite positive, probably more positive than many might expect. Few would deny that it is intrinsically valuable for parents and children to feel close to one another and enjoy being with one another. However, these descriptive analyses do not address the related question of whether positive relationships matter for children's life outcomes. There is evidence from numerous research studies, though, that positive parent-child relationships and interactions enhance the development of children and adolescents. This literature is well-known to researchers who specialize in the topic; we summarize the findings here to share them with a broader audience.

Overwhelmingly, and despite variation in the way the quality of the relationship has been measured,[6] research shows that positive and warm parent-child relationships are associated with more positive child and youth outcomes. Conversely, relationships that are less positive and warm have been linked to less desirable child and youth outcomes. This pattern persists across diverse populations, regions, and even across countries. Here, we present findings from several high-quality U.S. studies on this topic.

Children and teens who have positive relationships with their parents tend to have better academic outcomes. Child Trends' analyses of the NLSY97 have shown that adolescents with high-quality relationships with their parents are subsequently more likely to have good grades and less likely to have been suspended from school than their peers with less positive parent-adolescent relationships,[7] even after taking into account other social and economic influences. Similarly, parental involvement and connection with older teens (14-to-18 years old) predicts higher grades and higher academic expectations.[8]

Good relations between parents and adolescents lessen the likelihood that teens will exhibit problem behaviors. Such behaviors have been well-studied and are regularly found associated with the quality of the parent-youth relationship. A roundup of findings from studies in this area are presented below:

- A study of more than 12,000 teenagers found a link between positive parent-child relationships and fewer violent behaviors.[9]
- Similarly, another study[10] found that teens with positive relations with their mothers (and their fathers) are less likely to be delinquent. This association is mediated by greater parental awareness about the adolescent, more supportiveness, and stronger family routines.
- Several studies have found that positive relationships or connectedness between parents and adolescents are linked to avoidance or lower use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.[11]
- A review found that adolescents who have high-quality relationships with their parent were less likely to initiate sex or be sexually active,[12] while another study found, conversely, that poor-quality parent-teen relationships were associated with increased sexual activity for females.[13]

- Finally, studies have found similar links between the quality of the parent-child relationship and problem behaviors for subgroups, as well, e.g., Mormon teens[14] and both non-Hispanic white and Hispanic teens.[15]

High-quality parent-adolescent relationships have been linked repeatedly to mental, social, and emotional well-being in adolescents and youth.[16] For example, analyses of the NLSY97 found that high-quality parent-adolescent relationships in early adolescence are linked to better mental well-being and less delinquency for the youth three years later, even after taking into account social and demographic characteristics of the family and the youth's prior behavior.[17] Furthermore, across multiple multivariate longitudinal studies positive parent-adolescent relationships also are associated with self-confidence, empathy, a cooperative personality,[18] and psychological well-being.[19]

Growing evidence indicates that the apparently strong influence of the parent-child relationship on child and adolescent outcomes extends into adulthood. For example, studies based on national survey data have revealed that, generally:

- Better quality adult child-parent relationships have been associated with lower levels of psychological distress among both adult children and parents;[20]
- Close relationships with parents during childhood and adolescence have been positively associated with adult children's self-esteem, happiness, and life satisfaction; [21] and
- Positive mental and physical health in adulthood is positively associated with recollections of early parental support.[22]

Similar associations have been found in smaller-scale studies.[23] These findings are encouraging, as research reveals that parents and their adult children are in frequent contact[24] and report enjoying largely positive and rewarding relationships.[25]

While many studies provide strong evidence of the link between positive parent-child relationships and child, teen, and even adult outcomes, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that there has been controversy about the importance of parents[26, 27] and that research certainly finds that peer influence also matters during adolescence.[28] Indeed, a 2004 Child Trends public opinion poll[29] found that only 28 percent of adults think that parents have a greater influence on teens than teens' friends or peer group. One-half of adults think that peers and parents have equal influence, while only one in four think that parents have a greater influence than peers. In addition, well-adjusted adolescents may interact with well-behaved, well-adjusted peers and *also* have quality relationships with their parents. However, the evidence that parents matter is very compelling.[30] Clearly, it is not possible to conduct experimental studies to assess cause and effect, because one could not randomly assign children to parents. Still, nonexperimental research studies consistently find that parents are a critical influence in the lives of their children, adolescents included, even after controlling for the effect of the adolescent's prior behavior on the quality of the relationship with their parents.[31] Moreover, research done in the U.S. is bolstered by similar findings for other countries.

International Studies

Research examining parent-adolescent interactions in other countries suggests that positive interactions are generally important for positive youth outcomes. Using recently released data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),[32] researchers at Child Trends examined the relationship between five types of parent-youth interaction and student literacy[33] across 21 industrialized countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Norway, New Zealand, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. Students who participated in the survey, who were 15 years old at the time, responded to the following questions about their interactions with their parents:

1) In general, how often do your parents:
- *a) Discuss political or social issues with you?*
- *b) Discuss books, films or television programs with you?*
- *c) Listen to classical music with you?*
- *d) Discuss how well you are doing at school?*
- *e) Eat dinner with you around a table?*
- *f) Spend time just talking to you?*

2) How often do the following people work with you on your homework?
a) Your mother
b) Your father

Across the 21 countries studied, adolescents and their parents frequently interact with one another in a variety of ways. In all but five countries (the Czech Republic, Finland, Great Britain, Hungary, and United States), *eating meals together* was the activity that students reported engaging in most frequently with their parents. *Talking about general issues* followed as a close second, while *discussing books, films, or TV* was cited on a much less frequent basis.

In the countries studied, students report *eating and talking with their parents* at least several times a month, on average, and *discussing politics and social issues* about once a month. There are some differences across countries. For example, youth in Italy reported *eating meals* and *discussing books, films, or TV* with their parents more frequently than their counterparts in other countries, while students in Hungary reported engaging in more *general and political discussions* with their parents than those in other countries. In contrast, students in Sweden and Denmark reported receiving more frequent *help from their parents on homework* than youth in other countries.

Youth benefit from increased parental involvement. With few exceptions across the 21 countries included in this study, more frequent parent-youth interactions were found to be associated with higher levels of reading, scientific, and mathematical literacy, as directly assessed by PISA, after controlling for background characteristics. For example, in 16 of the 21 countries included in the study, the results indicate that youth who eat meals with their parents frequently have higher levels of reading literacy, even when social and economic differences across families are controlled. This finding echoes prior research, which has found that eating meals together as a family is associated with positive child outcomes.[34, 35] Similarly, the study found that youth who discuss politics or social issues frequently with their parents have significantly higher levels of reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy, even after taking other factors into account. Youth also appear to benefit from talking with their parents about books, films, and television, though the relationship to student literacy and across countries is less consistent and strong than that observed for political and social discussions or eating meals together.

The topic or nature of interaction matters. The research also suggests that not all types of parental communication are associated with better literacy outcomes. Talking with parents about general issues, for example, is not significantly associated with higher levels of student literacy, while talking about specific issues, such as political or social issues and the media, are. Moreover, youth who receive frequent assistance with homework from their parents have lower levels of literacy in all three areas than those who receive less help. This finding is consistent with past research that suggests that parental assistance with homework is often a sign of or a reaction to problems at school.[36]

What matters for students in one country matters for students in other countries. The research indicates substantial similarity in the general relationship between the five measures of parent-adolescent interaction and student literacy across the 21 countries. That is, while the results suggest moderate variation in the amount and degree of association between parent-adolescent interaction and student literacy across countries, for the most part, what matters for students in one country matters for students in the other countries. For example, in all but one instance (mathematical literacy among German students), frequent discussions about political or social issues were associated with higher levels of reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy. These kinds of specific conversations may indicate a higher level of parental involvement in students' everyday life.

DISCUSSION

Reports from U.S. adolescents indicate that, in general, teens feel close to their parents, think highly of them, and even want to spend time with them. In addition, research shows that quality parent-child relationships are linked to a wide range of positive outcomes for adolescents, such as mental and emotional well-being, adjustment, and social competence, and to lower levels of problem behaviors, such as substance use, delinquency, and premature sexual activity.[37] Moreover, data from research on parent-adult child relationships[38] indicate that

psychological, social, and health benefits persist over time.[39] The parent-child relationship clearly represents an important influence on adolescents' lives. Further, comparable analyses in 21 industrialized countries indicate that greater parent-adolescent interaction is related to more positive outcomes. Thus, not only are parent-adolescent relationships and interactions generally positive, but they also *matter*. [40]

At the same time, it is critical to acknowledge that some adolescents do not feel close to their parents. In the NLSY97, nearly four in 10 teens report that they do not have highly positive feelings about their parents. In fact, about one in 20 adolescents strongly disagree that they "think highly of" and "want to be like" their residential mother or father. As noted above, these attitudes are more likely when adolescents live apart from a parent and when their residential parent is not their biological parent. Even in these instances, though, a substantial proportion of adolescents hold quite positive feelings toward their parent or stepparent.

However, for that minority of teens who hold negative views, there is reason to be concerned. Supporting healthy marriages to help parents stay together or helping noncustodial parents remain involved in their children's lives may help some parents remain or become closer to their children. In other cases, parents may need to put time and effort into developing stronger relationships with their children, for example, by spending more time together and communicating regularly or by obtaining counseling. Becoming more aware that parent-adolescent relationships and interactions matter during the teen years may convince parents that this investment of time and effort is worthwhile, even if their teen appears uninterested at present.

Of course, parent-child closeness and parental involvement need to be age-appropriate. As children go through adolescence and become young adults, they do need to become more independent and responsible. For example, it would be inappropriate to monitor an 18-year-old as closely as a 13-year-old. However, research suggests that 18-year-olds continue to benefit from love, advice, values, and an ongoing sense that their parents care about what they do and what happens to them.[41]

Implications and Conclusion

No one would argue that childrearing is an easy task, or that adolescence is a trouble-free period of development. Unfortunately, one-half of adults in the Child Trends poll think that peer influence is more important than parental influence.[42] If parents mistakenly believe that their adolescent children don't care about them or respect them or enjoy spending time with them, a real risk exists that parents will step back from being involved in their children's lives. Since research consistently indicates that adolescents develop better when they feel close to their parents, it would be a serious loss to all concerned if parents acted as if they were no longer important once their children entered adolescence. Indeed, during the years of identity formation,[43] as adolescents complete their education and develop vocational plans, and during the time when many teens face numerous risks that can undermine their future, it could be argued persuasively that positive parent-adolescent relationships and interaction are extremely important.[44]

It may surprise some parents to know that their adolescent children continue to value them during these years and that parental involvement continues to be positive for children's development, but that, indeed, is what research indicates.

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Endnotes

[1] More than 9,000 U.S. adolescents who were 12 to 16 years old as of December 31, 1996, were interviewed initially in this nationally representative survey. These youths continue to be interviewed on an annual basis, most recently in 2004.

[2] Adolescent girls were only slightly more likely than boys to agree that they would like to be like their mother, while adolescent boys were just slightly more likely than girls to agree that they would like to be like their father. In 2001, for example, among girls, 60 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they want to be like their mother and 57 percent said the same about their father. For boys, 57 percent and 62 percent wanted to be like their mother and father, respectively.

[3] This index is created by averaging the proportion agreeing or agreeing strongly with three items ("I think highly of him/her"; "She/He is a person I want to be like"; and "I really enjoy spending time with him/her"). Adolescents who reported a score of 9 or more on the 3-item scale were characterized as having a high-quality relationship with their parent.

[4] The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) was designed to provide a broad understanding of the health and well-being of a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades seven through 12 in the United States in 1995. The survey collected data at the individual, family, school, and community levels in two rounds between 1994 and 1996 and in 2001 and 2002 Add Health respondents aged 18 to 26, were re-interviewed to investigate the influence of adolescence on young adulthood.

[5] Moore, K. A., McGroder, S. M., Hair, E. C., & Gunnoe, M. (1999). *NLSY97 codebook supplement main file round 1. Appendix 9: Family process and adolescent outcomes measures.* Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor.

[6] Across the studies discussed in this research brief, high-quality parent-youth relationships are defined in various ways including the amount of trust, the closeness, the amount of mutual respect, and the amount of communication within the relationships. For details on specific studies, please see individual articles or contact authors of this brief.

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[16] Borkowsky, J., Ramey, S., & Bristol-Power, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Parenting and the child's world: Influences on academic, intellectual, and social-emotional development.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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[26] For example, see, Harris, J. R. (2002). Beyond the nurture assumption: Testing hypotheses about the child's environment. In M. Bristol-Power (Ed.), *Parenting and the Child's World* (pp. 3 - 20). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[27] We cite research studies based on nationally representative and diverse samples; however, there is no information on the sexual preference of the parent(s). Accordingly, there is no information on gay parenting, a topic on which research is quite limited. For a review of available studies, see Patterson, C. J. (2002). Lesbian and gay parenthood. In M. H. Bornstein, Ed., *Handbook of Parenting, Volume 3: Being and Becoming a Parent.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp 317-338.

[28] See, for example, Dishion, T. J., Duncan, T. E., & Eddy, J. M. (1994). The world of parents and peers: Coercive exchanges and children's social adaptation. *Social Development, Special issue: From family to peer group: Relations between relationships systems, 3*(3), 255-268.

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[32] The OECD is an international organization with a current membership of 30 industrialized nations that share a commitment to democratic government and the market economy.

[33] Using multi-step reasoning and real-world situational items, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures a student's literacy in reading, mathematics, and science. In contrast to curriculum-based academic assessments, the goal of the PISA assessment test is to measure the extent to which students possess the knowledge and skills needed to function outside of the school environment and in the real world.

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