

OCD | Special Report

Parents And Adolescents: Positive Relationships And How They Influence Outcomes

Adolescence is a trying time for both child and parent. As children struggle to understand and deal with the physical, cognitive, psychological, and social changes they are experiencing, parents may feel their relationship has been turned upside down. Their child all of a sudden has become less willing to accept their advice, more independent, argumentative, and unwilling to acknowledge that a parent could have even the slightest clue about what they are going through.

Given such changes, parents may worry that their adolescent children have come to value their relationship less and that they have lost considerable influence over the direction of their children's lives. Research suggests otherwise.

An examination of a national survey of teenagers in the United States provides evidence that the majority of adolescents respect, admire, and like their parents and enjoy the time they spend together. This evidence is encouraging. Studies in the U.S. and other nations report a link between quality parent-child relationships and several positive outcomes among teenagers.

Changes During Adolescence

Parent-child relationships grow more complex during adolescence. Children undergo profound developmental changes during these years. For instance:¹

- Their physical development progresses at a rapid rate. Changes in height and weight are common. Puberty leads to development of several secondary sexual characteris-

tics. Brain development continues into late adolescence. It is not unusual for adolescents to feel awkward, compare their appearance to that of others, worry they are not developing at the same rate as others, and ask questions regarding sex.

- Cognitively, adolescents develop advanced reasoning skills and abstract thinking skills. They become able to think about how they feel and how they are perceived by others. They are much more self-conscious and tend to believe everyone is watching them and is concerned about what they do and think.
- They begin to form their identities, seek autonomy, and establish intimacy. They start to become comfortable with their sexuality. Adolescents often spend more time with friends and more time outside the home. They tend to want more privacy and be vague when it comes to explaining what is happening in their lives. They can be argumentative.

Adolescence is far from a trouble-free period. Parent-child relationships, in particular, are more challenging.

There is evidence to suggest many parents feel this difficult developmental period signals a loss of influence over their child. A 2004 Child Trends public opinion poll found that about half of adults believe a child's peers and parents have equal influence. Only 28% think parents have a greater influence over their adolescent child than the child's friends.

Adolescent Perspective Of Relationships

Survey data suggest that, in general, a majority of adolescents enjoy positive relationships with their parents, although the numbers decline a bit during early adolescence and are lower among children who live with stepparents.

Their perspective on relationships with parents were measured in a study of data from interviews conducted as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97). The adolescents ages 12-18 years were asked questions about their parents from 1997 to 2001.

Overall, they expressed positive feelings about both their mothers and their fathers. This was especially true among children who lived with their biological parents. For example:

- About 84% of adolescents whose parents lived with them agreed or strongly agreed that they think highly of their mother. About 81% felt the same way about their father.
- More than 57% agreed or strongly agreed they wanted to be like their mother and 61% felt the same way about their father.
- Nearly 79% reported they enjoy spending time with the mother and 76% said they enjoy spending time with their father.

Stepparent Relationships

Adolescents are less positive about how they feel about their stepparents than children are about their biological parents. However, the majority still responded in ways that suggest they respect their stepparents and want to spend time with them.

Among adolescents ages 14-15 years whose parents live with them, 67% agreed or strongly agree that they think highly of their stepfathers, compared to 82% of those who live with their biological fathers. About 59% said they enjoyed spending time with their stepfathers, compared to 78% who enjoyed spending time with their biological father. Only 39% said they wanted to be like their stepfather, compared to 63% for biological fathers.

Similar differences were found when relationships with biological mothers and stepmothers were compared.

Slight Decline

Survey data show that children's overall positive attitudes toward relationships with their parents decline somewhat as they move through adolescence. For example, the proportion of adolescents who stated positive feelings about their parents dropped from 70% to 64% for mothers and from 70% to 61% for fathers as the adolescents grew from ages 12 to 17.

The modest decline was steepest during early adolescence and leveled out during the later years. Feelings about mothers actually improved when children reached ages 16-17 years.

Importance Of Relationships

How adolescents feel about their relationships with their parents is important in light of research that suggests child-parent relationships play a key role in a number of critical outcomes.

Numerous nonexperimental studies have consistently found warm and positive child-parent relationships to be associated with positive academic, social and emotional, and behavioral outcomes. These patterns are found in studies of children in the U.S. and studies of children in other countries.

Academic Outcomes

Better academic outcomes are generally seen among adolescents who have positive relationships with their parents.

NLSY97 data, for example, suggests that children with positive relationships with their parents are more likely to earn good grades in school and less likely to be suspended than adolescents with less positive relationships. Such outcomes were reported even after other social and economic influences were taken into account.²

In other industrialized nations, better academic outcomes were also found among students with good relationships with their parents. The findings were part of an examination of data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The data suggested a link between frequent parent-adolescent activities were associated with higher levels of reading and literacy in science and mathematics. In most of the countries, eating meals together was the activity that brought children and parents together most frequently. In 16 of the 21 nations studied, students who frequently had meals with their parents had higher levels of reading literacy.

Students who often discuss politics or social issues with their parents were found to have significantly higher levels of reading and literacy in mathematics and science, according to the international data.

Social & Emotional Well-Being

The psychological, social, and behavioral well-being of adolescents is also associated with the quality of their relationships with their parents.

The NLSY97 data suggests that high-quality parent-child relationships are linked to better mental well-being and fewer instances of delinquency.³ Other studies report finding positive adolescent-parent relationships to be associated with such positive outcomes, including self-confidence, empathy, and a cooperative personality.

Long-Lasting Influence

Studies based on national survey data have found that strong relationships among parents and their adolescent children influence outcomes into adulthood. In some cases, these relationships produce benefits to both the child and parent. For example:

- Positive parent-child relationships are associated with lower levels of psychological distress among adult children and their parents.⁴
- Close relationships during childhood and adolescence tend to promote self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction into adulthood.⁵

Such evidence underscores the importance of promoting close, warm relationships among parents and their adolescent children. The studies and survey data also suggest that parents are mistaken if they believe they no longer have much influence over their adolescent children or that their adolescent no longer values their love, attention, advice, and support.

References

Moore, K. A., Guzman, L., Hair, E. C., Lippman, L., & Garrett, S. B. (2004). Parent-teen relationships and interactions: Far more positive than not. *Child Trends Research Brief*, 2004-25. Washington, DC: Child Trends. www.childtrends.org.

This Special Report is largely based on the above-referenced source. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:

¹ Huebner, A. (2000). Adolescent growth and development. Virginia Cooperative Extension, publication 350-8503. <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/family/350-850/350-850.html>.

² Hair, E. C., Moore, K. A., Garrett, S. B., Kinukawa, A., Lippman, L., & Michelson, E. (in press). The parent-adolescent relationship scale. In L. Lippman (Ed.), *Conceptualizing And Measuring Indicators Of Positive Development: What Do Children Need To Flourish?* New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press.

³ Hair, E. C., Moore, K. A., & Garrett, S. (2004). The continued importance of quality parent-adolescent relationships during late adolescence. Manuscript submitted to the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

⁴ Umberson, D. (1992). Relationships between adult children and their parents: Psychological consequences for both generations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *54*, 664-674.

⁵ Amato, P. (1994). Father-child relations, mother-child relations, and offspring psychological well-being in early adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *56*, 1031-1042.