

# background

Report # 69

Adolescents And Their Parents

July 2005

## Healthy bond between parents, teens

*Majority of adolescents report positive relationships with their parents*

Adolescence is a trying time. Children struggle to understand and deal with the profound physical, cognitive, psychological, and social changes occurring in their lives. Parents struggle to cope with a child less accepting of their advice, more independent, argumentative, and unwilling to believe that any adult could have the slightest clue about what they are going through.

During this turbulence, many parents feel their adolescent children have come to value their relationship less and that they no longer have influence over the direction of their children's lives. Research suggests otherwise.

Most adolescents respect, admire, and like their parents and enjoy the time they spend together, according to a study of national survey data on U.S. adolescents.

The importance of such findings is underscored by strong evidence that quality parent-child relationships tend to translate into positive outcomes among teenagers.

### Profound Changes

Adolescents undergo profound developmental changes,<sup>1</sup> which can influence relationships with their parents. For instance:

- Their physical development progresses at a rapid rate, including changes in height and weight and development of several secondary sexual characteristics. It is not unusual for adolescents to feel awkward, compare their appearance to that of 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.
- They begin to form their identities, seek autonomy, and establish intimacy. They start to become comfortable with their sexuality. They often spend more time with friends and more time outside the home. They tend to want more privacy and can be argumentative.

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

### More Positive Than Not

Most adolescents say they enjoy good relationships with their parents, although the numbers decline a bit during early adolescence and are lower when children live with stepparents.

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Adolescents' perspective on their relationships with parents have been measured in a study of data from interviews conducted as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97). Overall, they expressed positive feelings about both their mothers and their fathers. This was especially true among children who lived with their biological parents.

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

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**Living With Stepparents**

Relationships are somewhat less positive when adolescents live with a stepparent. However, a majority of adolescents still respect their stepparents and want to spend time with them.

Among adolescents ages 14-15 years, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that they think highly of their stepfathers, compared to 82% of those who live with their biological fathers. About 59% said they enjoy spending time with their stepfathers, compared to 78% who enjoy spending time with their biological father. But only 39% said they want to be like their stepfather, compared to 63% for biological fathers.

The differences are similar when relationships with biological mothers and stepmothers are compared.

**Early Years The Toughest**

Children’s positive attitudes about relationships with their parents fall off a bit as they move through adolescence. The proportion of adolescents who had 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.

This modest decline was steepest during early adolescence and leveled out during the later years.

**Relationships Matter**

Research has 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 the U.S. and in other countries.

NLSY97 data, for example, suggest 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.<sup>2</sup>

The link between academic out-

comes and parent-child relationships is also found in other industrialized nations, according to an examination of data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

For example, the data suggest frequent parent-adolescent activities are 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 often. In 16 of the 21 nations studied, students who frequently had meals with their parents had higher levels of reading literacy. And students who often discuss politics or social issues with their parents had significantly higher levels of reading and mathematics and science literacy.

The NLSY97 data also suggest that high-quality parent-child relationships are linked to better mental well-being and fewer instances of delinquency. Other studies link positive

adolescent-parent relationships to the development of self-confidence, empathy, and a cooperative personality.<sup>3</sup>

**Better Adult Outcomes**

Strong parent-child relationships appear to influence outcomes well 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.<sup>4</sup>
- Close relationships during childhood and adolescence tend to promote self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction into adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

Research evidence not only underscores the importance of parent-child relationships, but suggests 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**

*This report was largely based on the following source:*

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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