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Parent–Child Communication During Adolescence

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Conventional wisdom regards parent–adolescent communication as an oxymoron. As is often the case with adolescence, however, conventional wisdom can be misleading. Although it is certainly true that communication during the adolescent years is a significant challenge for parents and children, this challenge stems primarily from the changing nature of the relationship, not from an inherent inability of adolescents and parents to engage in meaningful conversation (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997). As families navigate the transition from childhood into adulthood, the frequency and content of their interactions change. Increasing adolescent autonomy inevitably alters patterns of self-disclosure, commonly shared experiences, and perceptions of privacy and responsibilities. Yet even in the face of these significant alterations, familial emotional bonds are noteworthy for their resilience and continuity.

To the extent that there is a generation gap, it is as much a product of incongruent perceptions and expectations as it is of inadequate or insufficient conversation (Steinberg, 2001). Parents and adolescents (relationship insiders) do not necessarily share the same view of the relationship and their ability to communicate, nor are their perspectives typically congruent with those of observers (relationship outsiders). Parents and adolescents pursue different implicit goals and timetables regarding the adolescent's autonomy, which may give rise to communication difficulties (Collins & Luebker, 1994). But communication problems are not preordained. Families differ widely in the extent to which autonomy has a corrosive effect on parent–child interactions. For some it is a difficult passage, but most families are well equipped to navigate the developmental challenges of adolescence.

This chapter describes how patterns of parent–child communication are transformed across the adolescent years in terms of changes in the nature and functions of relationships.

Because of space limitations, we focus on salient aspects of parent–adolescent relationships that best illustrate alterations in patterns of communication. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of theoretical accounts of parent–child relationships during adolescence. Most models of development assume perturbations in family relationships during the adolescent years, although there is little agreement as to the implications for family communication. The second section describes continuity and change in manifestations of parent–adolescent closeness. For most families, closeness and interdependence decline across adolescence, but the falloff in constructive communication appears to be especially pronounced for those in troubled relationships. The third section describes continuity and change in manifestations of parent–adolescent conflict. Expressions of anger and coercion may increase during the transition from childhood to adolescence, particularly among families with prior communication difficulties, but strife is not a normative feature of this age period. The concluding remarks place changing patterns of parent–adolescent communication in the larger context of relationship transformations from childhood to adulthood.

THEORETICAL ACCOUNTS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN PARENT–ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

Conceptual models of parent–adolescent relationships may be distinguished according to whether their primary focus is on the adolescent or on the relationship. Those that focus on the individual tend to emphasize the child's biological and/or cognitive maturation as the impetus for changes in the parent–adolescent relationship. Long the prevalent theoretical perspective, these models hold that the manner in which family relationships are transformed and the ensuing consequences for family communication depend on the nature and processes of individual maturation. In contrast, conceptual models that focus on the relationship tend to emphasize continuity and the enduring nature of bonds forged between parents and children. These models hold that because the relationship is inherently stable, functional properties of family communication remain constant despite adolescent development and alterations in the content and form of interactions.

Models of Individual Change and Their Implications for Parent–Adolescent Communication

Both Sigmund Freud (1921/1949) and Anna Freud (1958) assumed that hormonal changes at puberty give rise to unwelcome Oedipal urges that foster impulse control problems and anxiety, as well as rebelliousness and distance from the family. More recent psychoanalytic formulations (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968) also implicate puberty in the drive toward individuation from parents, through a process that emphasizes adolescent autonomy striving and ego identity development rather than impulse control. These models agree that deidealization (an awareness of parental fallibility) and psychic emancipation drive a wedge between parents and children; inner turmoil produced by adolescent hormonal fluctuations exacerbates these relationship difficulties. Family communication is expected to deteriorate as heightened parent–child conflict and diminished closeness follow pubertal maturation. Once pubertal maturation and individuation are complete, typically by late adolescence, conflict should abate and efforts may be undertaken to reestablish relationship

closeness. The end result is permanent changes in the parent–child relationship that permit the adolescent to participate in family communication as an adult.

Evolutionary views of adolescent development also emphasize the role of puberty in transforming relationships and communication (Hill, 1988; Steinberg, 1989). The origins of this process, however, lie not with impulses related to puberty, but rather with evolutionary pressures on the child to move away from the family to find a sexual partner. This model suggests that cognitive advances foster autonomy striving and individuation, which heighten conflict with and diminish closeness to parents. Increased independence may even help to promote pubertal development such that autonomy and individuation create distance between the adolescent and the family, which fosters physical maturation and encourages children to look elsewhere for mates. Increased conflict and diminished closeness are presumed to be an integral part of the move toward adolescent independence. Conflict should eventually subside, but there is no provision for the reestablishment of parent–child closeness. Although relationship transformations inevitably impede family communication, greater parental investment in offspring, as indicated by a prior history of responsive parenting, is thought to provide a foundation of warmth and respect that may enable both parties to transcend the difficulties of adolescence.

A related group of maturational models hold that cognitive development is the impetus for change in parent–adolescent relationships. Predicated on the principle that changes in cognitive capabilities mediate interpersonal behavior (Kohlberg, 1969), the various models all start from the premise that global advances in adolescent logical thought capacities promote abstract and complex reasoning (Piaget, 1932/1965), which foster a nuanced appreciation of interpersonal distinctions and an increasingly reciprocal view of parent–child relationships. As a result, adolescents come to view parents in egalitarian terms, similar to friends; parental reluctance to conform with this view by transforming their vertical affiliation into a horizontal one creates conflict and curtails closeness until family roles are renegotiated (Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980). Cognitive advances may also prompt adolescents to perceive as personal decisions issues that were previously considered to be under parental jurisdiction. In this view, parental insistence on a conventional perspective that emphasizes adult authority over adolescent autonomy heightens conflict until family roles and responsibilities are revised (Smetana, 1988).

These models imply that because parents and adolescents necessarily go through a period in which they experience the same interactions differently, communication between parents and adolescents may be impaired as a consequence of relationship change. After relationship roles have been successfully renegotiated, conflict should subside and parents and children may reestablish closeness and develop a more sophisticated framework for constructive communication (Collins & Luebker, 1994). Given that perceptions mediate relationship experiences, reports of change in parent–adolescent communication are expected to vary across participants, and one or both of these insider perspectives are likely to be at odds with independent outsider perspectives.

Models of Relationship Change and Their Implications for Parent–Adolescent Communication

Alternative models of parent–adolescent relationships focus on forces for stability and change within the dyad rather than on the impact of individual change on the dyad.

Attachment, the most common relational perspective, argues that parent–child relationships are inherently stable over time in terms of the quality of their functioning. Bowlby's (1969) theory focused primarily on infant–caregiver relationships; others (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989) have charted pathways of parent–child relationships through adolescence and beyond. According to this perspective, one person's behavior with another is guided by a set of cognitive representations derived from a history of interactions in relationships. Once established, representations of attachment relationships are presumed to be relatively stable. As a mutually regulated system, parents and children jointly work to maintain the relationship in a manner consistent with their cognitive representations. Specific interactions may vary from one age to the next, depending on the developmental challenges of the period, but the functional significance of interactions and their meaning to the partners are expected to vary little over time (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Applied to adolescence, this suggests that although maturational changes in the child stimulate greater autonomy striving that transforms patterns of communication with parents, perceptions of the quality of the relationship should remain fairly stable (Collins, 1995). Separation and individuation may precipitate conflict and diminished feelings of closeness for a time, but the magnitude of these changes and their impact on the relationship should reflect the prior history of the relationship (Allen & Land, 1999). Adolescents and parents with a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and strong emotional bonds may experience only temporary communication difficulties, whereas those in poorer quality relationships are more likely to sustain disruption and unresolved issues.

Social relations or interdependence models also emphasize the inherent stability of parent–child relationships. In an interdependent relationship, partners engage in mutually influential exchanges and share the perception that their connections are reciprocal and enduring (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). According to this view, interdependence is a hallmark of all close relationships and is manifested in frequent, strong, and diverse interconnections maintained over an extended time (Kelley et al., 1983). These enduring interconnections are internalized by participants and organized into mental schemas that shape expectations concerning future interactions. The obligatory nature of parent–child relationships fosters expectations of interdependence, and participants come to expect behaviors of each other that maintain the connections between them (Collins & Repinski, 1994). Patterns of communication established during childhood are likely to be carried forward into adolescence by both partners, but cognitive advances provide adolescents with a realization that the rules of reciprocity and social exchange that govern interactions with friends are not similarly applied to interactions with parents (Youniss, 1980). Greater autonomy offers adolescents the opportunity to influence interconnections with parents on the basis of perceived relationship costs and benefits (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The amount of change should vary, depending on the degree to which the relationship is perceived to be inequitable. Poor-quality relationships may experience an upsurge in conflict and a concomitant decline in closeness as adolescents express a growing dissatisfaction with unequal treatment and unfavorable outcomes. High-quality relationships, however, may change little, or even may improve, as participants build on mutually beneficent patterns of exchange and attempt to adjust for past inequities.

Both the individual and the relational perspectives on parent–adolescent relationships emphasize two key features of communication: closeness, which functions as a potential attractor that helps to maintain connections between family members despite changes in the

individuals, and conflict, which functions as a potential repellent that creates psychological and physical distance between family members. The remaining sections of our chapter focus on these two relationship features, with particular attention to their implications for communication in the family.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN PARENT–ADOLESCENT CLOSENESS

Closeness refers to the degree to which individuals affect and are affected by each other. Commonly invoked indicators of closeness include affection, cohesion, companionship, interdependence, intimacy, and trust (Collins & Repinski, 1994). There is considerable continuity between positive features of relationships during adolescence and those earlier in life, despite the altered patterns of interaction, emotion, and cognition. Surveys of families in Europe and North America repeatedly indicate that parents and adolescents perceive relationships with one another as warm and pleasant (Collins, 1995). Two comprehensive studies encapsulate these findings. In the first, an epidemiological study of all 14-year-olds on the Isle of Wight (United Kingdom), both parents and adolescents reported a high incidence of positive interactions and a very low incidence of relationship problems such as physical withdrawal and communication difficulties (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976). In the second, a longitudinal study of a representative birth cohort in Stockholm (Sweden), more than 75% of youth in each adolescent age period described "good" relationships with mothers and fathers, whereas fewer than 10% reported a "bad" relationship (Stattin & Klackenberg, 1992).

Developmental Trends

Continuities in parent–child relationships coexist with significant changes in the amount, content, and perceived meaning of interactions, in expressions of positive and negative affect and in interpersonal perceptions of participants (Collins & Russell, 1991). Connectedness during adolescence is manifest in forms that differ from those in earlier life. Parent–child intimacy, as expressed by cuddling and extensive joint interactions, declines as children mature, but conversations in which information is conveyed and feelings are expressed increase (Hartup & Laursen, 1991). These adaptations are appropriate responses to the maturity level and changing needs of the adolescent. Parents remain the most influential of all adolescent relationships, shaping most of the important decisions confronting children, even as their authority over mundane details such as attire wanes (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Stability in parental authority appears to be predicated on flexibility in parent–child communication.

Developmental changes in parent–child closeness are well documented. Subjective rankings of closeness and objective measures of interdependence similarly decrease across the adolescent years (Laursen & Williams, 1997). The amount of time parents and adolescents spend together declines in a linear fashion from preadolescence to late adolescence (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). Relative to preadolescents, adolescents perceive less companionship and intimacy with parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987) and report lower feelings of acceptance by parents and satisfaction with family life (Hill, 1988). Although perceptions of relationships remain generally warm and supportive, both adolescents and parents report less frequent expressions of positive emotions and

more frequent expressions of negative emotions when compared to parents and preado-
lescent children (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Not all trends are negative: Friendliness and
positive affect typically rebound to preadolescent levels sometime during mid to late
adolescence (Larson et al., 1996). Thus, measured in absolute terms, most indices of
closeness in parent–child relationships decline across early adolescence; warmth may in-
crease somewhat during the latter part of adolescence, but interdependence continues to
decline.

Reports of age-related diminished closeness tell but part of the story of relationship
change during adolescence. Such depictions may overstate the significance of changes
in parent–adolescent relationships because they focus exclusively on change at the level
of the group without considering change at the level of the family. When closeness is
examined in terms of the rank order of a single family on a particular dimension relative
to other families on the same dimension, a picture of relationship cohesion emerges.
For instance, longitudinal data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study revealed moderate to
high levels of stability in parent and child reports of positive and negative relationship
qualities (Loeber, Drinkwater, Yin, Anderson, Schmidt, & Crawford, 2000). Indeed, across
childhood and adolescence the relative ordering of families on various dimensions of
closeness remained fairly constant from one year to the next, even though the mean
level of each variable fell. Put in somewhat different terms, despite decreases across the
adolescent years, parents remain second only to friends or romantic partners in closeness,
support, and interdependence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1987; Laursen & Williams, 1997).
These findings suggest a complex dynamic of relationship continuity and change that belie
the conventional view of an abrupt descent into distance and alienation.

Reporter Perspectives

Parent and adolescent views of the family are notable for their divergence, particularly
during early adolescence. Perceptions of family functioning and the treatment of individual
family members vary considerably (Paikoff, 1991). In general, children and parents tend
to see the family in quite different terms. There is considerable overlap between maternal
and paternal reports of their own relationship with an adolescent child and in their reports
of a spouse's relationship with a child (Cook & Goldstein, 1993). Parents seem to agree on
the distinctiveness of their relationships with children. In contrast, adolescents perceive
fewer distinctions between mother–child and father–child relationships. Parents, especially
mothers, tend to hold a more optimistic view of the family than adolescents; mothers
routinely report more warmth and affection among family members than do children, which
may be an attempt to ward off the decline in maternal life satisfaction that accompanies
adolescent detachment (Noller & Callan, 1988; Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990). To recap,
where mothers and fathers see unique relationships, adolescents see a monolithic one, and
where parents see closeness, adolescents see something less.

Emerging evidence points to developmental differences in discrepant views of parent–
child relationship closeness. Consistent with findings that perceptions of self and others
increasingly converge with parents' perceptions during the transition to adolescence
(Allesandri & Wozniak, 1987), adolescent and parent views of positive and negative fea-
tures of their relationship appear to grow more convergent over time. Mismatches in

developmental expectations are highest at the outset of adolescence, with views gradually converging over time (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997). This point was illustrated in a longitudinal study of German family relationships in which large initial discrepancies in reports of cohesion, expressiveness, and support declined across adolescence, at the same time that reports indicated diminished closeness on each dimension (Seiffge-Krenke, 1999).

Individual Differences

Closeness varies from one adolescent to another and from one parent–adolescent pair to another. There are pronounced differences between mother–adolescent and father–adolescent relationships. Adolescents tend to be a good deal closer to their mothers than to their fathers; they spend more time with their mothers and are more apt to share feelings with their mothers (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). In contrast, adolescents view fathers as somewhat distant authority figures to be consulted primarily for information and material support. Sons and daughters have similarly warm relationships with mothers, but sons are typically much closer to fathers than daughters. Differences also emerge as a function of child gender. Parents are better informed about the lives of daughters than about the lives of sons: Parents solicit more information from girls than boys, and girls freely volunteer more information than boys (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). All of these trends tend to accelerate across the adolescent years; pubertal maturation has been linked to diminished relationship closeness, particularly for fathers and daughters (Hill, 1988), and to declines in the amount of time sons spend with mothers and fathers (Larson et al., 1996). Yet it appears that gender differences also have roots in earlier phases of the relationship. One longitudinal study showed that although parent involvement during childhood predicted parent–adolescent closeness for sons and daughters, links between early father involvement and subsequent closeness to father were stronger for girls than for boys (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002).

Little is known about variations in closeness among adolescents and parents of different socioeconomic statuses or ethnic minority groups. One issue in comparing across diverse groups is how to equate the degree of closeness associated with different norms and cultural forms of relating. The suggestion that closeness be operationalized as interdependence may provide a partial solution to this quandary by allowing for members of cultural groups to specify and report on the frequency, duration, diversity, and salience of activities that denote closeness in their respective contexts (Reis et al., 2000). More is known about variation associated with family structure. Warmth and intimacy appear to be higher in divorced, single-parent families relative to intact, two-parent families, but this closeness is sorely tested when the parent remarries (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Implications for Family Communication

Communication is a core element of both interdependence between family members and their subjective feelings of closeness. Disruptions of established patterns of interaction inevitably mean that parent–adolescent communication will differ in frequency, content, and tenor from that of earlier age periods (Collins, 1995). Families differ in the degree to which they are affected by individual and relationship changes. Most are able to capitalize

on greater adolescent maturity by fostering patterns of sustained communication that promote a psychological closeness that is less dependent on frequent interaction. They do so by adapting prior interconnections to meet new demands for adolescent autonomy (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Families with a history of communication problems, however, are missing the adaptive interconnections that form the foundation for new forms of closeness during this period of detachment and, thus, may be unable to surmount the barriers to effective communication that arise during adolescence. These families are at risk for distress and disorder.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN PARENT–ADOLESCENT CONFLICT

Conflict is ubiquitous in all close relationships, but it is especially prominent between family members. Surveys of adolescents indicate that disagreements are most common with mothers, followed by siblings, friends, and romantic partners, and finally fathers; angry disputes arise more frequently with family members than with close peers (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Some scholars view conflict as shorthand for all manner of interpersonal unpleasantness, but this broad definition fosters confusion. In this chapter, conflict is defined in terms of disagreement and overt behavioral opposition (Shantz, 1987) in order to distinguish it from other negative interactions.

Developmental Trends

Disagreements are composed of discrete components with a sequential structure that may be likened to a play or novel (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Typically, there is a protagonist and an antagonist (the conflict participants), a theme (the topic), a complication (the initiation), rising action and crisis (the resolution), and a denouement (the outcome). Most parent–adolescent disagreements concern mundane topics, famously tagged by Hill (1988) as "garbage and galoshes" disputes. Regardless of the topic, the majority of disagreements between parents and adolescents are resolved through submission or disengagement; compromise is relatively rare (Laursen, 1993). Most conflicts between parents and children do not have a negative impact on the relationship, although chronic fighting has been linked to adolescent maladjustment (Smetana, 1996). Disagreements further resemble plots because they unfold according to a prescribed sequence. Parent–adolescent conflicts usually adhere to a coercive script: Relative to those with friends, disagreements with parents more often involve a combination of mundane topics, power-assertive resolutions, neutral or angry affect, and win–lose outcomes (Adams & Laursen, 2001).

Until recently, conflict with parents was thought to follow an inverted U-shaped function that peaked during mid-adolescence. But meta-analytic methods revealed that this presumed trend was an artifact of the failure to distinguish quantity from affective tenor (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). The evidence indicates a decline in the frequency of conflict with parents from early adolescence to mid-adolescence and again from mid-adolescence to late adolescence. However, anger in these conflicts increases from early adolescence to mid-adolescence, with little change thereafter. No reliable age differences have been found in topics or outcomes of parent–adolescent conflict, but there is some indication that resolutions may change across the adolescent years, with rates of submission declining and rates of disengagement increasing (Smetana & Gaines, 1999).

Given the amount of detail available on parent–child conflict during adolescence, it is remarkable how little we know about changes in parent–child conflict from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood. As best we can tell, evidence is limited to a single cross-sectional survey indicating that conflict with mothers and fathers is perceived to be more prevalent during adolescence than during childhood or young adulthood (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Resisting speculation without sufficient evidence, we tentatively offer two additional propositions concerning long-term developmental trends in parent–child conflict: (a) The level of negative affect in parent–child conflict is probably higher during adolescence than it is during any other age period except toddlerhood. (b) The prevalence of coercion in parent–child conflict probably declines across successive age periods from toddlerhood to adulthood.

Reporter Perspectives

Parents and adolescents are known to experience their relationships in dramatically different terms (Larson & Richards, 1994). Less well known, however, is the fact that adolescents appear to have a more accurate (or more honest) view than parents of unpleasant aspects of the relationship. When it comes to describing family conflict, reports from independent observers frequently match those of adolescent children, but neither observer nor adolescent reports accord with parent reports of the same events (Gonzales, Caucé, & Mason, 1996). Although fathers are stereotyped as the family member most likely to be out of touch, accumulating evidence suggests that it is mothers who tend to underestimate the incidence of parent–adolescent conflict and overestimate its severity (Steinberg, 2001). Not coincidentally, mothers also report the most negative repercussions from conflict with adolescent children (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990). Several explanations have been offered. Chief among them is that (a) conflict represents a personal failure for mothers, because it is an indictment of their ability to serve as family conciliators and peacemakers (Vuchinich, 1987); and (b) conflict is the primary vehicle through which adolescents renegotiate their role in the family, which inevitably diminishes maternal (but not necessarily paternal) authority (Steinberg, 1981). The fact that parent and child reports of conflict appear to converge during late adolescence suggests that disagreements, however unpleasant they may be, play an important role in aligning expectations and facilitating communication among family members (Collins et al., 1997).

Individual Differences

Parent–child conflict behavior and patterns of developmental change may be moderated by characteristics of individual participants. We focus here on two important individual level variables: gender and puberty. Accumulating evidence shows that rates of conflict and levels of negative affect are higher in mother–daughter relationships than in other parent–child relationships (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Results from a meta–analysis indicate that conflict rates decline more across adolescence in mother-child relationships than in father–child relationships (Laursen et al., 1998). Few studies have considered conflict affect, but those that have generally agree that gender does not moderate developmental trends. Conflict resolutions vary as a function of parent and adolescent gender. Compromise is more common with mothers than with fathers, and disengagement is more typical

of conflict with sons than of conflict with daughters (Smetana, Yau, & Hanson, 1991; Vuchinich, 1987). Again, there is no reliable evidence that gender moderates patterns of developmental change.

Variation attributed to puberty may be parsed into two sources: pubertal status and pubertal timing. Pubertal status refers to the child's absolute level of physical maturation. Meta-analytic comparisons yield a small positive linear association between pubertal status and parent–adolescent conflict affect, such that greater maturity is linked to greater negative affect (Laursen et al., 1998). No similar association was found for pubertal status and conflict frequency. Observational studies shed light on how family communication patterns may be reorganized in response to conflict at puberty (Hill, 1988; Steinberg, 1981). During the course of a disagreement, fathers interrupt children more at the apex of puberty than during other developmental periods, successfully maintaining their dominant role in family decision making. Mothers and children also interrupt each other more during this period, as the latter challenge the authority of the former. Inevitably, mothers gradually lose influence over decision making to sons and, to a lesser extent, daughters. Pubertal timing refers to the child's relative level of physical maturation. Early maturing sons and daughters appear to experience more frequent and more intense parent–child conflict than adolescents maturing on time (Steinberg, 1989). Several explanations for these findings have been offered, most suggesting that parents do not agree with children that physical precocity is a sufficient basis for enhanced autonomy. In general, the effects of pubertal timing on parent–adolescent conflict are larger and more robust than those for pubertal status (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

Conflict behavior may also be moderated by characteristics of the dyad. Although families vary considerably in terms of their discordant experiences, storm and stress are not normative. Studies suggest that turmoil characterizes a small minority of families with adolescent children (Rutter et al., 1976). Relationship difficulties in these households usually have more to do with dysfunctional family systems or individual mental health problems than with the challenges posed by adolescent development (Offer & Offer, 1975). Setting these troubled families aside, it is still the case that different families have different experiences with parent–adolescent conflict. Cluster analyses based on the rate and severity of parent–adolescent conflict yield three types of families (Smetana, 1996): placid, squabbling, and tumultuous. Placid families reported few conflicts of moderate intensity. Squabbling families reported frequent conflict of low intensity. Tumultuous families reported frequent conflict of high intensity. Of these groups, only the tumultuous appear to experience serious interpersonal strife: Relative to other families, tumultuous families were least likely to successfully resolve conflicts. Conflict outcomes also vary across dyads, such that the significance of a disagreement depends on qualities of connectedness in the relationship (Cooper, 1988). Positive connectedness promotes constructive resolutions to disagreement that foster growth and insight; in less supportive relationships, conflict is considered a hostile attack that may have negative repercussions (Hauser, Powers, Noam, Jacobson, Weiss, & Follansbee, 1984).

Implications for Family Communication

Almost 40 years ago, Bandura (1964) argued against the notion of adolescent turmoil, in general, and against the impression that adolescence brought about a precipitous

upsurge in parent–child conflict, in particular: "The behavioral characteristics exhibited by children during the so-called adolescent stage are lawfully related to, and consistent with, pre-adolescent social behavior" (p. 231). Subsequent longitudinal evidence corroborates this view (Rutter et al., 1976; Stattin & Klackenberg, 1992): Family contentiousness during adolescence is best forecast by family contentiousness during childhood and preadolescence. This means that although many families experience a modest uptick in conflict at the outset of adolescence, disagreement is not a threat to these relationships. It is our view that conflict during adolescence actually strengthens the parent–child relationship by providing a much-needed vehicle for communication (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Disagreements, more than any other form of social interaction, offer parents and adolescents a forum for revising expectations and renegotiating roles and responsibilities in a manner commensurate with the autonomy typically accorded to youth in a particular culture (Collins, 1995). Most families successfully meet this challenge because they are able to draw on healthy patterns of communication established in response to the challenges of earlier age periods. Some families, however, are not so fortunate. Those who do not learn to communicate effectively when children are young are at risk for dysfunctional discord during adolescence because these families may be incapable of constructively addressing the developmental challenges of autonomy and the transformations in parent–child relationships that accompany it.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief, selective review underscores several principles of parent–child communication during adolescence and points the way to areas of inquiry requiring greater attention. We begin with a look forward. Future scholars of family communication would be well advised to consider adolescence as part of a larger developmental transition from childhood to adulthood. Although studies are increasingly exploring family communication across the transition from childhood into adolescence, little is known about the period from adolescence into adulthood. Given that transformations during adolescence purportedly presage adult relationships, it is surprising to discover that we do not know the extent to which parent–child conflict and closeness continue to be transformed through to young adulthood. The broad outlines of change in family communication from one age period to the next have begun to be documented, but specific processes of relationship transformation have yet to be elaborated.

Of additional concern is the relative absence of studies that identify context-specific features of communication. Parent–adolescent relationships are known to differ as a function of characteristics of the family and the environment, including culture and ethnicity, household structure, and socioeconomic status (see Collins & Laursen, in press, for a review). Some contextual variables, such as differences in family communication related to parental divorce and remarriage, are beginning to come into focus (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Unfortunately, this is the exception rather than the rule. The influence of other critical variables, such as ethnicity (García Coll & Pachter, 2002) and social class (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002), remain poorly understood. A better understanding of individual and group differences is essential, because differences among families that result from circumstances of economic disadvantage and experiences as members of minority groups almost certainly affect responses to the changes and prospects of adolescence.

Greater attention to contextual process is imperative, because it may very well be the case that normative adolescent development encompasses several different pathways of parent–child relationship transformation that vary as a function of environmental demands (Collins et al., 2000). We anticipate this research will reveal differences across settings in typical patterns of communication and control but similarities in pathways of influence, such that families emphasizing mutuality, respect for the child's opinions, and training for maturity will be most effective in helping adolescents develop attitudes and behaviors appropriate to their society.

Three principles of family communication stand out from our review. First, the vagaries of communication are deeply embedded in qualities of the parent–adolescent relationship. Some differences between communication during adolescence and communication during childhood reflect physical and cognitive development, as well as normative psychosocial changes in peer involvement and autonomy striving. Other differences, however, reflect the ability of the family to cope with the developmental demands of adolescence. As families adapt long-standing expectations and patterns of interaction to maturational changes in the child, communication typically falters for a time and then recovers much of its accustomed fluency, albeit in more adult forms. Second, despite significant changes in communication during the adolescent years, most families experience a reassuring continuity in their emotional bonds. Moreover, relative to families with a history of communication difficulties, those families that enter adolescence with a history of positive, responsive relations appear to experience fewer disruptions in communication and cope more constructively with those that inevitably do occur. In this manner, families that build upon prior successful developmental transitions handle the demands of adolescence by revising communication patterns in a manner appropriate for incipiently adult offspring. Third, parent–adolescent conflict not only is normative but also fosters communication that is integral to necessary realignments of relationship roles. This constructive process is most likely to occur when conflicts are neither extreme nor persistent and when they arise in a relationship characterized by warmth and closeness. The successful ability of most parents and adolescents to balance conflict and closeness during this period of relationship transformation reaffirms the integral role of communication in human functioning.

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