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, 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

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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 stepparents, compared to 82% of those who live with their biological fathers. About 59% said they enjoy spending time with their stepparents, 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.

The link between academic outcomes 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.

**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.
- Close relationships during childhood and adolescence tend to promote self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction into adulthood.

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 values their love, attention, advice, and support.

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**References**

This report was largely based on the following source:


