

Closeness, authority and independence in families with teenagers

Contemporary views of parent-teenager relationships stress the ideal of the family as a 'democracy'. However, recent legislation has emphasised the importance of parental control and responsibility for the moral development of the young, and education and employment policies have extended young people's dependence on their families well beyond the school-leaving age. This study, by a team at Lancaster University, looked at how 57 families with teenagers described everyday domestic life and the beliefs and values that maintain the family. Interviews with both parents and teenagers revealed that:

- f** Respondents described 'the family' very positively, as a means of developing love, care, help and trust. A strong value was placed on spending time together as a distinct group, particularly by parents.
- f** There was an emphasis on an emerging ideal of companionship between parents and teenagers. Parents and children talked more; this affirmed the maturity of the child and reduced explicit demonstrations of parental control.
- f** However, parents invited communication from teenagers in order to maintain control as well as to provide emotional support and friendship.
- f** Teenagers wanted to be treated as 'equal' with parents, but they recognised parents' need to control and were consequently reluctant to provide too much information about their lives. Their own source of 'power' lay in withholding information or making themselves unavailable.
- f** Mothers and fathers found satisfaction and enjoyment in close relationships with their children, but their teenagers' withdrawal from closeness can herald a parental 'identity crisis'.
- f** Parents often tried to make up for their own perceived failures and missed opportunities, or for their own parents' 'bad' parenting, by becoming highly involved in, and supportive of, their children's activities.
- f** Of those prepared to identify the family member they were most close to, boys and girls selected their mothers more than any other family member.
- f** Fathers were often cast as family disciplinarian, and were sometimes described by teenagers as coercive and even threatening. Nevertheless, fathers described themselves as striving to get away from traditional images of paternal authority.

Background

The contemporary family is described increasingly in 'democratic' terms of individuals' 'rights', 'choices' and 'discussion' where parent-child relationships are being renegotiated - especially those involving teenagers. However, recent legislation has emphasised parental responsibility for young people's moral and educational development and the need for parental control. In the light of this contradiction, this study examines the beliefs and values concerning the family and the tensions surrounding closeness and control in families with teenagers.

Defining the family

All family members were asked "What's important for you about being in a family?" A large number of participants emphasised the central role of the family and were very positive about the benefits of being part of a family:

"The family is there ... sends you out into the world and accepts you back and that's what I think a family is." (Mother)

The most frequent types of response incorporated ideas about: 1) *positive attributes* - families as a source of care, help, support, and love; 2) *taken-for-granted* - the 'just there' or 'lost without it' nature of families; 3) *togetherness* - family unity and belonging; 4) *being there* - the importance of families 'being there' through thick and thin; and 5) *talk* - families as centres of communication. In addition, three other categories were identified: 6) *self* - family as important for affirmation, enhancement and development of self; 7) *money* - families as a source of material provision; and 8) *possession* - families as something 'owned' by an individual (see Figure 1).

Parental investment

Parents in particular placed a strong emphasis on spending time together as a family and on the family as a place where they could develop and express their sense of identity:

"I wouldn't like not to have been a dad ... I think it completes you ... it's a strange kind of feeling in't it - the parental feeling of love is something which is ... totally indefinable and yet it's there, and you know it is there and you can recognise that and it's a very nice feeling ... it is a very, very strong bond ..." (Father)

Parents often identified with their children and gained emotional satisfaction from seeing themselves in their children:

"Sometimes it can be almost like looking in a mirror ... seeing them getting on with life and knowing that you're part of that ... They start developing their own personality and in that personality you can see sometimes ... a very large reflection of yourself ..." (Father of two teenage sons)

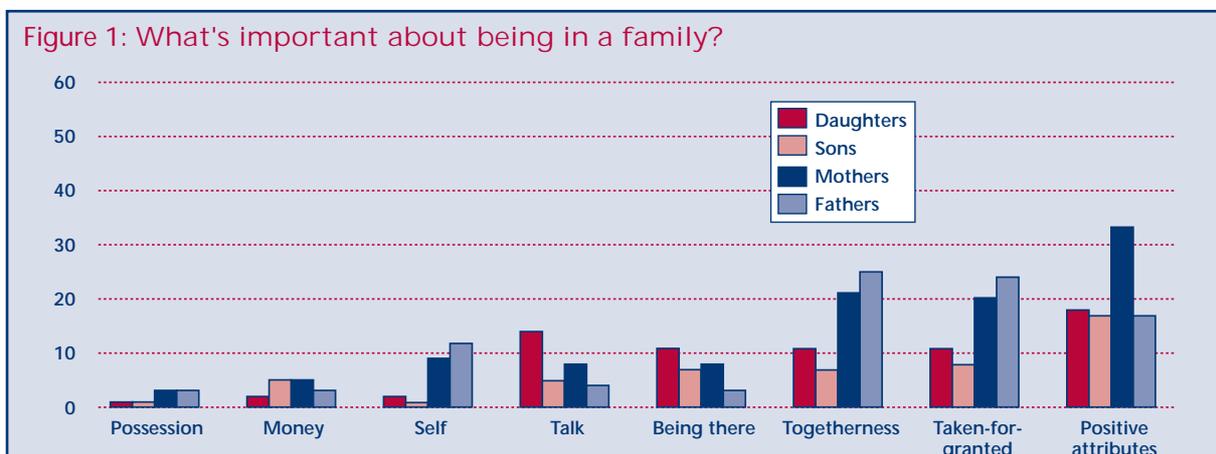
Such close connections meant that many parents wanted their children to make up for opportunities they felt they'd missed in their own lives. This sometimes led to tension in family relationships:

"I think my dad sees himself as, well not a failure but someone who hasn't achieved what they want to be in life and my dad's trying to push us to be what he wants us to be ..." (15-year-old boy)

Parents were often uncertain about the future of their families as their children grew up, and held on to an ideal picture of the family which differed greatly from their actual experience. Strongly resistant to change, parents described their families as 'disappearing' rather than 'developing'. Their accounts described the difficulties they faced in coming to terms with the fact that their sons and daughters increasingly spent their time apart from the family:

"Um, it's changed quite rapidly ... when you put him to bed, even up to nearly 9 months ago, he would always want to come and have a cuddle, right, and so during the cuddle I told him that I loved him. And you could get close to him that way. And I think he just liked

Figure 1: What's important about being in a family?



being with his dad ... But then as he's got older obviously he is changing. He's becoming much more diffident and different and difficult ... so yeah, it's just now it's just kind of a respectful distance has kind of developed, you know, and I don't encroach too much, you know?" (Father)

While many parents believed that good parenting involves encouraging children's development and independence, their image of the family as a tight-knit unit with dependent children meant that they were reluctant to accept their children's move towards adulthood and their own middle and old age:

"People do lead very lonely lives that aren't in a family ... I can imagine the days when the kids are grown up and they've left home - they've got their own lives, own family and what have you. I can imagine, an awful thought - what kind of existence are you going to lead in your granny flat, old people's home or whatever?" (Mother)

Closeness

The parents and teenagers were asked about their relationships and patterns of closeness in the family. Figure 2 shows teenagers' responses concerning change. One third described their relationships with their parents as 'closer' as they progressed into and through secondary school. These teenagers saw their own contribution to the relationship as more mature and their parents as being more accommodating to their needs and wishes. The next most popular response amongst girls was that there was now 'more talk with mum'. For boys, the next most likely response described the feeling that parental control was diminishing. Other responses emphasised the greater centrality of peers rather than parents ('peers supplanting parents'). Some teenagers pointed to external factors such as illness, changing work patterns, the arrival of a baby, or parental separation. Finally, two groups of responses emphasised changing relationships with fathers - 'more talk with dad', and, in the case of a few girls, a 'growing apart from dad'.

Although one quarter of the teenagers would not be pressed to identify an individual in the family to whom they were closest, the remainder were three times more likely to mention mothers rather than fathers. Mothers were more likely to be seen as good listeners and as easier to talk to.

Parents and teenagers described 'closeness' in terms of an ideal of companionship between friends and equals:

"When you are younger you think it's like they're the thing you look up to, as all things good and everything ... But then as you get older you find they are just human beings and they become more like really good friends, than like ... a good person who looks after you." (14-year-old boy)

Democracy and authority

Many parents and teenagers stressed the value of open communication in their developing relationships:

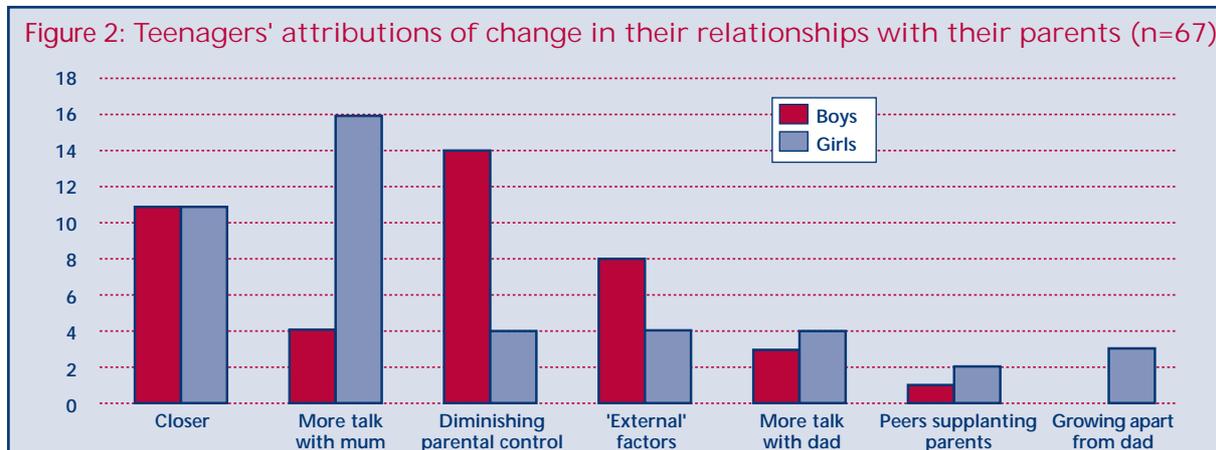
"I am actually very open with my mum and dad, like I said I am very lucky, I can tell them almost anything ... it's because they are very honest with me, I think." (14-year-old girl)

However, most 'open talk' focused on the teenager's not the parent's life. Parents reported that they generally choose not to disclose much of their own lives to their teenage children. While openness is clearly seen as an ideal in their relationships, it is not reciprocal. Parents seek openness as a way of maintaining parental control through information. One mother described her husband's direct strategy:

"He will come straight out and ask personal things ... not being nosy, but important things that we should know."

Teenagers recognised this and developed ways of avoiding giving out more information than they wished to, making themselves unavailable for communication by, for example, withdrawing to their

Figure 2: Teenagers' attributions of change in their relationships with their parents (n=67)



bedrooms or staying out of the house with their friends.

Parents' interest and involvement in their children's homework produced contradictory feelings about closeness with their children and pressures to maintain control over them. Many parents expressed a strong desire to control their children's academic progress; this was driven both by their anxieties about their children's futures and by their perception of their parental roles:

"She has had one detention for not taking in her homework. So we've got this routine now where I check her books ... I've got to get up really early to check her bag before she goes to school." (Father)

Many parents were unwilling to relinquish control and to allow their children to make their own mistakes, perhaps because of the possible reflection on their parenting.

While much parental control via information gathering was implicit, families also described explicit parental authority. The typical pattern was for fathers to be described as those who 'discipline' while mothers 'talk' and are closer to their children. While they were frequently reluctant to act as disciplinarians, fathers were often called upon to maintain order:

"If there are issues of discipline I think it is, sometimes, more effective coming from a dad than it can be from a mum ... just because of pure physical difference." (Father)

Teenagers frequently rejected the sorts of judgements and sanctions issued by their parents, underlining their belief in ideals of democracy:

"I'm not gonna smack or hit my kid. I know it's hard to say but I know I don't - I dislike it and I'm not going to shout 'cause I know how much I dislike that as well and I am going to listen to what my son or daughter might say ... I am not going to ground my children either because ... it's so important to making friends when you're younger ... I'm not going to punish them." (15-year-old boy)

Conclusion

Life in families with teenagers presents fundamental contradictions between ideals and reality. While teenagers are portrayed by themselves and by their parents as increasingly 'doing their own thing', parents frequently asserted the importance of 'spending time together'. While parents often portray 'family time' as a chance simply to be together, teenagers are more likely to emphasise 'benefits' such

as care, attention and material provision. Despite the gap between aspirations and everyday life, 'the family' remains fundamentally important to individual hopes and desires:

"It means a lot to my mum ... when she sees us like all sat together and stuff. She likes it ... when me brother comes down when we have tea, when we sit down together ... 'cause it reminds her of when we were little and she sees that we haven't drifted apart and that we're still close to one another ... If we didn't [get on] it would upset her." (15-year-old girl)

The researchers conclude that:

- When policy-makers focus on getting the best out of young people they must not overlook the impact of their policies on family relationships;
- Policy which compounds parental authority reinforces roles that parents find difficult and which may be resented by teenagers;
- Parents think a great deal about how they parent. Policy-makers need to listen to parents and to draw on their experience.

About the study

This study was undertaken by Wendy Langford, Charlie Lewis, Yvette Solomon and Jo Warin. The research, carried out at Lancaster University, is based on empirical data gathered from families in the large northern town of Rochdale. The sample consisted of 227 parents and teenagers aged 11-16 in 57 families from a diversity of social backgrounds representing a range of parental employment patterns, income, parental education, types of housing, and family composition.

How to get further information

The full report, **Family understandings: Closeness, authority and independence in families with teenagers** by Wendy Langford, Charlie Lewis, Yvette Solomon and Jo Warin, is published for the Foundation by the Family Policy Studies Centre (ISBN 1 901455 43 2, price £12.95). It is available from the Family Policy Studies Centre, 9 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SN, Tel: 0207 388 5900, Fax: 0207 388 5600, email: fpssc@mailbox.ulcc.ac.uk (please add £1.50 p&p).

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