

Parenting teenagers: relationships and behaviour



Informing service provision

The research summarised in this briefing will be used by voluntary and public sector agencies to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* will work with these agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

About Families aims to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing relevant and accessible evidence to inform service development.

If you are interested in being involved in one of our forum events to discuss the implications of our research findings for service development, please contact Natalia Duncan on 0131 651 1941 or email natalia.duncan@ed.ac.uk

About Families is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Capability Scotland and Parenting across Scotland.

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Liz McMahon, Area Manager, Aberlour Child Care Trust

Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive, Relationships Scotland

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We know from calls to helplines that parents of teenagers often struggle and feel isolated, particularly around behaviour and relationship issues. *About Families* asked what research could tell us about these issues to help inform voluntary and public sector agencies in the development of services. The full report is available at www.aboutfamilies.org.uk

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Key points

- **Conflict:** Conflict between parents and teens is not necessarily a bad thing and can play a useful role in teenagers' development. It is important how often, with whom and why conflict happens, along with how parents manage their own behaviour
- **Communication:** Good communication in families can contribute to the development of social skills and positive outcomes for teenagers
- **Relationships:** The personalities of both parents and teenagers contribute to the quality of their relationship and are also linked to how much control the parent tries to impose on their teenager
- **Independence:** Parents are often anxious as teenagers become more independent. Parents cope better if they see increasing independence as an appropriate part of adolescent development, are able to maintain boundaries between their own feelings and their teenager's, and feel comfortable with close relationships
- **Parental satisfaction:** How happy parents feel about their parenting is linked to how they view their teenager's development. Adolescence can be a positive time when parents can reassess their teenager's capabilities as they mature
- **Parenting together:** Parents agreeing about their approach to parenting is more important than who does what, or how much mothers and fathers are involved. Both parents of disabled teenagers are likely to be involved in all areas of their teenager's life. Fathers are less likely to seek parenting support and usually look to their partner when they do
- **Divorce and re-partnering:** Following divorce, those boys able to maintain some boundaries between their own feelings and their mother's were less likely to be affected by their mother's negative comments about their father. Teenagers' relationships with their father are not affected by their mother remarrying, whether they become close to their stepfather or not
- **Monitoring behaviour:** There are differences between mothers and fathers in how they find out about their teenagers' lives. Generally, parents think their teenagers should tell them more than teenagers think they should, and overestimate how much they are told. Ensuring that teenagers feel comfortable about sharing information about themselves can be more effective in deterring them from problem behaviour than trying to control their activities. Both teenagers and parents make judgments over what they feel teenagers should tell parents about which links to the kind of areas they believe parents have authority over
- **What do we know about parenting teens?:** Research tends to focus on reducing social problems and not necessarily on issues of most concern to parents or teenagers. A view of the teenage years as problematic is over-represented and there is less research and guidance aimed at ordinary parents and teenagers with everyday problems. Most research is based on traditional heterosexual two-parent families and does not address the issues of families affected by disability. However, the issues arising around parenting teenagers are applicable to other types of families

Conflict

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing and can play a useful role in teenagers' development. However, the type of conflict, who it is with and how often it happens is important. Conflicts with parents usually involve parents wishing to control teen behaviour and may not allow for teenagers to practice managing conflict. In contrast, conflicts with friends usually involve some attempt to limit damage, withdraw from conflict and attempt to preserve the relationship. Conflict with friends can therefore help teenagers to learn about conflict management and develop a range of emotional responses.

Involving teenagers in arguments between parents does not mean that parents and teenager are close. Teenagers are more likely to be drawn into arguments between their parents if conflict is continual and antagonistic. Also, they are more likely to involve themselves if they feel threatened in some way by parents arguing in an attempt to cope with their feelings.

Parents can contribute to reducing conflict by managing their own behaviour and emotions.

Communication and relationships

Good parenting is linked with good communication and active listening. Teenagers who are communicated with and involved in family decisions are more competent in making decisions about their lives and less likely to engage in problem behaviours.

Although boys may appear less socially competent than girls, it should not be assumed that they do not value social skills. They approach them in a different way.

The personalities of both parents and teenagers contribute to the quality and warmth of their relationship. How much control the parent tries to impose is more related to the teenager's than the parent's personality.

Appropriate levels of parental control may be different for different families depending on the amount of emotional and developmental support the teenager receives from their parents. Where families are highly supportive of their teenager, maintaining high levels of parental control may be developmentally inappropriate, and teenagers can respond to this by engaging in problematic behaviour. However, control can have a positive effect on teenagers' wellbeing where there is less support.

Moving to independence

For parents, feeling some anxiety as their teenager becomes more independent is normal. However,

problems can arise if this anxiety compels them to act in a way which is intrusive or inhibits the teenager's exploration of new environments and relationships. Parents may cope better when they can view events that indicate their teenager is becoming independent as a healthy and appropriate part of adolescent development.

Parents are more likely to feel rejected by separation and respond negatively if they are overly anxious, are less able to view themselves as separate and independent from their children, or are not comfortable in close relationships. Less anxious parents see disagreement as reflecting normal growth toward independence and this is less likely to result in conflict.

Parental satisfaction

How happy parents feel about their parenting is linked to how they view their teenager's development. Adolescence can be a positive time when parents can reassess their teenager's capabilities as they mature. Parents who see their teenager's increasing independence as an indication of competence are more likely to feel satisfied with their parenting. Parents of disabled teenagers reported feeling that seeing their teen develop socially was a key factor in their parental satisfaction.

Mothers and fathers, together or apart, find greatest parental satisfaction when they either feel they are being supportive, view themselves as accepting, warm and affectionate towards their teen, or see their teenager acquiring qualities which they feel reflects their successful parenting.

Parenting together

Mothers and fathers may contribute in different ways to parenting, but both are important.

Parents agreeing about how involved they are in parenting is more important than who does what or how much, even where there are traditional roles.

However, parents of disabled teenagers reported feeling that both mothers and fathers were likely to be involved in all areas of their teen's life as working as a team was necessary.

Fathers are less likely to seek parenting support and usually look to their partner for any support. This is reflected in calls to ParentLine. Between 2007 and 2010 only 20% were from males. The only issue where ParentLine generally receives more calls from males

than females is over retaining contact with their children following separation. The impression given is that male callers feel they need a 'good reason' to call, often meaning they call when at crisis point.

Divorce and re-partnering

Following divorce, those boys able to maintain some boundaries between their own feelings and their mother's were less likely to be affected by their mother's negative comments about their father.

Teenagers' relationships with their father are not affected by their mother remarrying, whether they become close to their stepfather or not.

Relationships with stepfathers are more likely to be close if the teenager is already close to their mother. However, the relationship between mother and teenager may become less close when the mother lives with another partner, but not necessarily if she marries her partner.

What do parents know about their teenagers?

There are differences between mothers and fathers in how they find out about their teenagers' lives. However, how much they know could be more a result of what teenagers choose to tell them than what they try to find out.

Some parents of disabled teenagers rely much more on other people, such as practitioners, to gain information as direct communication with their teen can be limited by their disability.

Ensuring that their teenager feels comfortable about sharing information about themselves could be more effective in deterring them from problem behaviour than trying to control their activities. Communicating in this way also means that the parent has more opportunity to offer advice.

Both teenagers and parents make judgements over what they feel teenagers should tell their parents about and these judgements are closely linked with areas they believe parents have authority over. What teenagers actually tell their parents is closely linked to these beliefs. However, conflict can still arise over what information is shared and what is withheld, even when both parties say they want a close relationship.

Although some parents of disabled teenagers reported feeling that more detailed communication is necessary due to the nature of the disability, generally the issues were felt to be the same regardless of disability.

Generally, parents think their teenagers should tell them more than teenagers think they should, and overestimate how much they are told.

Parents and teenagers use mobile phones to negotiate movements and curfews. Parents intrude on teenagers' independent time and activities more by using mobiles, but teenagers generally feel this is outweighed by the extra freedom being able to negotiate brings.

Parents of disabled teenagers who were able to use mobile phones reported a particularly heavy reliance on mobiles where the teen was felt to be more vulnerable due to their disability.

Discussion

There are fewer organisations, parenting programmes and policy initiatives aimed at parents of teenagers than at parents of younger children. However, the evidence explored in this report, including the number of calls to helplines from parents of teenagers, suggests that this highlights a deficiency in service provision rather than lack of need. Organisations and professionals who do not specifically cater for parents of teenagers may find this report useful in considering whether this is an area that could and should be developed.

Disability is often seen as a separate issue from parenting. Only 5% of calls to ParentLine in 2009 referred to disability. Families affected by disability were not included in research studies, and conversely there can be a perception that if research is about disability then it isn't about anything else. About Families hopes to enable parenting professionals to develop services appropriate for all families, and likewise to help those working in the disability field to appreciate the impact of the family context. Some parenting issues may have a different impact if the family is affected by disability, for other issues it may make no difference at all. Any impact may depend on the type of disability. Also, there may be elements of good practice that can be shared between those working with families affected by disability, and those who work with parents generally.

Most research is based on traditional heterosexual two-parent families. Although there are issues arising around parenting teenagers which obviously resonate for all types of families, more research around a more diverse range of families and parents might be useful. There is also much more research based in the US than the UK or Scotland.