



Parenting teenagers: relationships and behaviour

Topic report

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



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Given the prevalence of concerns over relationship issues, and the importance of these issues for well-being, *About Families* asked what research could tell us about relationship and behaviour issues in parenting teenagers.

This report presents a review of research evidence to help inform voluntary and public sector agencies in the development of services.

It has been produced by *About Families*, a partnership which seeks to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing accessible and relevant evidence to inform service development.

1. Summary of key findings

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.

Parenting and support

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.

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

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.

What do parents know about their teenagers?

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.

Popular research topics

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.

2. Background

Why parenting teenagers?

Parenting during the teenage years is commonly seen as particularly challenging, with emerging demands of puberty, peer influence and risky behaviour. Young people's transition to independence is less structured, more gradual, and takes longer than in the past, yet in some ways younger teens are introduced to elements of growing up at a younger age than previous generations (Nuffield Foundation 2009; Nelson 2009). Puberty starts earlier than in the past, the distinction between childhood and adulthood is less clear, and economic difficulties make it harder to leave the family home during late teens. This means that adolescence is stretched at both ends, creating an artificially long period of dependence and semi-independence (Nelson 2009).

Calls to parenting helplines in Scotland feature a significant number of calls about parenting teenagers. Behaviour and relationship issues consistently appear prominently, making up around half of calls to ParentLine alone.

"The hardest thing is coping with my teenage daughter. She has changed so much"

ParentLine survey

"It's a real challenge understanding why they do what they do and trying to see things from their perspective. I know compromise is important but I do find it hard sometimes"

ParentLine survey

"There's lots of advice and help for parents of young children, but parents of teenagers are struggling."

ParentLine survey

Research has found that the quality of family relationships is a fundamental aspect of young people's wellbeing and more important than change, family structure or even quantity of time spent together (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships 2010).

What we found

The focus of much research found during our investigation was centred on how to improve outcomes for teenagers, such as improving mental health or reducing delinquency. Research around parenting mostly looks at the effects of parents' behaviour on teenagers' lives. There was much less research

about what it is like to be the parent of a teenager, or what effect having teenage children has for parents. Similarly, there was little on teenagers' views and experiences of being parented. Having said that, it does follow that when teenagers fare better this is likely to have a positive impact on parental well-being and satisfaction.

Unsurprisingly there is a clear link between the most popular research topics and issues causing the greatest political and social concern. Most research is around alcohol and substance misuse, sexual behaviour and teenage pregnancy. This suggests a view of adolescence as a universally problematic period of emotional turmoil and rebellion (Nelson 2009). The impression given is that we expect the experience of adolescence to be negative and difficult.

When looking at parenting, the central underlying question of research often appears to be how parents can influence young people to behave better rather than how parents and teenagers can get on better. In other words, the approach is one of controlling and influencing rather than relationship building. However, some authors are calling for a new perspective on the family, which emphasises the different viewpoints that parents and teenagers can bring to each other (Steinberg 2001, cited in Nelson 2009).

The issues of most concern to parents who call helplines are about managing behaviour and getting on, which appear therefore to contrast with the focus of much research. On the one hand, relationship and behaviour concerns in calls to helplines may mean that parents have need for support in these areas which are not being met. On the other hand, it could indicate a lack of confidence, or feelings of increasing pressure, in their role as parents during the teenage years. Information from ParentLine indicates that many parents feel they have failed in some way if they view something as going wrong. In discussing this review, people who work with parents told us that parents tend to feel more isolated during the teenage years since there is much less contact with other parents at school gates or other activities than when children are younger. Also, parents may feel less comfortable talking about teenagers who are developing their independence and boundaries over privacy. This could mean that parents think they are not doing a good job, whereas what they are experiencing may actually be the result of a typical part of adolescence. Calls to ParentLine consistently

feature issues that could be described as typical and are generally split equally between calls about teenage boys and girls.

Indeed, psychologists and others working in the field suggest that serious problems only exist among a minority of teenagers (Scabini 2006, cited in Nelson 2009). A focus mainly on problems, together with increasing demands on parents to take more responsibility for their children's upbringing, can fuel anxiety and undermine confidence (Nelson 2009).

Does this comment still ring true today? "Parents of teenagers have more influence on young people than any other group of adults; and of all parents, they are

the ones with the lowest self-confidence" (Coleman 1997, cited in Nelson 2009).

The studies we selected to contribute to this review were around parenting teenagers and relationships or behaviour issues. Details of the search methodology can be found in appendix i.

About the research used in this review

Twenty-two individual studies, a literature review, a briefing paper and small-scale independent research with families affected by disability contributed to this report.

Breakdown of 22 research studies	
Family structure	Most households involved in the studies had two resident parents (usually biological parents) unless a different family structure (Kenyon et al 2009; King 2009) was specifically being looked at.
Participants	All of the studies involved teenagers directly in the research, and all but two (Adams et al 2001; Fosco et al 2010) involved at least one parent.
Parent participants	Fifteen studies involved both mothers and fathers (or just referred to plural 'parents') and five involved mothers only. Two studies (Coatsworth et al 2010; Smetana et al 2006) noted that fathers were particularly hard to involve. One of these (Coatsworth et al 2010) ended up only using data from mothers and teenagers as the response from fathers was so low.
Country	The majority of research studies included were from the USA (12: Adams et al 2001; Bumpus et al 2001; Coatsworth et al 2010; Crouter et al 2005; Day et al 2009; Fosco et al 2010; Henry et al 1995; Hock et al 2001; Kenyon et al 2008; King 2009; Phares et al 2009; Smetana et al 2006), with a small number from the Netherlands (6: Denissen et al 2009; Finkenauer et al 2005; Hawk et al 2009; Keijsers et al 2009; Keijsers et al 2010; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al 2009), the UK (3: Gillies et al 2001; Solomon et al 2002; Williams et al 2010), and Sweden (1: Kerr et al 2010).
Environment	Most studies were conducted in urban settings along with surrounding municipalities and some rural areas.
Demographic	Most studies were carried out with middle, lower middle and working class families.
Ethnic diversity	Most studies were carried out with white or predominantly white families and one study (Gillies et al 2001) referred to involving participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Otherwise, ethnic diversity referred to was usually African-American or Mexican-American, with some Hispanic and British Punjabi.
Disability	No studies referred to including participants affected by disability. One study reported specifically de-selecting a family as the teenager was "developmentally disabled" (see below).
Methods used	Thirteen studies used quantitative methods, six used qualitative and three used both.
When	All studies were published between 1995 and 2010

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and teenagers were not explicitly included in the research found during this review. One study reported specifically de-selecting a family as the teenager was “developmentally disabled”. This suggests an important and overwhelming gap in the literature. This meant we could not say whether the issues explored in this review impact on families affected by disability in similar or different ways.

To address this gap, we conducted a survey and interviews with disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers. We presented them with some of the key research findings and asked whether they thought the issues would be different or the same for families affected by disability. This research was small scale and is not representative of the views of families affected by disability across Scotland, since that is outwith the scope of this work. The intention was to include some reflections from disabled families to inform discussions of what action is needed to meet the needs of parents of teenagers, and to ensure that the voice of disabled families was included.

Reflections from the families who participated in the research are included at the relevant points throughout this report.

There is research carried out with disabled families - but we were looking specifically for research around parenting teenagers and relationship and behaviour issues. The research that did include disability did not fall within this specific topic area.

The profile of respondents to both the interviews and surveys is shown to the right:

Number of responses

Disabled parent	21
Parent with disabled teenager	21
Other (works with disabled teenagers)	1

Relationship:

Mother	28
Father	13
Other (foster parents/ work with teenagers)	2

Disability of parent:

Visual/hearing impairment	4
Learning difficulty	1
Mental ill health	1
Physical difficulty	17
Other disability	1

Disability of teenager:

Visual/hearing impairment	3
Learning difficulty	16
Mental ill health	4
Physical difficulty	18
Other disability	6

Age of teenager:

13-14	11
15-16	12
17-19	18

Of the ten interview participants, eight were disabled parents and four were parents of disabled teenagers. Five were single parents (two fathers, three mothers).

3. Findings

a. Conflict

Conflict is not always a bad thing.

Research suggests that conflict has a useful role in constructing family privacy boundaries. For 15-16 year olds, conflict with parents was more frequent if teenagers thought their privacy was being invaded. Here, conflict can draw attention to different perceptions of where boundaries lie and provide teenagers with a way of directly dealing with what they think is an invasion of their privacy. Although confrontation is unpleasant while it's happening, it can send clear messages and restore boundaries (Hawk et al 2009).

Conflict can offer teenagers the opportunity to learn how to manage conflict.

Research found that conflicts between teenagers and their parents, and teenagers and their friends, were structured in a similar way (a conflict was over a particular topic which resulted in a resolution and an outcome). However, because friendships are not necessarily permanent relationships and involve sharing power, conflicts with friends usually involved attempts to limit damage caused by conflict and some withdrawal from conflict in an attempt to preserve the relationship. In contrast, ties with parents are generally assumed to be permanent and do not depend on equal power sharing. Teenagers' conflicts with parents therefore usually featured more coercion from parents. Although what the conflict was about differed (conflicts with parents were usually over 'daily hassle' topics such as getting a lift somewhere; with friends over relationship issues), this did not explain this difference in dynamics. The authors conclude that conflicts with friends provide an important way for teenagers to learn about conflict management, because disagreements with parents may offer few opportunities to practice mitigation. They suggest that teenagers who lack friends, or lack friends with social skills, run the risk of developing unsuitable conflict management strategies (Adams et al 2001).

However, high levels of mother-daughter conflict can mean that daughters do not develop a range of emotional responses.

A study found that teenage girls involved in conflicts with their mothers more than about twice a week had conflicts over a large number of topics but bought

the same emotional state to them – these girls felt the same, no matter what. For example, mother and daughter often argue over going out. The daughter wants to attend a party but “knows” her mother won't let her go and prepares for the inevitable conflict with an angry face. Mother sees this angry face, knows what's coming next, and puts on an angry face herself. The result is an angry fight within seconds. The more often this pattern occurs the more often small cues, for example a bad look, can trigger this type of conflict pattern. Girls who have a narrow range of emotional responses would react in the same way to conflict over any topic. For them, the sheer fact of having another conflict with their mothers was enough to trigger their dominant emotional state, regardless of what the conflict was about.

In contrast, girls who had some conflict with their mothers, but less than about twice a week, developed a wider emotional range and could bring different emotional responses to different topics of conflict (Lichwarck-Aschoff et al 2009).

Teenagers are more likely to be drawn into arguments between their parents when parental conflict is continual, antagonistic, and unresolved.

Research found that if teenagers feel threatened in some way by conflict between their parents, they are more likely to involve themselves in an effort to cope with their feelings. This may lead teenagers to blame themselves or feel responsible for solving their parents' problems. For teenagers, a feeling of being caught in the middle of parental disagreements always had a negative affect on their relationships with both their mothers and fathers, resulting in even more conflict and less closeness. Drawing teenagers into parental conflict is not a sign of an exceptionally close teenager-parent relationship, it is the result of poorly managed inter-parental conflict. The authors suggest that for these parents, help with understanding appropriate emotional boundaries can help to promote healthy development for their teenagers (Fosco et al 2010).

Parents can help to reduce conflict by managing their own responses.

This review did not examine parenting programmes, though some studies we did look at noted the lack of programmes aimed at parents of teenagers. Little information came up about what might be done to address conflict in families with teenagers and research was more focused on the impact of conflict

on adolescent development. However, there is some research to indicate that mothers who used techniques to manage their anger had better relationships with their teenagers and became more 'in tune' with their teenager's emotions (Coatsworth et al 2010).

Key findings: 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.

The source of the conflict is not necessarily the teenager, even if they are involved. Parents can be the source of, and contribute to, family conflict. Likewise, parents can contribute to reducing conflict by managing their own behaviour and emotions.

Discussion points:

- Is conflict seen as a typical part of the growing up process?
- Do parents of boys and girls have different experiences of conflict?
- How do parents handle conflicts in relationships with their teenager? What coping strategies do they have?
- How can parents manage their own reaction to conflict? How can services support parents with this?
- How can these findings be used in advising parents about dealing with conflict?
- Is the economic climate likely to contribute to increased pressure and conflict in families and what of the implications of these issues for service provision?

b. Parenting and support

The involvement of both mothers and fathers matter.

Mothers' parenting may generally be more centred on relationship building skills and fathers' parenting on behaviour and obedience. However, this does not suggest that mothers do not matter for preventing or dealing with poor behaviour and fathers do not matter

for encouraging positive behaviour. Research found that when one parent was less involved (for whatever reason), the other parent's involvement compensated for this (Day et al 2009).

Other research (Phares et al 2009) highlights that the amount of time parents spend with their teenagers (beyond a basic minimum) may be less important than what parents do with that time. In other words, parents just being around or available may not be enough. It is important that parents use that time to communicate and build relationships with their teenagers.

Mothers take more responsibility for their teenagers' activities than fathers, but this doesn't necessarily lead to parental conflict.

In line with other studies in this area, research found that mothers take much more responsibility for the activities of their teenagers (such as school work, discipline, daily care and fun activities) than fathers. Although fathers felt they took more responsibility than mothers thought they did, both agreed that the mother took the most. However, neither mothers nor fathers said they were unhappy with this. Mothers were happiest when fathers were involved in all areas of their teenager's activities, such as school work, discipline, daily care and fun activities. Fathers were most satisfied, and felt most comfortable, when they were involved in discipline and fun activities. Conflict between parents was lowest when both parents were satisfied with the way that responsibilities were shared (Phares et al 2009).

Mothers are more likely to seek support than fathers.

A study with parents of 16 – 18 year olds found that fathers were less likely to mention any need for help or reassurance, and saw their partners as the primary source of knowledge about parenting. In contrast, mothers saw support as important and sometimes sought support from sources other than their partners (Gillies et al 2001). Indeed, of 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.

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers were asked to comment on some of the above findings relating to responsibility for activities.

Both disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers generally agreed that mothers take more responsibility than fathers for the activities of their teenagers, and that mothers are most satisfied when fathers are involved in all areas. Generally, it was felt that parents' personalities and their role within the family were the key factors determining involvement, regardless of any disability.

However, there was some disagreement over the finding that fathers gained most satisfaction when involved in discipline and fun activities. Disabled parents felt that mothers and fathers were equally likely to be satisfied by being involved in all areas if their disability allowed for it (for example, some disabled parents do not drive). Parents of disabled teenagers said that both parents have to be involved in all areas as they need to work more as a team in parenting their teenager.

Key findings: Parenting and support

Both parents are important to parenting, even though most of the time mothers and fathers may contribute in different ways.

Mutual agreement between parents 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.

Discussion points:

- What are the implications for parenting as a lone parent?
- How do parents communicate about parenting their teenager? What is most effective?
- How can couples be supported to agree how to share their responsibilities in a way that is consistent and benefits the whole family?
- How do parents manage their time with their teenagers? What is most effective?
- What are the implications for families affected by disability and how can they be supported?
- What implications does the finding that fathers are less likely to seek support have for service provision?

c. Communication and relationships

Good parenting is linked with good communication and active listening.

It is generally agreed that communication and listening play an important role in successful parenting. Warmth combined with consistent discipline over clear standards is generally viewed as an optimum balance. However, respect is also important. Teenagers who are communicated with and involved in family decisions are seen as more competent in making decisions about their lives and less likely to engage in problem behaviours (Henricson 2002, cited in Nelson 2009).

Boys understand and value social skills, despite the traditional view that they are less competent in them than girls.

A study found that 14-15 year old boys did value relationship and social skills, but communicated in a more task focused and less interactive way than girls (Thurlow 2001, cited in Nelson 2009).

The personalities of both teenagers and their parents are linked to the quality of their relationship.

Research found that the more agreeable teenagers are, the warmer the parent-teenager relationship. This link became stronger as the teenager got older, perhaps because as they become more independent they are more willing to find solutions agreeable to all parties.

The more the teenager is able to regulate their own behaviour the less parents try to restrict or control them, perhaps because these teenagers are seen to have the qualities required to be more independent. If teenagers don't appear to have the ability to regulate their behaviour, parents may react by exerting more restrictive control.

The more open teenagers were to experience, the more control they faced, perhaps because open people like to experiment with rules and conventions.

The personalities of both parents and teenagers seemed to play an equal part in the warmth of their relationship. However, the level of control parents imposed was more related to the teenager's personality (Dennisen et al 2009).

Parental control can have different effects in different families.

Other research suggests that what is an appropriate level of parental control can differ depending on the amount of emotional and developmental support the teenager receives from their parents. Where families are highly supportive of their teenagers, maintaining high levels of parental control may be developmentally inappropriate and teenagers may respond to this by engaging in problematic behaviour. However, control may have a positive effect on teenagers' wellbeing where there is less support (Keijsers et al 2009).

Key findings: Communication and relationships

Good communication in families can contribute to development of social skills and positive outcomes for teenagers.

Although boys may appear less socially competent than girls, it should not be assumed that they do not value these skills. They may just be approaching these skills, and showing that they value them, in a different way.

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. Personality and the family environment contribute to deciding levels of control.

Discussion points:

- What help is available for parents and teenagers in negative relationships? What sort of help would parents like to see?
- How do services work with parents to encourage more open communication and involving teenagers in decision making?
- How do parents decide what is an appropriate level of monitoring and supervision for their teenagers? How do services support them with this?
- How can services help parents to negotiate agreements that work for both sides?

d. Moving to independence

There is a lack of data on trends in parenting, particularly for teenagers. However, social trends surveys show a shift in what attitudes parents value in their children – the emphasis has shifted and parents like to see their children's growing independence and autonomy rather than valuing obedience. That said, research suggests that parenting behaviour has a stronger influence on young people's development than parents' attitudes (Nuffield Foundation 2009).

How parents react to their teenager's increasing independence is important.

Research suggests that parents can expect to feel some anxiety as their teenager becomes increasingly independent, but this anxiety should not compel them to act in a way which would be intrusive or inhibitive of the teenager's exploration of new environments and relationships. Parents should view events that indicate their teenager is becoming independent as a healthy part of adolescent development. They should feel comfortable in providing a secure base for their teenager and being available for them when needed. Research has found that how anxious parents feel and how comfortable they feel in providing a secure base is linked to parent-teenage conflict.

Some parents have particularly high levels of anxiety over their teenager's increasing independence which may not significantly decrease until after the teenager leaves home. Parents able to view themselves as separate and independent from their children were more able to provide a secure base for their teenager.

In contrast, parents who had weaker emotional boundaries were more anxious over separation.

The authors suggest that this anxiety reflects both a reluctance to relinquish control and denial of their teenager's need for independence. Anxious parents reported high levels of negative communication with their teenagers. This may be because they are more likely to see adolescent independence as challenging (i.e. rather than age-appropriate). Also, if parents react to their teenager's increasing independence by becoming overprotective or too involved, the teenager may increase the intensity and frequency of conflict in an attempt to feel and be seen as independent. Teenagers in these families said they felt less attached to both their mother and father.

Less anxious parents, in contrast, expressed more understanding of the appropriateness of their teenager's independence and increasing numbers of relationships. Where parents see disagreement as reflecting normal growth toward independence, disagreements should less likely result in conflict. The more comfortable parents felt in providing a secure base from which their teenager could explore, the healthier the teenager's attachment to their mother and father.

The authors conclude that parents with a healthy approach to attachment in relationships are able to respond to separation from their teenagers in a constructive manner. In contrast, parents who are anxious or not comfortable in close relationships are less capable of responding constructively and may even be threatened or feel rejected by their teenagers' interests in interacting with and depending on others (Hock et al 2001).

Key findings: moving to independence

For parents, feeling some anxiety as their teenager becomes more independent is normal. However, this can cause problems if the parent tries to restrict independence and doesn't see it is a normal 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 maintain boundaries between their own feelings and their teenager's, or are not comfortable in close relationships.

Discussion points:

- How can parents be supported to be less anxious and detach more successfully during the teenage years?
- Are there particular issues for lone parents and, if so, how can they be supported?
- What information do parents have access to on age-appropriate behaviour during adolescence?

e. Parental satisfaction

How happy parents feel about their parenting is linked to how they view their teenager's development.

Adolescence can encourage parents to reassess their teenager's capabilities as they mature and assume more responsibility. It is not necessarily a time of inevitable stress and frustration.

Research found that, for both parents, parental satisfaction was greatest when they either felt they were being supportive, or saw their teenager acquiring qualities which they felt reflected their successful parenting. Parents felt satisfied when they viewed themselves as accepting, warm and affectionate towards their teenager; viewed their teenager as becoming socially competent; and felt their teenager had qualities which made them good companions for them as parents. These parents saw their teenager's capabilities as age-appropriate – rather than viewing challenges to parental authority as stressful, parents felt satisfied when the teenager's authority was viewed as competence. Fathers in particular reported greater satisfaction when they felt they were using reasoning as well as support (Henry et al 1995).

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers were asked to comment on some of the above findings relating to parental satisfaction:

Disabled parents generally thought that they derived satisfaction from the same factors as non-disabled parents. However, half of parents with a disabled teenager felt that other aspects of parenting made them feel most satisfied. The key difference for these parents was that satisfaction

was gained from seeing their disabled teenager develop socially and not necessarily in relation to their age or as an adult companion. Parents of disabled teens also highlighted that the development of teenagers could be limited by the resources available and societal attitudes towards disability.

For some disabled and non-disabled parents, the idea of teenagers being good companions for them as parents was contentious; they suggested that they would be satisfied that their teenagers were good companions generally.

Key findings: 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 feel satisfied when they view themselves as accepting, warm and affectionate towards their teen.

Parents of disabled teenagers reported feeling that seeing their teen develop socially was a key factor in their parental satisfaction.

Discussion points:

- Is there mutual agreement between parents over their teenager's increasing autonomy? Does this cause conflict between parents? How can they be supported with this?
- What are the implications for parents of disabled teenagers and how can they be supported?

f. Divorce and re-partnering

Much of the research that arose during this review was carried out with heterosexual two-parent families, sometimes because differences between resident mothers and fathers were explicitly being investigated. However, there were a small number of studies which specifically explored families following divorce.

Negative comments about the father by the mother can affect some, not but all, teenage boys' perceptions of their relationship with their father.

Research looking at families following divorce (where the teenager remains living with the mother) explored whether the mother saying negative things about the father affected the teenager's perception of their relationship with their father. Generally, there wasn't a clear link. However, the perceptions of those boys less able to maintain some boundaries between their mother's feelings and their own were more likely to be negatively affected by their mother's negative comments about their father, even up to three years after the divorce. For boys who had more emotional autonomy, perceptions of their relationship with their father was not significantly linked to the how often their mothers said negative things. The authors suggest that emotional autonomy may act as a buffer for boys when faced with familial stress. Girls did not react in the same way as boys when mothers said negative things about their fathers. The authors suggest this study highlights that some parents may be turning to their teenagers for support in times of familial stress (Kenyon et al 2008).

Developing relationships with stepfathers does not affect teenagers' ties to their fathers or vice versa.

In families where the teenager lives with their mother following divorce, research found that a teenager's closeness to, or contact with, their father, was not affected by a stepfather joining the family. This was still the case even when the teenager developed a close bond with a stepfather after the mother's marriage to him.

The bond between the teenager and their mother may become less close when mothers live with another partner, but not necessarily when they (re)marry.

The relationship teenagers develop with stepfathers did not seem to be affected by their existing ties with their biological father. However, teenagers who were already close to their mothers were more likely to develop close ties to a new stepfather, suggesting that a close mother-child bond facilitates the stepfather-child relationship (King 2009).

Key findings: 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 is 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.

Discussion points:

- Does family change affect families with teenagers in a way that is different from families with younger children?
- How can teenagers and parents be supported through separation and re-partnering?
- How can support services best communicate these findings to parents?

g. What do parents know about their teenagers?

Fathers and mothers learn about their teenagers' lives in a number of ways.

Research has found that fathers who described their children as open to being parented learned about experiences in direct ways (e.g. teenagers offered information, fathers asked questions, and fathers observed and listened). Other fathers relied on their spouses for information – these fathers tended to work longer hours and were more likely to have daughters than sons. Fathers who relied on siblings or people outside the family for information experienced the most conflict with their teenagers, suggesting that this way of getting information may be a last resort for fathers whose relationship with their teen is not going well.

Most mothers did not find out about their teenager's lives by direct questioning, but by listening and observing and through information offered voluntarily. The authors suggest this means teenagers may interpret questions from fathers as signs of engagement, but from mothers as more negative. Mothers asked more direct questions if there was no resident father. Mothers who relied on other people for information - whether

a family member or not – had a more problematic relationship with their teenager, whereas for fathers relying on their spouse was better than relying on people outside the home (Crouter et al 2005).

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers were asked to comment on some of the above findings relating to how fathers and mothers learn about their teenagers' lives.

For the parents of disabled teenagers we interviewed, the issues involved in communicating with teenagers were very different from the research findings. These parents often relied on other people to find out about their teenager, such as social workers and teachers, because the nature of the disability meant that their teenager's communication was limited.

Disabled parents thought that their communication depended on the relationship with the teenager rather than the disability. A few disabled parents felt that their teenager would communicate differently with them but that this was a reflection of a wish to 'protect' the parent rather than a difference in how they communicate with mothers and fathers.

What parents know ultimately depends on what teenagers choose to tell them.

For teenagers, we generally talk about monitoring and supervision than rather controlling behaviour – do parents know where their teenagers are and what they are doing? Can they stop them if they want to? (Nuffield Foundation 2009). However, the idea that such monitoring provides parents with knowledge about their teenagers has recently been questioned. It's been suggested that that what parents know is more a result of what teenagers choose to tell them rather than what parents try to find out (Kerr et al 2010).

By regulating the information their parents receive, teenagers can regulate how much of a say their parents can have in their lives and therefore have some level of independence. However, this also means parents have fewer opportunities to give advice or influence their child's behaviour. This suggests that parenting has an important role to play in encouraging teenagers to freely

offer information about their lives and activities, rather than directly attempting to prevent negative behaviour. The authors suggest that lack of disclosure from teenagers about their lives could indicate a downward spiral of decreasing communication and increasing negative behaviour. It could be said that what parents know reflects the quality of their relationship with their child (Nuffield Foundation 2009).

This is the case for both boys and girls, and research generally agrees that teenagers relate information more often and in more detail to their mothers (Keijsers 2010; Smetana et al 2006). Furthermore, research has reported that boys do not voluntarily talk more to their fathers about personal issues (Smetana et al 2006).

Elsewhere in this review, we've seen that what, and how much, teenagers choose to tell their parents can be affected by perceptions of privacy invasion, how much room parents give teenagers to become independent, and different ideas over what information is personal and what should be shared.

Both teenagers and parents make judgments over what they feel teenagers should tell parents about.

The research found that these judgements were closely linked with areas they believed parents had authority. What teenagers actually told their parents was closely linked to these beliefs.

Generally, parents thought that teenagers should tell their parents more about their life than the teenagers thought they should, though this discrepancy decreased as the teenager got older. Even in good relationships, parents overestimate how much their teenager is telling them, particularly at middle adolescence and about friends. Mothers in particular think their daughters tell them more about personal issues than they actually do (Smetana et al 2006). However, parents who are less responsive to their child's needs and less accepting tend to over-estimate how much their teenager conceals from them (Finkenauer et al 2005).

Both parents and teenagers thought that teenagers should tell their parents about things that affect safety or health. Both thought that parents had less legitimate authority over personal issues such as privacy and choices over clothes and recreational activities, and that teenagers should not necessarily have to tell their parents about these issues. On the other hand, parents generally thought their teenagers should sometimes tell them about personal things.

Some issues were seen as at the boundaries of what parents should regulate and what is personal, such as seeing friends that parents don't like, or keeping bedrooms tidy (good manners to the parent, a privacy issue to the teenager). Unsurprisingly, these borderline issues are major sources of conflict in teenager-parent relationships (Smetana et al 2006).

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers were asked to comment on some of the above findings relating to what teenagers should tell their parents.

Both disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers felt that the findings outlined were typical of their experiences. However, a few parents of disabled teenagers thought that there was a need for more detailed communication if the teenager was felt to be more vulnerable than the average teenager because of their disability.

Even when both parents and teenagers want a close, open and democratic relationship, difficulties can arise.

This is because there is still conflict over what information is shared and what is withheld. A power imbalance can affect the types of communication that take place (Solomon et al 2002). Other authors have highlighted that teenagers can control how much their parents know about them by withholding information and deliberately avoiding communication. Adults face a dilemma in how they can surrender some of their power without resorting to helpless inaction (Nelson 2009). Some parents attempt to maintain their own parental identity at the expense of their children's growing adult identity as they exercise control, protection and authority through gaining (sometimes illicitly) information (Solomon et al 2002). Indeed, calls to ParentLine regularly feature parents with dilemmas over information they have obtained illicitly.

Having mobiles phones means parents retain control over teenagers' activities, but they are also used by both parents and teenagers as a negotiating tool.

Research found that parents generally use mobile phones to keep tabs on their children's movements outside of the home, and to alleviate concerns about

'stranger danger' or any mischief in which their children might find themselves. The mobile phone has helped to retain parental control by giving them the opportunity to enter their children's space at any time.

However, it was also found that the mobile is increasingly being used as a bargaining tool in the negotiations between child and parent. Teenagers will put up with parents contacting them outside the home by mobile phone because parents are more willing to negotiate over movements and curfews if the teenager has a mobile on them. Parents and children have developed a set of rules and compromises. For example, the mobile should be kept switched on, and texting rather than phoning is ok in certain situations (Williams and Williams 2005).

Families affected by disability

Disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers were asked to comment on some of the above findings relating to the use of mobile phones.

Parents of disabled teenagers who were able to use mobile phones felt they had a greater reliance on phones than parents whose teenagers were not disabled, and agreed that they were important in negotiating unsupervised activities. For example, the disabled teenager may be more physically vulnerable or not recognise danger. Some teenagers were unable to use mobiles or would misuse them and so did not have one.

Disabled parents generally felt that their experience of mobile phones was similar to the research findings and that their disability did not have an impact on this. However, a couple of disabled parents commented that they required higher than average levels of communication from their teenagers because, for example, they could not just jump in a car and fetch them.

Key findings: 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. 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 points:

- How does monitoring and control relate to the other issues in this review e.g. anxiety of parents and relationship conflict?
- What support do parents have in deciding the levels of autonomy and monitoring for their teenage children?
- How can parents be supported to keep up good relationships where sharing information is usual?
- Can services help parents to manage expectations about how much information sharing to expect? Can parents be supported in distinguishing between appropriate levels of privacy and indications of problems?
- How can parents of disabled teenagers be supported in balancing the need for detailed information with respecting privacy and independence?

4. Comments

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 prevalence 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 can seem to be 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.

Families affected by disability

During the research carried out with families affected by disability, unprompted comments highlighted two key additional concerns about parenting for disabled parents: the impact that having a disabled parent has on teenagers (for example, stress for the child, being bullied at school) and the potential for teenagers becoming carers of disabled parents.

Indeed, teenagers can worry about their parents for many reasons, such as financial well-being, health and happiness, which can all have implications for their relationship.

Comments on existing research and gaps in the research

The most popularly researched topics are not necessarily those of most concern to parents or teenagers.

An apparent emphasis on young people as problems, and the political impetus to ameliorate these problems, means there is a lot of research on sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol misuse and bad behaviour. Therefore a view of the teenage years as problematic is over-represented. There is less research and guidance aimed at ordinary parents and teenagers with everyday problems (Nelson 2009). The vast majority of calls to ParentLine relating to relationships between parents and teenagers are over everyday issues.

There is less research involving fathers than mothers.

Although some research does refer to involving both mothers and fathers, where research is carried out with one parent or the main carer, the default parent is generally the mother. Some research drawn on in this review (Coatsworth et al 2010; Smetana et al 2006) noted that fathers were particularly hard to involve. It would be interesting to know whether this was because of practical reasons (fathers were not available or too busy due to work commitments) or cultural reasons (fathers didn't feel comfortable in being involved in

research and sharing information about their private family life). Notably, research has reported that fathers are less likely to seek parenting support (Gillies et al 2001) and this is also reflected in calls to ParentLine.

Most research is based on traditional heterosexual two-parent families.

However, the issues arising around parenting teenagers are applicable to other types of families.

Much of the research refers to 'parents' generically when discussing their findings.

When referring to research findings in this review we have endeavoured to be clear when mothers, fathers, or both parents specifically (i.e. not merely generic 'parents') are discussed. Otherwise, we refer to 'parents' in the same way as the research studies.

Families affected by disability were not explicitly referred to in the research and it is therefore not clear whether the conclusions of researchers would apply in a similar way to these families.

Furthermore, families affected by disability are not a homogenous group and different issues will impact on these families in different ways. As researchers usually offer details of the people involved in their research (age, ethnicity, income, nationality etc) we can assume that if disability was not referred to, it was not included. In fact, one study specifically referred to de-selecting a family that was found to include a "developmentally disabled" teenager (Bumpus et al 2001).

Generally, research did not involve participants from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

It is therefore difficult to say whether the findings would be applicable to different ethnic cultures.

Most research found was carried out in the USA (12), with a small number from the Netherlands (6), the UK (3), and Sweden (1).

We should not assume that findings are directly transferable to Scotland or the wider UK since there are likely to be cultural differences over ideas of childhood, transition to adulthood, parenting etc., and differences in welfare provision, between these countries. However, discussions over these findings with parenting professionals in Scotland suggest that the issues are very relevant. Questions have been raised throughout this review to help readers to reflect on how the findings can inform service development.

Studies looking at communication between parents and teenagers generally define 'communication' as directly talking about something.

However, communication can involve more than just speaking to each other. There is little research addressing the role of indirect verbal interactions (e.g. jokes), or non-verbal communication (e.g. laughter, silence), activities together or digital communication. Any current or very recent research that exists on technological communication such as social networking would not have been accessible at the time of compiling this report.

Most research is based on quantitative data collected via questionnaires.

This means that parents and/or young people comment on issues relating to communication, relationships, behaviour and their perception of situations by means of scoring them on a scale, such as from 'very poor' to 'excellent'. This method may not capture the richness and complexity of the issues, or the detailed perspectives of those involved in the research.

What next?

Informing service provision

This report 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.

Gathering evidence

About Families links research with the experiences of parents, practitioners and disabled people to identify and explore key challenges facing parenting and disability services and the families they work with.

Sharing information

Information and evidence are presented in user-friendly topic reports which help services to identify clear routes to developing service provision. Free downloads of all our topic reports are available on our website.

Informing action

Voluntary and public sector agencies use our topic reports to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* works with key agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

Join our mailing list and find out more at www.aboutfamilies.org.uk

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 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**

5. Appendices

Appendix i) Method

An initial scoping was carried out to see what types of evidence and information are currently available around teenagers and parenting. This is reflected in section 2 of this report where the most popular topics are noted. This also helped to assess where there may be gaps in research.

Data from parenting helplines in Scotland was used to find out which issues are of the most concern to parents. Using this data and following discussions with professionals in the field, the more focused topic of relationship and behaviour issues in parenting teenagers was selected for investigation.

About Families carried out research using two major social science databases: Web of Knowledge and IBSS (International Bibliography of Social Science) Online. The terms used to search for evidence were 'parent', 'mother', 'father', 'family', 'step', 'divorce', 'separation', 'teenager', 'adolescent' and also 'relationship', 'behaviour', 'disability'. 'Teenager' was defined as aged 13 – 19. Searches were restricted to English language articles published in Europe, USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand between 1995 and 2010. All studies selected had been peer-reviewed.

Studies were selected which explored the experience or activities of parenting, rather than the experiences of teenagers. However, two studies which involved only teenage participants (Adams et al 2001; Fosco et al 2010) were selected as the research aims related to examining the parent-teenager relationship.

Since our search for academic research was carried out through databases, results generally included studies published in academic journals rather than edited collections of papers presented in books.

As noted in section 2, disabled parents or teenagers were not explicitly included in the research found during this review. To address this gap, we conducted a survey and interviews with disabled parents and parents of disabled teenagers. We presented them with some of the key research findings and asked whether they thought the issues would be different or the same for families affected by disability. This research was small scale and is not representative of the views of families affected by disability across Scotland, since that is outwith the scope of this work. The intention was to include some reflections from disabled families to inform discussions of what action is needed to meet the needs of parents of teenagers, and to ensure that the voice of disabled families was included. The research was carried out in two ways:

- a self-completion questionnaire was sent to parents through Capability Scotland's 1 in 4 Poll resulting in 33 responses
- telephone interviews with 10 parents in order to explore views in depth

These reflections are included as highlighted boxes at the relevant points in the report.

A draft version of this report was reviewed by relevant practitioners, service managers and policy workers, as well as a panel of experts in the fields of families and disabilities, as part of the *About Families* Evidence Review Process.

Appendix ii) Policy context

The policy context is not described in detail since those this report is aimed at would already be familiar with the key areas. In brief, this report is relevant in the context of national initiatives in Scotland aiming to increase parental capacity, empower service users and take a holistic view of the child and family, including Getting it Right for Every Child, the Curriculum for Excellence, Achieving our Potential, More Choices More Chances and Equally Well.

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Appendix iv) Acknowledgements

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