

Parent-Adolescent Conflict

"This is a dangerous world, what with all the drugs and drunk drivers and violent crime and kids disappearing and you name it. I know my kids are pretty responsible, but can I trust all their friends? Are they going to end up in some situation they can't get out of? Are they going to get in over their heads? You can never be sure, so I worry and set curfews and make rules about where they can go and who they can go with. Not because I want to be a tough dad, but because I want them to be safe."

—John, father of a 16-year-old son and a 13-year-old daughter (Bell, 1998, p. 54)

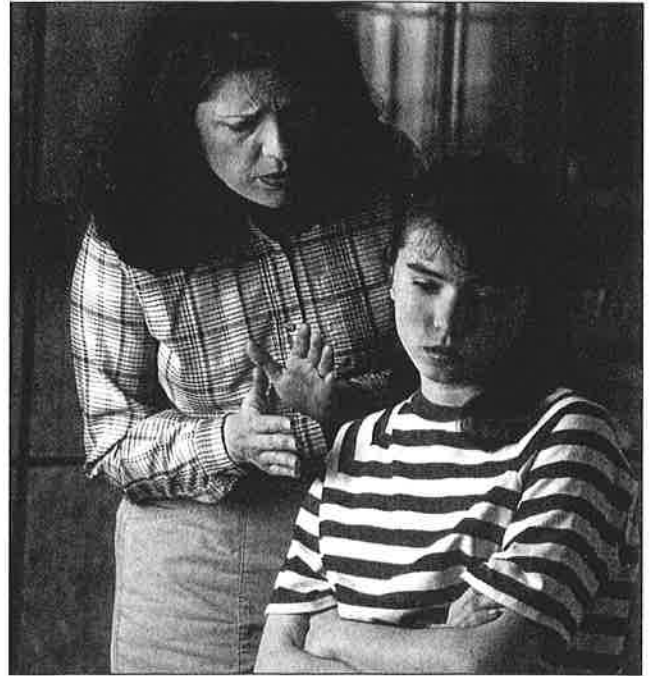
"My father is very strict and had a great deal of rules when I was in high school, which usually could not be bent for anything. My father was very worried about the fact that I was getting older and interested in boys so much. This worrying led him to lay down strict rules which led to many arguments between us. He wouldn't let me date until I was 16—by this he meant 'don't even speak to a boy until you're 16!' He would hardly let me go anywhere."

—Danielle, age 19 (Arnett, unpublished data)

Although children and adolescents typically develop attachments to their parents, the course of family life does not always run smoothly, and this seems to be especially true for families with adolescents. For a variety of reasons, adolescence can be a difficult time for relationships with parents.

The degree of parent-adolescent conflict should not be exaggerated. Early theories of adolescence, such as those of G. Stanley Hall (1904) and Anna Freud (1946), made it sound as though it was universal and inevitable that *all* adolescents rebel against their parents and that *all* parents and adolescents experience intense conflict for many years. Anna Freud (1946) even asserted that adolescents would not develop normally without this kind of turmoil in their relationships with their parents.

Few scholars on adolescence believe this anymore. Over the past few decades, numerous studies have indicated that it is simply not true. In fact, adolescents and their parents agree on many of the most important aspects of their views of life and typically have a



Conflict in adolescence is especially frequent and intense between mothers and daughters.

great deal of love and respect for one another (Moore et al., 2002; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992; Smetana, 2005). Two studies in the 1960s were among the first and most important in dispelling the stereotype of pervasive and fierce conflict in parent-adolescent relationships (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, 1969). Both studies found that the great majority of adolescents like their parents, trust them, and admire them. Both studies also found that adolescents and their parents frequently disagreed, but the arguments were usually over seemingly minor issues such as curfews, clothes, grooming, and use of the family car. These arguments usually did not seriously threaten the attachments between parents and their adolescents.

More recent studies confirm this pattern (e.g., Moore et al., 2002; Steinberg, 1990, 2000). These studies report that adolescents typically love and care about their parents and are confident that their parents feel the same about them. Like the earlier studies, recent studies find that arguments between parents and adolescents generally concern seemingly minor issues such as curfews, clothing, musical preferences, and the like (Smetana, 1988, 2005; Steinberg & Levine, 1997). Parents and adolescents may disagree and argue about these issues, but they usually agree on key values such as the importance of education, the value of hard



Chores are a common source of conflict between parents and adolescents. FOR BETTER OR WORSE reprinted by permission of United Features Syndicate, Inc. Copyright © 1992 FOR BETTER OR WORSE by Lynn.

work, and the desirability of being honest and trustworthy (Gecas & Seff, 1990).

However, let's not get carried away with the rosy portrait of family harmony, either. Studies also indicate that conflict with parents increases sharply in early adolescence, compared with preadolescence, and remains high for several years before declining in late adolescence (Arnett, 1999a; Dworkin & Larson, 2001; Larson & Richards, 1994; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Figure 7.3 shows the pattern of conflict across

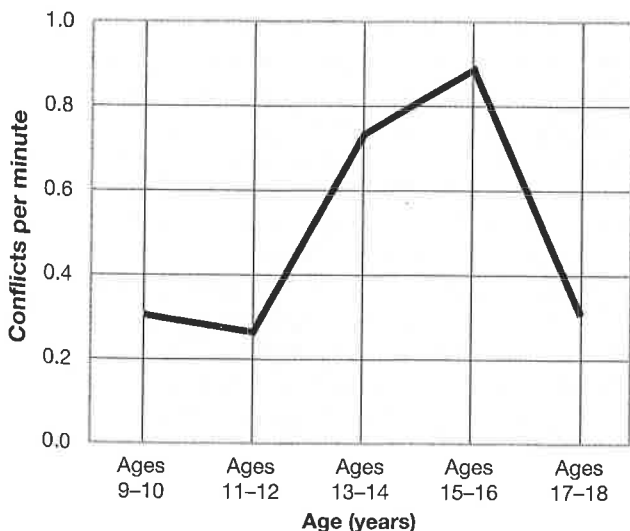


FIGURE 7.3 Observed conflicts per minute between mother and son in 30-minute videotaped interactions over an 8-year period.

Source: Granic, Dishion, and Hollenstein (2003).

adolescence, from a longitudinal study that observed mothers and sons in videotaped interactions on five occasions over 8 years (Granic, Dishion, & Hollenstein, 2003). A Canadian study found that 40% of adolescents reported arguments with their parents at least once a week (Sears et al., 2006). Frequency of conflict between *typical* adolescents and their parents is higher than between *distressed* marital couples (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Conflict in adolescence is especially frequent and intense between mothers and daughters (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Both parents and adolescents report more frequent conflict in early adolescence than prior to adolescence; by mid-adolescence, conflict with parents tends to become somewhat less frequent but more intense (Laursen et al., 1998). It is only in late adolescence and emerging adulthood that conflict with parents diminishes substantially (Arnett, 2003a; 2004a).

Perhaps as a consequence of these conflicts, parents tend to perceive adolescence as the most difficult stage of their children's development (Buchanan et al., 1990). In a recent study in the Netherlands, 56% of Dutch parents viewed adolescence as the most difficult time to be a parent, compared to 5% for infancy and 14% for the toddler period (Meeus, 2006). Although midlife tends to be an especially fruitful and satisfying time for adults, for many of them their satisfaction with their relationships with their children diminishes when their children reach adolescence (Gecas & Seff, 1990; Gladding, 2002). As conflict rises between parents and adolescents, closeness declines (Laursen & Collins, 2004; Larson & Richards, 1994).

Sources of Conflict With Parents

“One minute my mother treats me like I’m old enough to do this or this—like help her out at home by doing the marketing or making dinner or babysitting my little brother. And she’s always telling me, ‘You’re thirteen years old now, you should know better than that!’ But then the next minute, when there’s something I really want to do, like there’s a party that everyone’s going to, she’ll say, ‘You’re too young to do that.’”

—Elizabeth, age 13 (Bell, 1998, p. 55)

THINKING CRITICALLY

Apply the idea of the custom complex to parent-child conflict in the American majority culture. How do the typical topics of conflict reflect certain cultural beliefs?

But why do parents and adolescents argue more than they did earlier? Why would early adolescence be a time when conflict with parents is especially high? Part of the explanation may lie in the biological and cognitive changes of adolescence. Biologically, adolescents become bigger and stronger physically with puberty, making it more difficult for parents to impose their authority by virtue of their greater physical presence. Also, puberty means sexual maturity, which means that sexual issues may be a source of conflict—at least indirectly—in a way they would not have been in childhood (Arnett, 1999a; Steinberg, 1990). Early-maturing adolescents tend to have more conflict with parents than adolescents who mature “on time” (Collins & Laursen, 2004), perhaps because sexual issues arise earlier.

Cognitively, increased abilities for thinking abstractly and with more complexity make adolescents better arguers than preadolescents and make it more difficult for parents to prevail quickly in arguments with their children. According to psychologist Judith Smetana, conflict may also be a reflection of cognitive changes experienced by adolescents and their parents in the different ways they perceive and define the range of adolescents’ autonomy (Smetana, 1989; 2005). Issues of conflict are frequently viewed by parents as matters of desirable social convention but viewed by adolescents as matters of personal choice. Smetana’s research indicates that, especially in early adolescence, parents and adolescents often disagree

about who should have the authority over issues such as dress and hair styles, the adolescent’s choice of friends, and what state of order (or disorder) should be maintained in the adolescent’s bedroom (Smetana, 1989, 2005; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Parents tend to see these as issues they should decide, or at least influence and set boundaries for; adolescents, however, tend to see the issues as matters of personal choice that should be theirs to decide by now. Perhaps the peak of conflict occurs in early adolescence because that is the time when adolescents are first pressing for a new degree of autonomy, and parents are adjusting to their adolescents’ new maturity and struggling over how much autonomy they should allow. In the view of Smetana and other scholars on adolescents and families, conflict can be constructive and useful because it promotes the development of a new equilibrium in the family system that allows adolescents greater autonomy (Collins, 1997; Laursen & Collins, 2004; Steinberg, 2004).

Although most parent-adolescent conflict is over apparently minor issues, some issues that seem trivial on the surface may in fact be substitutes for more serious underlying issues (Arnett, 1999a). For example, most American parents and adolescents have limited communication about sexual issues. Especially in the era of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, it would be surprising indeed if most parents did not have some concerns about their adolescents’ sexual behavior, yet they find it difficult to speak to their adolescents directly about sexual issues. As a result, they may say “You can’t wear that to school” when they mean “That’s too sexually provocative.” They may say “I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to date him” when they really mean “He has that lean and hungry look—I worry that he will want you to have sex, and I worry that you’ll like the idea.” And “You have to be home by 11:00” may mean “The movie ends at ten, and I don’t want you to have time to have sex between the time the movie ends and the time you come home.”

Sexual issues are not the only issues that may be argued about in this indirect way. “I don’t like that crowd you’re hanging around with lately” could mean “They look like the type who might use drugs, and I worry that they might persuade you to use them, too.” Arguments about curfews may reflect parents’ attempts to communicate that “The sooner you come in, the less likely it is that you and your friends will have drunk enough beer to put yourselves at risk for a terrible automobile accident.”

Seen in this light, these arguments are not necessarily over trivial issues but may be proxies for arguments over serious issues of life and death (Arnett, 1999a). Parents have legitimate concerns about the safety and well-being of their adolescents, given the high rates of adolescents' risky behavior (as we will see in Chapter 13), but they also know that in the American majority culture they are expected to loosen the reins substantially when their children reach adolescence. The result may be that they express their concerns indirectly, through what seem to be less serious issues.

Culture and Conflict With Parents

Although the biological and cognitive changes of adolescence may provide a basis for parent-adolescent conflict, this does not mean that such conflict is therefore universal and "natural." Biological and cognitive changes take place among adolescents in all cultures, yet parent-adolescent conflict is not typical in all cultures (Arnett, 1999a). Cultures can take the raw material of nature and shape it in highly diverse ways. This is no less true for parent-adolescent conflict than for the other topics addressed in this book.

In traditional cultures, it is rare for parents and adolescents to engage in the kind of frequent, petty conflicts typical of parent-adolescent relationships in the American majority culture (Schlegel & Barry, 1991; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Part of the reason for this is economic. In traditional cultures, family members tend to rely on each other economically. In many of these cultures family members spend a great deal of time together each day, working on family economic enterprises (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Children and adolescents depend on their parents for the necessities of life, parents depend on children and adolescents for the contribution of their labor, and relatives are all expected to assist one another routinely and help one another in times of need. Under such conditions, the pressure to maintain family harmony is intense, because the economic interdependence of the family is so strong (Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

However, more than economics and the structure of daily life are involved in the lower levels of parent-adolescent conflict in traditional cultures. Levels of conflict are low in parent-adolescent relationships not only in nonindustrialized traditional cultures but also in highly industrialized traditional cultures, such as Japan and Taiwan (Zhou, 1997), and in the Asian American and Latino cultures that are part of Ameri-

can society (Chao, 1994; Harwood et al., 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1996). This indicates that even more important than economics are cultural beliefs about parental authority and the appropriate degree of adolescent independence. As discussed earlier, the role of parent carries greater authority in traditional cultures than in the West, and this makes it less likely that adolescents in such cultures will express disagreements and resentments toward their parents (Arnett, 1999a; Phinney et al., 2005).

THINKING CRITICALLY

How would you predict parent-adolescent conflict in traditional cultures will be affected by globalization?

This does not mean that adolescents in traditional cultures do not sometimes feel an inclination to resist or defy the authority of their parents, to question their demands and argue with them (Phinney et al., 2005; Phinney & Ong, 2002). Like Western adolescents, they undergo biological and cognitive changes at puberty that may incline them toward such resistance. But socialization shapes not only the way people behave but their cultural beliefs, their whole way of looking at the world (Arnett, 1995a, 2006b; Shweder et al., 1998). Someone who has been raised in a culture where the status and authority of parents and other elders are taught to them and emphasized constantly in direct and indirect ways is unlikely at adolescence to question their parents' authority, regardless of their new biological and cognitive maturity. Such questioning is simply not part of their cultural beliefs about the way the world is and the way it should be. Even when they disagree with their parents, they are unlikely to mention it because of their feelings of duty and respect (Phinney & Ong, 2002).

A key point in understanding parent-adolescent relationships in traditional cultures is that the independence that is so important to Western adolescents is not nearly as much of an issue in non-Western cultures. In the West, as we have seen, regulating the pace of adolescents' autonomy is often a source of parent-adolescent conflict. However, parents and adolescents in the West agree that independence is the ultimate goal for adolescents as they move into adulthood (Alwin, 1988). Individuals in the West are supposed to reach the point, during emerging adulthood, where they no longer live in their parents' household, no longer rely on their parents financially, and have learned to stand alone as self-sufficient individuals (Arnett, 1998a). The pace of the

adolescent's growing autonomy is a source of contention between parents and adolescents not because parents do not want their adolescents eventually to become independent of them, but because the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency that both of them value requires continual adaptations and adjustments in their relationship as they move toward that goal. Increasing autonomy prepares adolescents for life in a culture where they will be expected to be capable of independence and self-sufficiency. The discussion, negotiation, and arguments typical of parent-adolescent relationships in the West may also help prepare adolescents for participation in a politically diverse, democratic society.

Outside of the West, independence is not highly valued as an outcome of adolescent development (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Financially, socially, even psychologically, interdependence is a higher value than independence, not only during adolescence but throughout adulthood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003; Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhalmisdottir, 2005). According to Schlegel and Barry (1991), in traditional cultures "independence as we know it would be regarded as not only egocentric but also foolhardy beyond reason" (p. 45), because of the ways that family members rely on each other economically. Just as a dramatic increase in autonomy during adolescence prepares Western adolescents for adult life in an individualistic culture, learning to suppress disagreements and submit to the authority of one's parents prepares adolescents in traditional cultures for an adult life in which interdependence is among the highest values and throughout life each person has a clearly designated role and position in a family hierarchy.

Emerging Adults' Relationships With Parents

"In high school, I went out of my way to avoid conversations with my parents because I felt that a lot of things they wanted to know about didn't concern them. I find now that my parents know less about my life because I'm not at home. They don't ask me as many questions, so I enjoy having conversations with them."

—Tara, age 23 (Arnett, 2003a)

"In high school I was rude, inconsiderate, and got into many fights with my mom. Since coming to col-

lege I realize how much she means to me and how much she goes out of her way for me. I've grown to have a true appreciation for her."

—Matt, age 21 (Arnett, 2004a, p. 57)

"They're still my parents, but there's more—I don't know if friendship is the right word, but like I go out with them and just really enjoy spending time with them, and they're not in a parental role as much. It's not a disciplining role, it's just more of a real comfortable friendship thing."

—Nancy, age 28 (Arnett, 2004a, p. 58)

"Over the past year I have become very close with my dad. Before college there was a definite parent-child relationship with my father. Now he is more like a mentor or friend. Overall, the relationship between my parents and I has been a growing mutual respect."

—Luke, age 20 (Arnett, 2004a, p. 58)

In most Western majority cultures, most young people move out of their parents' home sometime during emerging adulthood. In the United States, leaving home typically takes place around ages 18 to 19 (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). The most common reasons for leaving home stated by emerging adults are going to college, cohabiting with a partner, or simply the desire for independence (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Juang et al., 1999; Silbereisen et al., 1996).

When a young person leaves home, a disruption in the family system takes place that requires family members to adjust. As we have seen, parents generally adjust very well, and in fact report improved marital satisfaction and life satisfaction once their children leave (White & Edwards, 1990). What about the relationship between parents and emerging adults? How is it influenced by the young person's departure?

Typically, relationships between parents and emerging adults improve once the young person leaves home. In this case, at least, absence makes the heart grow fonder. Numerous studies have confirmed that emerging adults report greater closeness and fewer negative feelings toward their parents after moving out (e.g., Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2003a; O'Connor et al., 1996; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985; Smetana et al., 2004). Furthermore, among emerging adults of the same age, those who have moved out tend to get along