Adolescents’ Perceptions of the Nature of Their Communication with Parents

Patricia Noller and Victor J. Callan

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This study examines the effects of the age and sex of adolescent and the sex of parent upon adolescents' perceptions of the nature of their communication with each parent. Two hundred and ninety-six adolescents aged 13–17 years completed a communication schedule, rating 14 content areas along six process dimensions: frequency of conversation, initiator, levels of recognition of adolescents' opinion, self-disclosure, domination, and levels of satisfaction. Multivariate analyses of variance were conducted separately for each process dimension. Frequency ratings revealed that adolescent females of all ages reported talking more often with mothers than did adolescent males. Adolescent males, however, believed they talked more often than did females with fathers about interests, sexual issues, and general problems. Mothers were seen to initiate more conversations than fathers on a wide range of topics. Mothers were also perceived as more likely to recognize and accept the adolescents’ opinions. Adolescent females believed they disclosed more to mothers than fathers, but males believed they disclosed equally to both parents. Males disclosed more to fathers than did females about their sexual or other problems, while females disclosed more often overall to their mothers than did males. Adolescent males were equally satisfied with their discussions with both parents, but females were more satisfied about conversations with mothers rather than fathers. In sum, the results suggest that mothers’ more
frequent initiation of discussions with their younger adolescents and their greater recognition of their opinions lead to older adolescents interacting more with mothers than fathers.

INTRODUCTION

If we are to tap the complexity and variety of parent–adolescent communications, it seems critical to consider not only the topic and the quality of the communication, but also differences in communication according to the sex of the parents, and sex and age of the adolescents. While a large number of studies have detailed specific features of parent–adolescent communication, only recently have researchers attempted to study the variety of factors that may simultaneously shape the nature of the communication. Such studies are important as several theories of adolescence propose that the stresses related to this stage are due to the adolescents' lack of interpersonal skills to cope with changes necessary to move toward greater independence and autonomy (see Hartup, 1979; Montemayor, 1983).

Supportive communication in the family is seen as one factor that encourages the development of social and coping skills, and more positive identities among adolescents (Chartier and Chartier, 1975; Cooper et al., 1982). In particular, a more relational view of adolescence (see Grotevant and Cooper, 1986) describes a family environment in which changes in communication are moderate and through negotiation, with the result that parents come to show greater respect for the opinions of growing adolescents, and allow them more control. Older adolescents seem to change their relationships with parents, developing new forms of interaction involving reduced levels of conflict (Jacob, 1974; Steinberg and Hill, 1978). They renegotiate their status in the parent–child relationship (Hunter, 1985; Hunter and Youniss, 1982), and their gains in status and control may emerge in their perceptions about the quality of their communication with parents.

Research into the topics of parent–adolescent conversations reveals that the majority of arguments between parents and adolescents are about day-to-day living and family matters: personal hygiene, disobedience, school work, social activities and friendships, chores around the house, and arguments with siblings (Caplow et al., 1982; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Montemayor, 1982, 1983). In fact, Montemayor (1983) draws together data to show that the arguments between parents and adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s are similar in content to those reported by Lynd and Lynd (1929). Bengtson and Starr (1975) showed that parents and adolescents tend not to argue about some of the areas of great difference (sex, drugs, religion, politics) and others (Noller and Bagi, 1985; Thornburg, 1981) have found that families avoid potentially explosive issues such as sexuality.