Parenting and Adolescence

By Mary Ellen Lynch, Ph.D.

As young people make the transition from childhood into adolescence, their parents are sometimes anxious and bewildered by the new situations, contexts, and challenges their children present. Some changes are normative—changes involved in physical maturation, transition to middle school or high school, or onset of dating relationships. But the specter of potential negative outcomes in adolescence—for instance, delinquent behavior, reckless driving, substance use, or unintended pregnancy—make parents wary and concerned about maintaining good relationships with their teens.

Most studies of adolescent development in relation to parenting practices show that positive outcomes for teens are most consistently associated with authoritative parenting. Steinberg and colleagues, consistent with prior studies of child development, have used two dimensions to define parenting styles: warmth/involvement and strictness/supervision. The warmth dimension refers to the emotional quality of the relationship—Is the parent responsive? Can the adolescent depend on him or her for advice or help? Are they close enough that they spend time together just talking? The supervision dimension refers to the amount of monitoring the parent provides. Does the parent provide firm guidelines for behavior? Does he or she usually know where the teen is when not at home or school? Most studies of adolescent development in relation to parenting practices show that positive outcomes for teens are most consistently associated with parenting that is high on both warmth and supervision; this is known as authoritative parenting.
Researchers have used these dimensions to define other styles of parenting and contrasted them with the impact of authoritative parenting. Outcomes for teens in families characterized by authoritarian parenting (high supervision/low warmth), indulgent parenting (low supervision/high warmth), and neglectful parenting (low supervision/low warmth) have been less positive than those for teens in authoritative families. According to Steinberg’s (2001) summary of several prior studies, “adolescents from authoritative homes achieve more in school, report less depression and anxiety, score higher on measures of self-reliance and self-esteem, and are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior, including delinquency and drug use (p. 8)” when compared to adolescents from nonauthoritative homes.

In summary, prior studies have shown that parenting practices associated with authoritative parenting (high warmth/high supervision) are related to good outcomes for adolescents. This pattern is consistent with that shown for studies relating parenting practices to developmental outcomes for younger children. In addition to these dimensions, Steinberg and other researchers of adolescent family relationships also stress the importance of allowing teens some “psychological autonomy” --- some freedom to establish themselves as individuals with their own ideas and opinions—as they make the transition to adulthood and their lives as independent adults.

For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff Road N.E., Suite 323-West, Atlanta GA, 30306. You can email us at
msacd@listserv.cc.emory.edu, visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD, or phone us at 404-712-9800.

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