

Changes in Family Environments and Self-Concept in Early Adolescence

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### Abstract

Several studies have documented a decline in self-esteem and an increase in self-consciousness during early adolescence, especially among girls (e.g., Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). Other studies have demonstrated that children's self-concept is positively associated with opportunities to participate in family decision-making, and negatively associated with parent control (Yee & Flanagan, 1985). This paper contributes to this previous body of work by examining the relation between changes in family environments and changes in children's self-esteem and self-consciousness in a longitudinal sample of early adolescents. In particular it is predicted that a decline in self-concept will be associated with fewer opportunities to participate in family decision-making and greater parent control during the transition into early adolescence. Conversely increasingly positive self-concept will be associated with greater opportunities to participate in family decision-making and less parent control during the transition into early adolescence. Implications of these findings for parental influences on early adolescents' developing self-concept will be discussed.

## Changes in Family Environments and Self-Concept in Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is an important period for transformations in children's self-conceptions and parent-child relations. Several studies have documented a decline in self-esteem and an increase in self-consciousness, during this developmental period, especially among girls (e.g., Elkind & Bowen, 1979; Kissel, 1975; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). Family environments may play a role in fostering children's self-esteem and mitigating their self-consciousness during this period. Numerous studies with adolescents have demonstrated that self-esteem is positively associated with parental acceptance, participation in family decision-making, and opportunities to voice dissenting opinions at home (e.g., Bachman, 1970; Coopersmith, 1967; Epstein & McPartland, 1977; Holmbeck & Hill, 1986; Isherwood & Hammah, 1981; Streitmatter & Jones, 1982). Further, Yee & Flanagan (1985) have found that children from authoritarian families report greater self-consciousness whereas children from families offering opportunities for self-direction report less concern with others' scrutiny and appraisal of their behaviors. These findings suggest that family environments characterized by high parent control may intensify self-consciousness and undermine self-esteem during early adolescence by focusing attention on the self's conformity to rules and standards imposed by others. In contrast family environments that offer the child opportunities for autonomous behavior may mitigate self-consciousness and support self-esteem by focusing attention on the task of independent decision-making and away from the self's compliance with decisions made by others. The present paper builds on this body of work by examining the role of family environments on children's developing self-esteem and self-consciousness in a longitudinal sample of early adolescents. The following hypotheses are the focus of this study:

1. As reported in previous studies, boys and girls will show a decline in self-esteem and an increase in self-consciousness during the transition into early adolescence.
2. Compared to boys, girls will show a greater decline in self-esteem and increase in self-consciousness.
3. A decline in self-concept will be associated with fewer opportunities to participate in family decision-making and greater parent control during the transition into early adolescence.
4. Conversely increasingly positive self-concept will be associated with greater opportunities to participate in family decision-making and less parent control during the transition into early adolescence.

#### Methods

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of the Transitions in Early Adolescence Project, a 2-year longitudinal survey concerning changes in family environments and early adolescents' self-concepts during the transition from sixth grade to seventh grade. Data were collected from over 3000 students recruited from predominantly white middle- and upper-middle income school districts in southeastern Michigan. Students were administered questionnaires in 4 waves during 2 years: the fall (Wave 1) and spring (Wave 2) of the sixth grade, and the fall (Wave 3) and spring (Wave 4) of the seventh grade.

Students rated their perceptions of the family environment at each wave using items adapted from Epstein & McPartland (1977). This family environment scale measures three dimensions of the family environment: Participation in Family Decision-Making, Parent-Child Conflict, and Parent Control. Students also rated their general self-esteem at each wave using items developed by Harter (Harter, 1983). Finally students' self-consciousness in each of four activity settings -- math class, English

class, social settings, and sports -- was measured at selected waves before and after the transition to junior high school. Because math self-concept was a particular emphasis of the Transitions project, math self-consciousness was measured at Waves 2, 3, and 4. English and social self-consciousness were measured at Waves 2 and 4. Sports self-consciousness was measured at Waves 1 and 3. Self-consciousness items tapped the young adolescent's focus on the self as an object of attention in each activity domain.

### Results

#### Descriptive analyses.

Self-esteem and Self-consciousness. To test hypotheses 1 and 2, a child sex x wave repeated measures ANOVA was performed on self-esteem and each self-consciousness measure. There was a main effect for wave, with both boys and girls showing a decline in self-esteem and increasing self-consciousness during this transition period. In particular there was a sharp drop in student self-esteem at Wave 3, namely immediately after the transition to junior high school. There was also a main effect for child sex on self-esteem and self-consciousness in math, social, and sports domains, with girls reporting lower overall self-esteem and greater self-consciousness in each of these domains. Finally, a wave x child sex interaction was observed in self-esteem as well as self-consciousness in all domains. Girls showed a greater increase in self-consciousness after the transition than did boys. The results for self-esteem were mixed. In short hypothesis 1 was supported, and hypothesis 2 received partial support.

Family environments. A child sex x wave repeated measures ANOVA was also performed on children's perceptions of decision-making opportunities and parent control at home. For the family decision-making scale, girls

reported that they they had more opportunities to participate than did boys. Further both girls and boys reported a steady decline in decision-making opportunities through the transition from elementary to junior high school.

In contrast to findings on decision-making, boys reported greater parent control of their activities than did girls. Both boys and girls reported an increase in parent control at Wave 2 that steadily declined through Waves 3 and 4.

Relational analyses.

To test hypotheses 3 and 4, repeated measures ANOVA and path modeling procedures will be used to relate changes in family decision-making and parent control to changes in students' self-esteem and self-consciousness during this transition period. It is expected that children who report a decline in self-concept will report a concomitant decline in decision-making at home and an increase in parent control. Conversely children who report an increasingly positive self-concept will report an increase in decision-making opportunities and less parent control through the transition.

The implications of these findings for parental influences on early adolescents' developing self-concept will be discussed.