

Early Adolescent Peer-Oriented and Parent-Child Relationships

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Abstract

The transition into early adolescence is a critical period for the transformation of parent-child relationships. If parent-child relationships do not provide early adolescents with an increased sense of control over their lives, they may turn to and become more reliant upon those relationships in which they do have a degree of control -- namely peer relationships. In addition, this relation may be mediated by adolescents' sense of disengagement from parents.

Results suggest that adolescents who perceive few opportunities for decision-making and high parental control at 7th grade orient more towards peers than other adolescents. In addition, a perceived decrease in decision-making opportunity during the transition was related to increased peer-orientation. Although adolescents' sense of disengagement was related to higher peer orientation, it generally did not mediate the effects of parent-child relationships on peer-orientation. These relations seemed to be true for both males and females.

Introduction

The transition into early adolescence is a critical period for the transformation of parent-child relationships. Through significant cognitive developments and increased relational experience, early adolescents begin to sense the contrast between their relationships with their friends and their parents (Higgins and Eccles-Parsons, 1983; Youniss and Smollar, 1985). Increased exposure to the symmetrical relationships they have with peers may lead them to attempt to exercise greater independence and introduce a more equal power balance into their asymmetrical relationships with their parents.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) has proposed that the "feedback" in the family associated with transitional periods such as early adolescence is of particular developmental importance. Does the family adapt and reorganize in response to the adolescent's bids for a more egalitarian relationship with their parents? And does the way in which the family adapts to the early adolescent have consequences for the amount of influence both parents and peers continue to have on the developing adolescent?

We hypothesize that if the family reorganization fails to provide early adolescents with increased sense of control over their lives, they may turn to and become more reliant upon those relationships in which they do have a degree of control -- namely peer relationships.

Aims

To test:

1. if parent-child relationships in early adolescence were related to adolescents' orientation towards peers.
2. if the change in parent-child relationships during the transition into early adolescence was related to adolescents' orientation towards peers.
3. if the effects of parent-child relationships on peer-orientation were mediated by adolescents' sense of disengagement from parents.
4. if there were gender differences in the relations between parent-child relationships and peer-orientation.

Sample and Method

2791 adolescent subjects filled out questionnaires in the spring of 6th and 7th grades as part of the The Michigan Adolescence Study. The following measures were used:

Parent-Child Relationships

Parental Control

The extent to which adolescents feel their parents assert power and control over them. Included items such as *"My parents want me to follow their directions even if I disagree with their reasons"*, and *"My parents are very strict"*. (4-point scale)

Decision-Making Opportunity

Adolescents' perception of the amount of opportunity for participating in decision-making. Included the items *"How often do you take part in family decisions concerning yourself?"*, and *"My parents encourage me to give my ideas and opinions even if we might disagree"*. (4-point scale)

Disengagement

Adolescents' feelings of detachment and alienation from their parents. Included items such as *"My parents accept me the way I am (reversed)"*, and *"I don't know why I'm supposed to do what my parents tell me to do"*. (Z-score scale)

Peer-Orientation

Advice-Seeking

The extent adolescents' turn to parents and/or friends for personal and instrumental support. Included items such as *"When I want to talk about a personal problem, I talk [mostly to my parents; both my parents and my friends; mostly to my friends]"*, and *"When I want to talk about my future job or educational plans, I talk [same scale]"*. (5-point scale)

Extreme Peer-Orientation

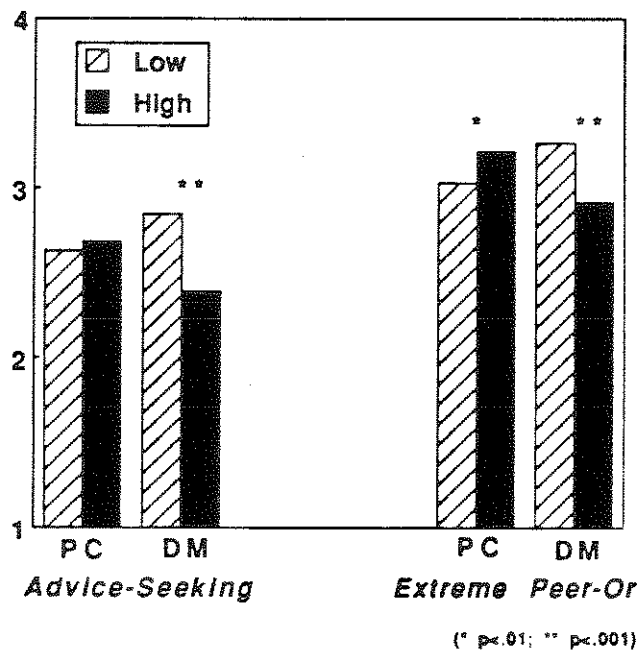
The extent adolescents are willing to sacrifice developmentally positive aspects of their lives for the sake of peer relationships. Included items such as *"It's okay to let your schoolwork slip or get a lower grade in order to be popular with your friends"*, and *"Would you act dumber or less talented than you really are in order to make someone like you?"*. (7-point scale)

Parent-Child Relationships at Seventh-Grade

Parental Control (PC) and *Decision-Making (DM)* were split at the median in order to create two groups: High and Low.

Analyses proceeded in three stages:

First, two-factor ANOVA's were performed in order to determine the main effects and the interactive effects of PC and DM on peer-orientation.



** those low in *Decision-Making* were higher in both aspects of peer-orientation (E's=(101.40, 52.20))

** those high in *Parental Control* were higher only in *Extreme Peer-Orientation*(E's=(.06, 10.38))

** the interaction between PC and DM was not significant (E's=(.09, .29))

Second, a two-factor ANOVA was performed in order to determine the main effects and the interactive effects of PC and DM on *Disengagement*.

	Low	High	F
Parental Control	-0.15	0.13	178.07 **
Decision-Making	0.03	-0.05	7.60 *

(Note: Scores for Disengagement are Z-scores)

** those high in *Parental Control* and those low in *Decision-Making* were higher in *Disengagement*

** the interaction between PC and DM was not significant ($F=.09$)

Third, in order to determine if *Disengagement* (DG) mediated the effects of PC and DM on peer-orientation, ANOVA's were again performed, this time including DG as a covariate.

	Advice-Seek (F)	Extreme PO (F)
Parental Control	2.96	0.59
Decision-Making	91.55 **	41.74 **
Disengagement	64.67 **	253.12 **

(** p<.001)

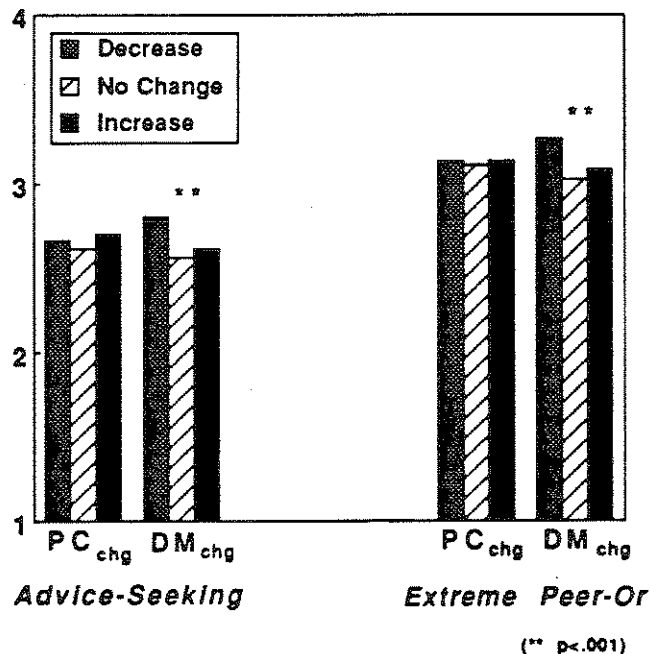
** while *Disengagement* had a significant effect on both aspects of peer orientation, it only mediated the effects of PC on *Extreme Peer-Orientation*.

Change in Parent-Child Relationships

Parental Control and *Decision-Making* at 6th grade were subtracted from the same measures at 7th grade in order to create measures of *Parental Control Change* (PC_{chg}) and *Decision-Making Change* (DM_{chg}). Each measure included three groups: 1) decrease, 2) no change, 3) increase.

Analyses proceeded in three stages:

First, two-factor ANOVA's were performed in order to determine the main effects and the interactive effects of PC_{chg} and DM_{chg} on peer-orientation.



** those who experienced a decrease in *Decision-Making* were higher in both aspects of peer-orientation ($E's=(9.18, 9.03)$)

** the main effect of PC_{chg} was not significant ($E's=(.63, .14)$)

** the interaction effect of PC_{chg} and DM_{chg} was not significant ($E's=(.80, 1.13)$)

Second, a two-factor ANOVA was performed in order to determine the main effects and the interactive effects of PC_{chg} and DM_{chg} on *Disengagement*.

	Decrease	No Change	Increase	F
PC _{chg}	-0.08	0.04	0.09	23.37 **
DM _{chg}	0.03	-0.04	0.01	2.71

(Note: Scores for *Disengagement* are Z-scores)

** those who experienced an increase or no change in *Parental Control* were higher in *Disengagement*

** the main effect of DM_{chg} was not significant

** the interaction effect of PC_{chg} and DM_{chg} was not significant ($F=(.29)$)

Third, in order to determine if *Disengagement* (DG) mediated the effects of DM_{chg}, ANOVA's were again performed, this time including DG as a covariate.

	Advice-Seek (F)	Extreme PO (F)
DM _{chg}	7.95 **	6.24 **
<i>Disengagement</i>	49.76 **	212.08 **

(** p<.001)

** *Disengagement* did not mediate the effects of DM_{chg} on either aspect of peer-orientation

Gender Differences

Student t-tests and crosstabulations were performed to determine if there were any gender-differences in the measures.

Parent-Child Relationships

	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>t</u>
Parental Control	2.49	2.46	-1.30
Decision-Making	2.53	2.56	0.92
Disengagement	-0.02	0.00	0.74

** there were no differences in the measures of parent-child relationships at seventh grade

** females were slightly more likely to perceive a decrease in *parental control* from 6th to 7th grade than males ($X=8.65, p<.05$)

** there was no difference in perceived change in *decision-making* ($X=3.23, n.s.$)

Peer-Orientation

	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>t</u>
Advice-Seeking	2.42	2.86	-10.15 **
Extreme Peer-Or.	3.28	3.02	5.62 **

** females were more likely to seek advice from friends in addition to parents

** males were higher in extreme peer-orientation

Parent-Child Relationships and Peer-Orientation

In order to test for gender differences in the relations between parent-child relationships and peer-orientation, the original ANOVA's were performed again, including gender as a third factor.

In none of these analyses, however, was there a significant interaction between gender and the other factors.

Conclusions

1. Adolescents who perceive few opportunities for decision-making and high parental control at 7th grade orient more towards peers than do other adolescents.
2. A perceived decrease in decision-making opportunity during the transition to early adolescence was related to increased peer-orientation.
3. Adolescents who perceive few opportunities for decision-making and high parental control have a greater sense of disengagement from parents; but although this disengagement is also related to increased peer orientation, it generally does not totally mediate the effects of parent-child relationships on peer-orientation.
4. There seem to be no gender differences in the relations between parent-child relationships and peer-orientation.

Discussion

The transformation of parent-child relationships as children enter adolescence is an ongoing process. A certain amount of disequilibrium in family relationships during this process is normative and often necessary so that change may occur (Steinberg, 1987; Montemayor, 1983). However, results of this study suggest a pattern of low or even decreasing decision-making opportunities during the transition to early adolescence may lead adolescents to turn to and rely more on their relationships with their peers. The implications of this orientation are not exactly clear, and much may depend upon the nature of adolescents' peer groups as well as the quality of their future relationships with their family.