

**A PICTURE OF THE  
PARENT-TEEN RELATIONSHIP  
WITHIN THE FAMILY CONTEXT**

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## INTRODUCTION

Conflict and stress between teenagers and parents has long been portrayed as a characteristic of the transition from childhood to adolescence (Steinberg, 1990). Traditionally, research describing these parent-child interactions has focused on linear effects. However, emerging theories are postulating that parents and teens are part of a larger, more complex and reciprocal family system (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Compas & Wagner, 1991; Minuchin, 1988). In this work, we turn to qualitative data to begin to examine what changes parents and teens themselves describe as important experiences during the shift from childhood to adolescence.

This study presents 1) the use of a qualitative research tool, an eco map (Hartman, 1978) for analyzing individuals' perceptions of family relationships and for exploring intra-family relationships; (2) themes related to parent-child, spousal, and sibling relationships and the frequency with which they are spontaneously mentioned across subjects; and (3) an account of family members' views of pushing limits, independence, and parent-child communication during the adolescent period. A discussion of the research projects' significance in exploring intra-subject consistency between verbal description and graphic representation of relationships within the family and intra-family congruence of perception regarding dyadic relationships will also be highlighted.

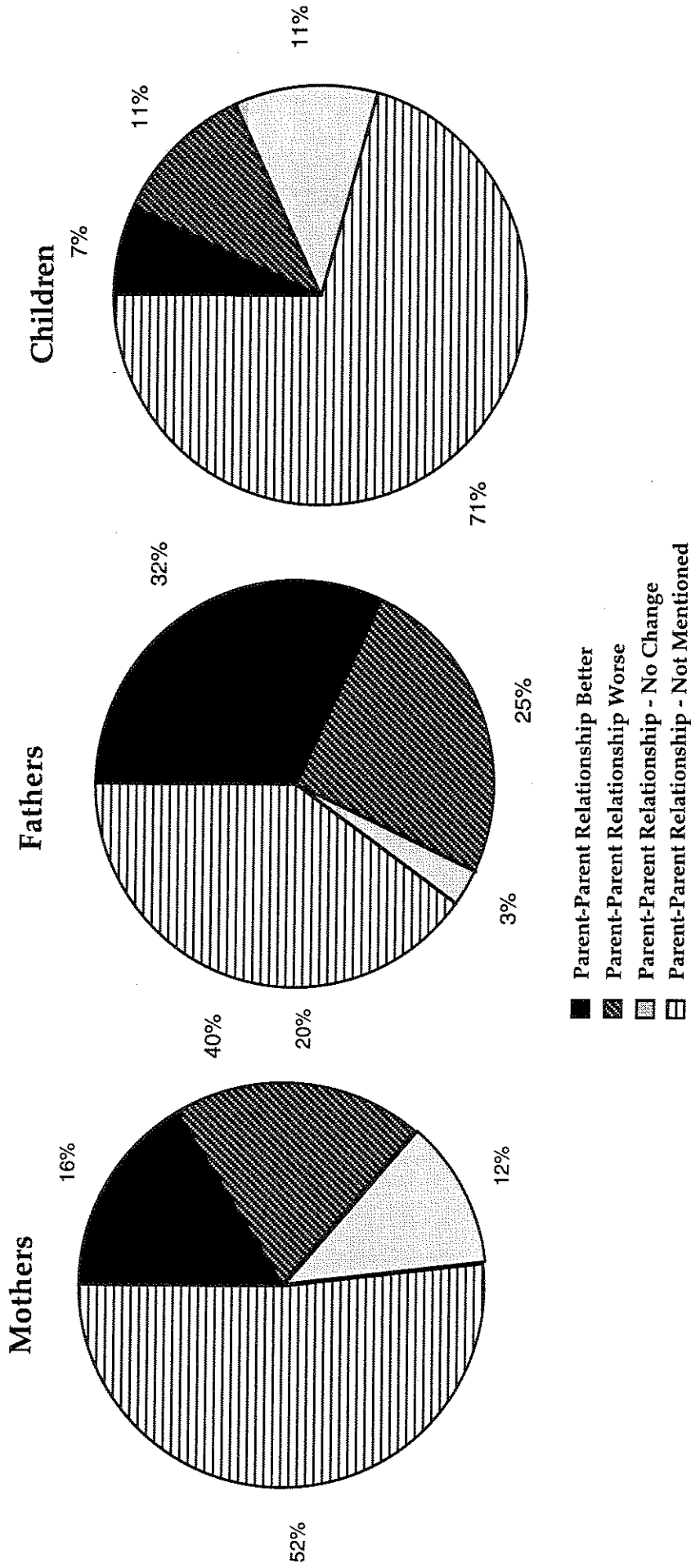
## METHODS

This longitudinal study began in 1986 with a quantitative approach to a series of questions about the socialization of children by parents and teachers (Eccles & Blumenfeld, 1984; Eccles, Blumenfeld, Harold, & Wigfield, 1990). Stimulated by the emerging complexity of family processes, questions arose about what the families themselves perceived as important in their family's development. The result was the addition of a qualitative component to the study. Interviews with parents and children have been conducted twice over a 6 year time period. The data presented here are based on interviews with parent and adolescent members of 54 families for a total of 190 individual interviews (50 mothers, 38 fathers, and 102 children).

During the interview, subjects were asked to describe changes in their families over the past five years (which corresponded to the transitional period from childhood to adolescence for the families in this study). Participants were also shown a blank ecological map (see Figure 1). This assessment tool is used to highlight the connections between a family and its environment. Interviewers led individual family members through the process of depicting the family in genogram fashion in the center of the map. Descriptive lines (as noted in Figure 1) were drawn to represent the relationships between the members of the family.

Eco map information was explored for themes of family relationships and adolescent-related issues in the family using an emic approach. A code sheet (see Figure 2) was then developed and used to record the frequencies of these themes in each family.

Figure 3. Family members' views of parental relationship changes.



**THEMES:** more/less time for parents to be together; planning for the future; kids more independent; parents' interests are changing and they are growing apart as children mature; strains over parenting issues regarding the adolescents, e.g., teen pregnancy in one family created a deep division between parents with siblings taking sides; teens becoming more aware of parents' relationship.

**BETTER** ◊ "We spend more time alone together because we no longer need a baby-sitter."

**WORSE** ◊ "Medical problems, work, cars, etc. make for a stressful environment."

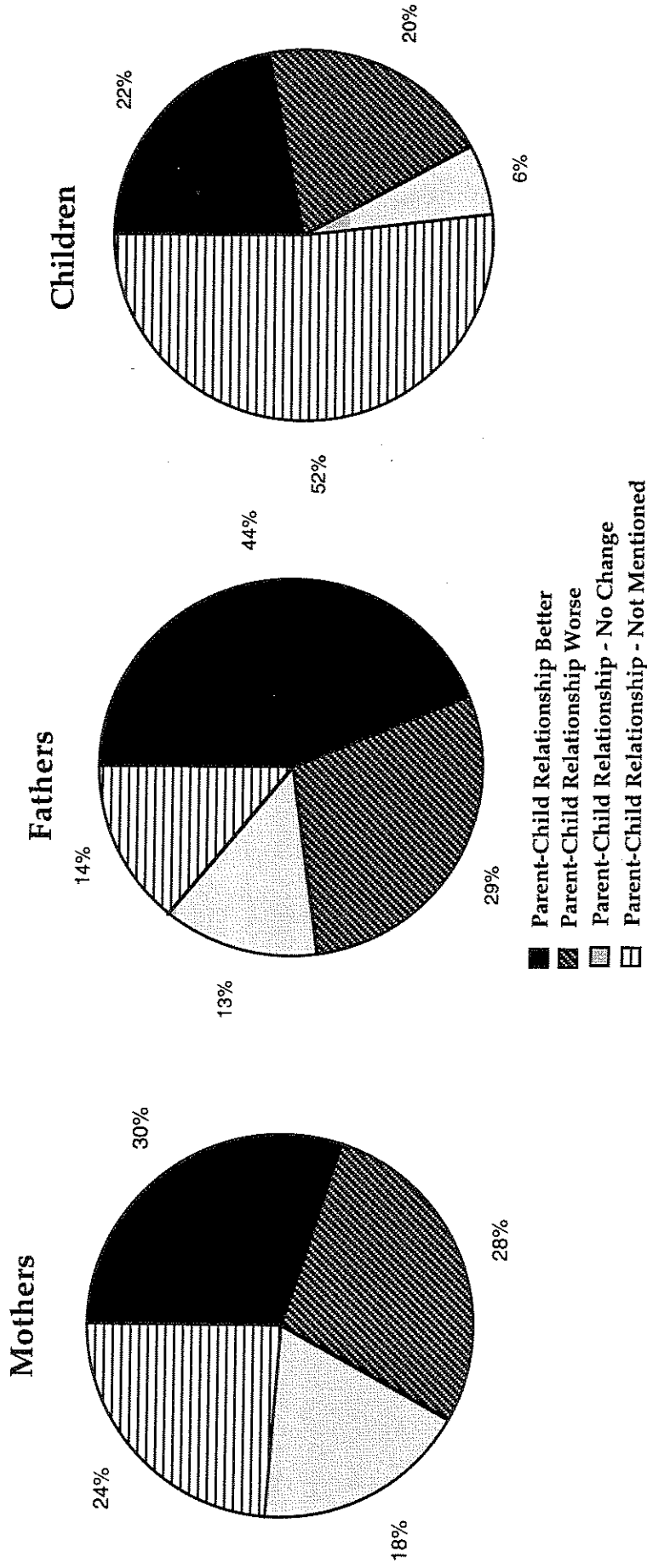
**BETTER** ◊ "It's gotten better over the past five years - raising kids and going to activities together."

**WORSE** ◊ "It's slightly less positive because we're more busy now - there's not as much time between us as a couple due to the children."

**BETTER** ◊ "Their relationship has always been strong positive, close. They have more time together now as we grow older."

**WORSE** ◊ "They put each other down worse than before."

Figure 4. Family members' views of parent-child relationship changes.



**THEMES:** parents and teens spend more/less time together doing activities; can talk about things on a more adult level; have more things in common; a change in the family constellation improved the relationship between the parents and remaining children; struggles over rules and discipline, opinion differences, e.g., styles of dress, social values, and academic performance; and gender alliances.

**BETTER** ◊ "I feel there's a stronger emotional bond since they became adolescents."

**WORSE** ◊ "They seem to be embarrassed to go places with us."

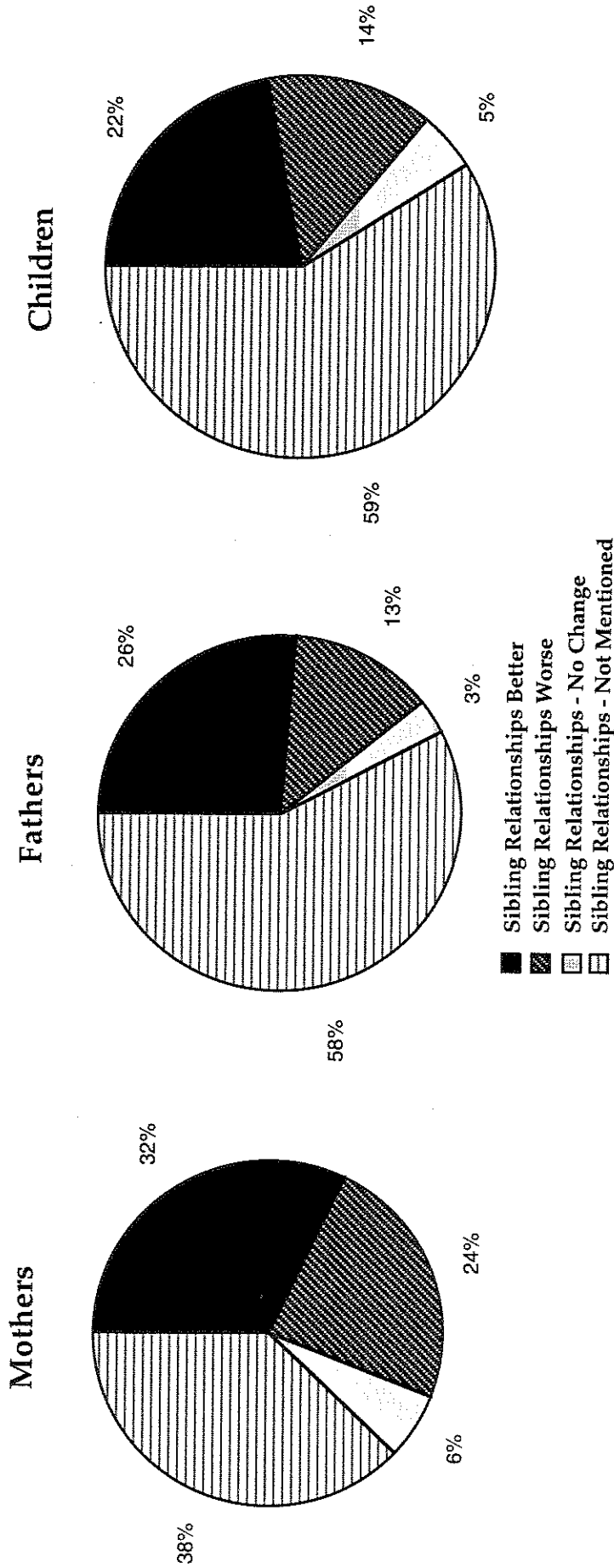
**BETTER** ◊ "Our oldest child moved out - that relationship was strained, so now our relationship with the other kids is better."

**WORSE** ◊ "We're less close, maybe because they say I am more rigid about rules now."

**BETTER** ◊ "I've gotten a little closer to dad because we spend more time together now."

**WORSE** ◊ "They hassle me more now about school, work, and the future."

Figure 5. Family members' views of sibling relationship changes.



THEMES: talk more and have more in common, e.g., school, activities, now that they're older; more respect for one another; support one another in disagreements with parents; played together when younger, but are very different from one another as adolescents; less tolerance for different interests and styles.

BETTER ◊ "The oldest is more empathic toward the younger one since she entered high school."

WORSE ◊ "The kids got along better when they were younger."

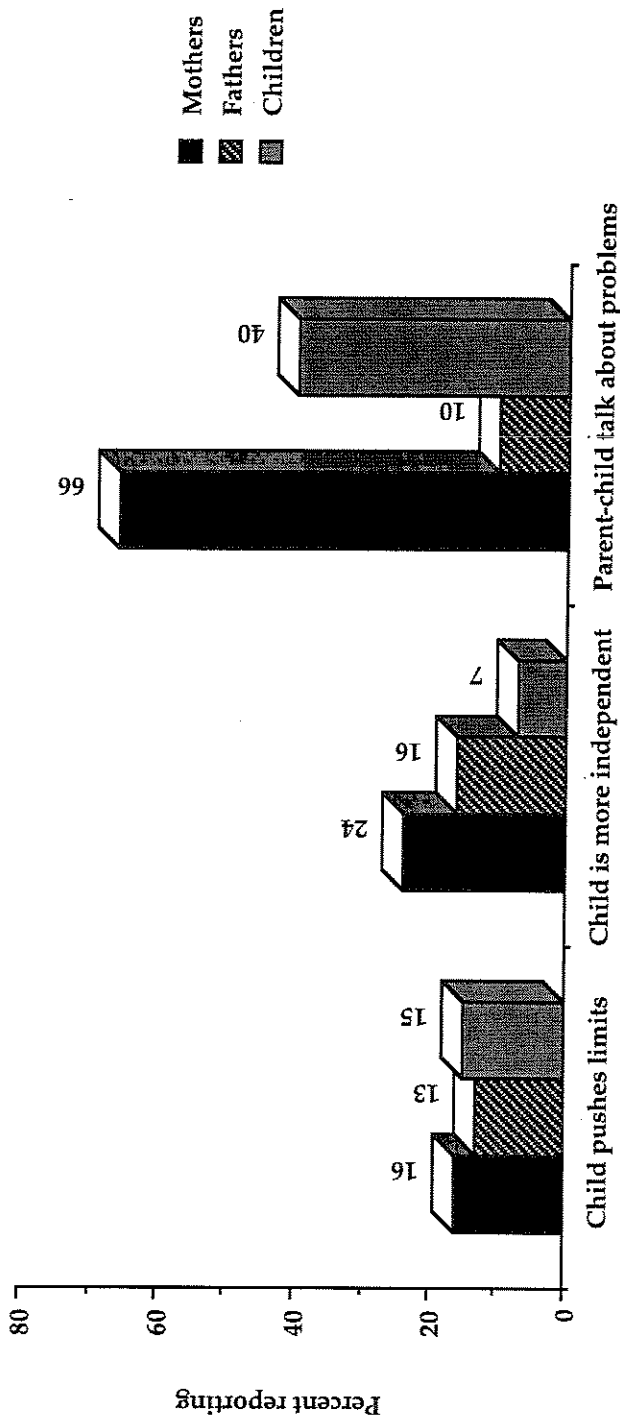
BETTER ◊ "Their relationship is stronger than before, they stick together."

WORSE ◊ "They have a mixed relationship - the younger one is positive toward him, but he is less positive toward her now than in the past."

BETTER ◊ "We talk more now and get along better."

WORSE ◊ "We like different things and don't do as much together anymore."

Figure 6. A comparison of mothers', fathers', and children's reports of three behaviors



**PUSHES LIMITS**

- ◇ "I get yelled at more often because I break my parents' rules and talk back to them. My brother gets in trouble because he comes home late."
- ◇ "Our 15 year old tests the waters. We disagree about curfew times, which has made the last two months more stressful. We have arguments with our 18 year old about doing chores and other issues."

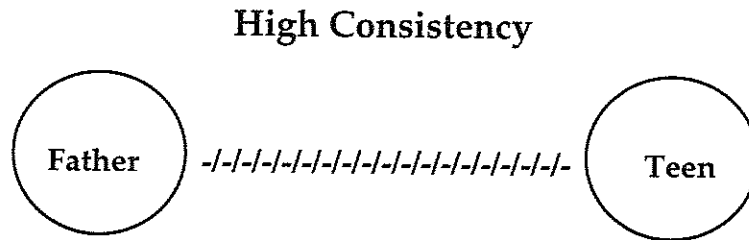
**MORE INDEPENDENT**

- ◇ "My son and I don't talk as much now, he gives fewer hugs, and needs me less as he gets older."
- ◇ "We clash more now than we did a year ago - teenage independence."
- ◇ "She doesn't ask for help now as much as she did".
- ◇ "My parents let me do more now than they did before."

**TALK ABOUT PROBLEMS**

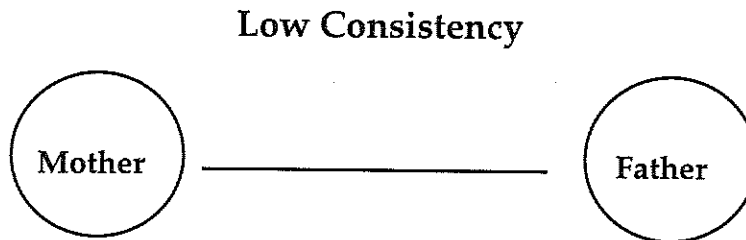
- ◇ "All the kids tell mom everything - we have open communication and are very close."
- ◇ "I can talk to mom about a lot more stuff - personal problems and guys. It's always been that way, but more so now."
- ◇ "I tell mom everything. We're very close, best friends."

Figure 7. Consistency between subjects' graphic and verbal descriptions of their relationships.



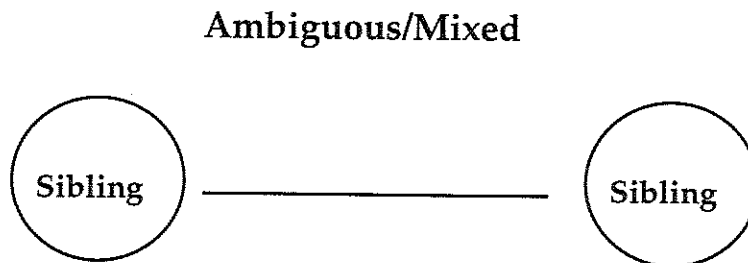
[Conflictual line]

Mother: "Relationships between them have always been stressful. There's not too much in common. It never seems like anything is good enough for his father. Son tries his best to make his dad happy, but his expectations are too high. Dad can't accept him for who he is."



[Strong/Positive line]

Mother: "We've been married 22 years. We tolerate each other. If he were home more often, it would be more stressful, we'd probably be divorced."



[Strong/Positive line]

Teen: "We do things together, but it is stressful with petty arguments."



## DISCUSSION

The use of the eco map to graphically depict family relationships and compare perceptions across family members provides an innovative technique for viewing family dynamics, particularly during the transitional stage of adolescence. It offers the opportunity to examine how changes that occur at this time affect each member of the family:

1) Both parents and teens described changes in the parents' relationship over the last 5 years (see Figure 3). One of the most interesting issues involved time spent together: some families said that because the teens were involved in activities away from the family, it left more time for the parents to be alone together, while others said that parental relationships were negatively affected because of spending more time with the teens' academic or recreational activities.

2) Contrary to the storm and stress model of adolescence and struggles between parents and children over independence, more parents and teens who commented on parent-child relationships reported improved relationships with the onset of adolescence (see Figure 4).

3) Changes in sibling relationships were also reported as being more positive than negative (see Figure 5). Maturation seems to lead to more tolerance for differences in personality and interests, although some stated that the sibs no longer engaged in activities together and this was seen as negative.

4) Figure 6 illustrated three themes commonly related to adolescence: pushing limits, independence, and talking with parents. One of the most interesting findings depicted here is that mothers have more to say about all of these issues, particularly parent-child talks. Not surprisingly, most

of the teens who mentioned this referred to communications with their mothers.

5) A particular highlight of this research tool is the opportunity to compare the consistency between subjects' graphic and verbal descriptions of their relationships as seen in Figure 7. It is particularly interesting to look at those individuals who choose to depict the relationship as positive even though their verbal description tells a different story.

Similarly, it is interesting to explore the congruence among family members' depiction and description of the relationships in the family. The bottom half of the code sheet (Figure 2) provides researchers the opportunity to compare views of dyadic relationships across subjects as well as looking down each column to get a view of how individual members choose to portray family relationships. For example, in one family, the mother said that every relationship was "strong/positive." All of the other family members, however, agreed on stress and negativity between both parents and the children.

This paper explored only a few of the issues that are considered important during adolescence and that were mentioned by the study participants. Further analyses will also shed light on family members' definition of their roles and the alliances that exist within families.

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