

# Life Stories & Eco Maps: Practice & Research Techniques

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## Introduction

The studies described in this poster began with a quantitative approach to a series of questions about the socialization of children by parents and teachers. Stimulated by the emerging complexity of family processes, questions arose about what the families themselves perceived as important in their development. The result was the addition of two qualitative research components that can also be used in practice, thus bridging the practice-research gap. This poster offers a description of the qualitative methodology used in the data collection and analysis, and some examples of clinical and research applications.

For the past two decades social work has hosted a continuing dialogue about the interplay between research and practice. The ongoing discussion has focused on the need for specific methods which can 'cross over' between research and practice. The life story and eco map techniques were developed as practice tools for assessment and organization of information collected during regular contact between social worker and client. Both techniques are effective tools for research and practice and both are suited to social work activities in various settings. For these studies, researchers were trained to use story boards and eco maps as tools for collecting and analyzing data. The results show promise for meaningful research-based practice.

## Story Board Method

Parents from 60 families (38 pairs of mothers and fathers, 18 mothers only and 4 fathers only) were interviewed individually in a private room of their home where there were few interruptions or distractions. All interviews were tape recorded, after receiving participant consent, and later transcribed verbatim. Parents were asked to take about 20 minutes to tell the story of how their family developed with a beginning, a middle, and how things will look in the future. To help them think about their story, they were given a story board that seems to describe most people's storyline (see Figure 1).

A coding process was developed following the story board itself (see Figure 2): 1) level one coding included the division of stories into the classes represented by the developmental phases on the story board; 2) level two coding involved identifying issues within each class and developing categories across the classes; and 3) linkages and connecting themes were found that explored relationships within and among categories.

In this way, "family stories" were used to develop a schema of significant issues in family development. The schema was then used to further analyze the stories themselves, and to compare issues in the stories with other quantitative data from the larger study. The method described here can be employed in other research or practice-related settings where it is important to ascertain the meanings individuals assign to certain phenomenon.

## Eco Map Method

Families who participated in the first qualitative study that used the story board method were contacted several years later to ask if they were willing to participate in this continuing study of family development. Interviews were conducted 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 3). This assessment tool was designed to highlight the connections between a family and its environment. Interviewers, trained in the use of this technique, 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 3) were drawn to represent the relationships between the members of the family. Eco map information was coded using an etic/emic approach to studying themes of family relationships and adolescent-related issues in the family. A code sheet (see Figure 4) based on the themes and existing relationships was then developed and used for each family to record frequencies of each family member's reported themes.

## Intra-family Evaluation

In these studies, the method of using coding sheets or frames to organize information across the family made it possible to visually identify important issues and trends within the family. For example, eco maps frequently revealed 1) developmental themes that were important to different members in the family, 2) relationship dynamics between the members such as alliances, conflicts, unspoken tensions, and cut-offs and 3) individual and familial patterns of presenting the relationships within the family, e.g., some members chose a strong positive line to represent every relationship regardless of their verbal appraisal of the relationship. Similarly, story boards suggested family themes, such as the interaction between family development and social network, or gender differences in response to family stressors.

Another way that eco map data can be used within a single family involves looking at the consistency between the types of lines chosen on eco maps and the words used to describe the relationships. An analysis of subjects' line choices and verbal descriptions yielded three categories of consistency (see Figure 5). Comparison of responses yields information about the reliability of client reporting on family relationships as well as about communication patterns. A related analysis of congruence among family members' descriptions of the relationships within the unit could inform the practitioner about roles and alliances.

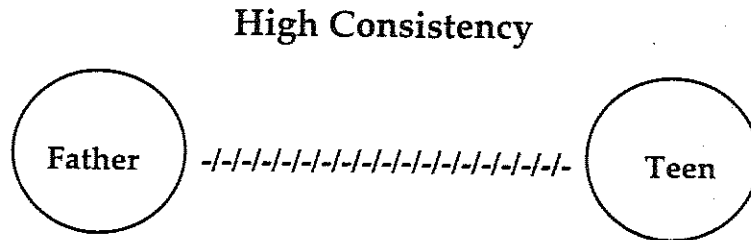
## Inter-family Research

The eco map has several research applications. It can be used to produce in-depth case studies of individuals within a family system or to test out existing theories. Eco maps provide the opportunity to compare and analyze relationship patterns or themes and issues across many families. For example, using the coding sheet in Figure 4, frequencies can be obtained across many subjects, providing systematic information for descriptive research studies based on qualitative data.

Figure 6 depicts a summary of how members from 54 different families perceived parental relationships. By counting the number of times each person, across many families, talks about the parental relationship, we can get a picture of how mothers, fathers, and teens perceive things similarly and differently. Alternately, figure 7 illustrates three themes commonly related to adolescence: pushing limits, independence, and talking with parents. An interesting finding 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.

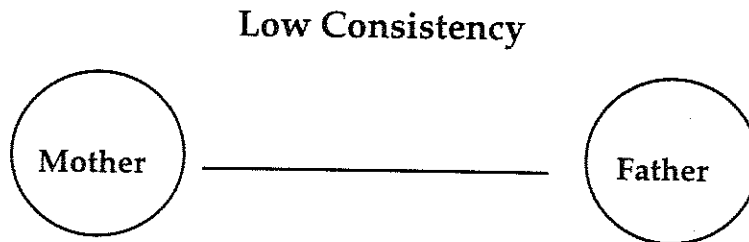
Eco map data could also be used to analyze which aspects of the social system, outside the family, when impoverished are associated with what kinds of child difficulties, allowing social workers to focus treatment, case management, and/or social policy efforts on these systems.

Figure 5. Consistency between subjects' graphic and verbal descriptions of their relationships.



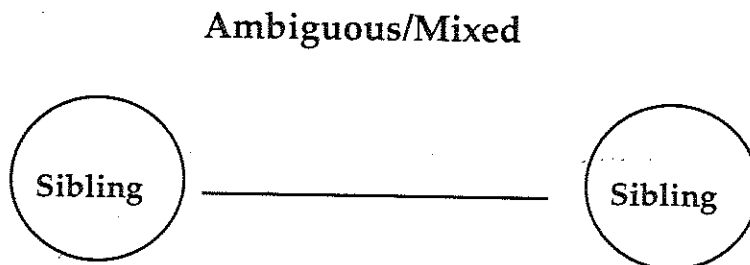
[Conflictual line]

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."

Figure 1. The Story Board

# YOUR FAMILY STORY

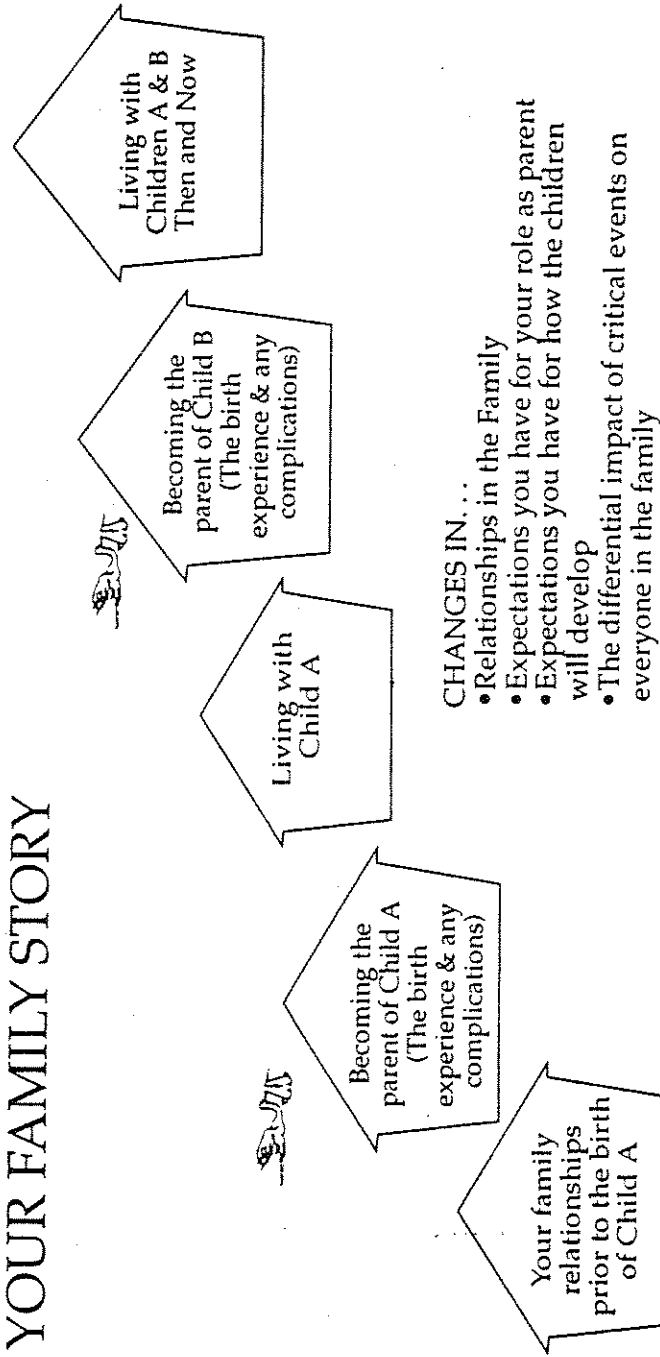


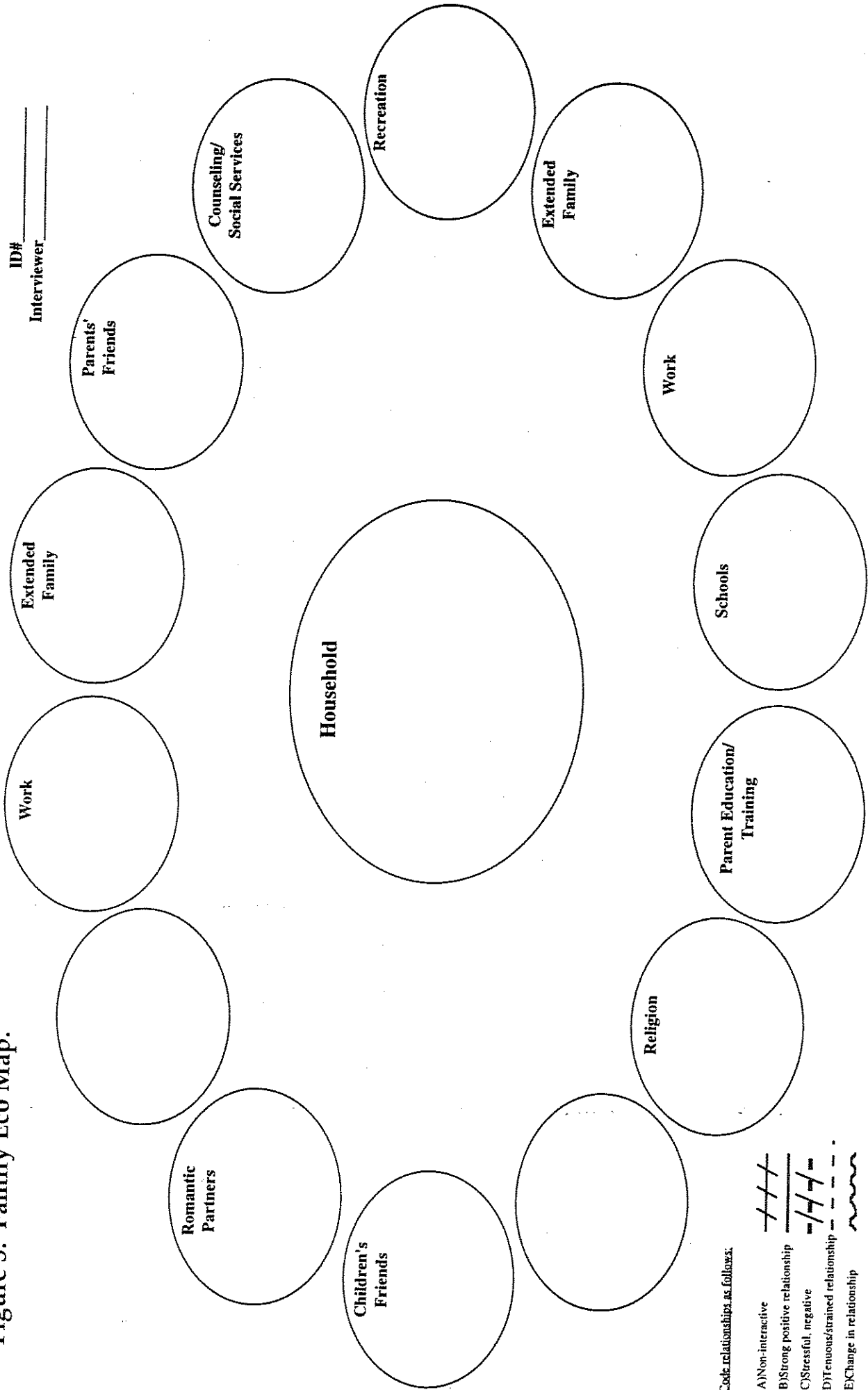


Figure 2. Final Coding Frame.






LEVEL I: THEORETICAL CLASSES	PRIOR TO THE BIRTH OF CHILD A	BIRTH OF CHILD A	LIVING WITH CHILD A	BIRTH OF CHILD B	LIVING WITH CHILD A & B
LEVEL II: CATEGORIES					
- Characteristics					
	<b>BIRTH DECISION - CHILD A</b> - Information on birth decision choice or accident planned/ unplanned - Precipitating factors	<b>BIRTH PROCESS</b> - Additional decision information - Birth itself - Pregnancy - Expectations of birth	<b>BIRTH DECISION - CHILD B</b> - Information on birth decision choice or accident planned/ unplanned - Precipitating factors	<b>BIRTH PROCESS</b> - Additional decision information - Birth itself - Pregnancy - Expectations of birth	<b>BIRTH DECISIONS</b> - Additional children? - Overview information on having children
	<b>FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b> - Extended family descriptive - Marital relationship - Living situation	<b>FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b> - Extended family descriptive - Marital relationship - Living situation	<b>FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b> - Extended family descriptive - Marital relationship - Living situation	<b>FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b> - Extended family descriptive - Marital relationship - Living situation	<b>FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b> - Extended family descriptive - Marital relationship - Living situation
	<b>FAMILY ACTIVITIES</b> - Events and activities - Trips - School involvement	<b>FAMILY ACTIVITIES</b> - Events and activities - Trips - School involvement	<b>FAMILY ACTIVITIES</b> - Events and activities - Trips - School involvement	<b>FAMILY ACTIVITIES</b> - Events and activities - Trips - School involvement	<b>FAMILY ACTIVITIES</b> - Events and activities - Trips - School involvement
	<b>FAMILY GOALS AND BELIEFS</b> - School involvement: goals/ beliefs - Future goals - Parenting beliefs	<b>FAMILY GOALS AND BELIEFS</b> - School involvement: goals/ beliefs - Future goals - Parenting beliefs	<b>FAMILY GOALS AND BELIEFS</b> - School involvement: goals/ beliefs - Future goals - Parenting beliefs	<b>FAMILY GOALS AND BELIEFS</b> - School involvement: goals/ beliefs - Future goals - Parenting beliefs	<b>FAMILY GOALS AND BELIEFS</b> - School involvement: goals/ beliefs - Future goals - Parenting beliefs
	<b>EXPECTATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS</b> - Expectations or characteristics of: pregnancy parental role child	<b>EXPECTATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS</b> - Physical problems - Personality of child - Looks of child - Initial impressions - Gender preferences	<b>EXPECTATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS</b> - Personality - Skill - Physical issues or problems - Achievement issues	<b>EXPECTATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS</b> - Physical problems - Personality of child - Looks of child - Initial impressions - Gender preferences - Expectations of two	<b>EXPECTATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS</b> - Child B - Personality - Skill - Physical issues - Achievement issues
	<b>WORK LIFE</b> - Mother's work life - Father's work life - Before children work life - Changes expected?	<b>WORK LIFE</b> - Mother's work life - Father's work life - Effect of birth on parents' work - Financial issues	<b>WORK LIFE</b> - Mother's work life - Father's work life - Work and child rearing	<b>WORK LIFE</b> - Mother's work life - Father's work life - Effect of birth on parents' work - Financial issues	<b>WORK LIFE</b> - Mother's work life - Father's work life - Work and raising a family - Work life with two children

**Figure 3. Family Eco Map.**

ID# \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_



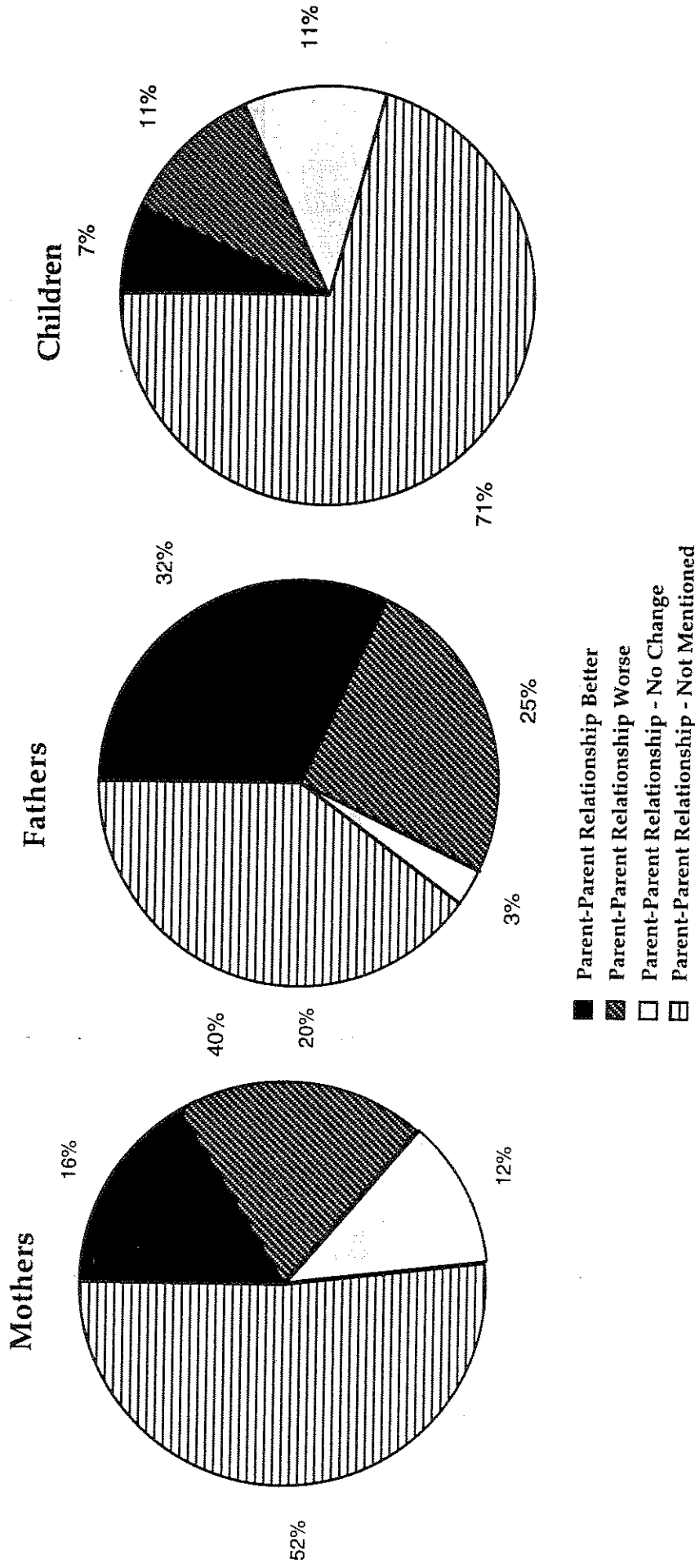
Code relationships as follows:

- (A) Non-interactive 
- (B) Strong positive relationship 
- (C) Stressful, negative 
- (D) Tenuous/strained relationship 
- (E) Change in relationship 

**Figure 4. Eco Map Coding Sheet for Intra-Family Relationships.**

<b>Family ID:</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Oldest</b>	<b>Second</b>	<b>Third</b>
parent-parent relationship better					
parent-parent relationship worse					
parent-parent relationship - no change					
parent-child relationship better					
parent-child relationship worse					
parent-child relationship - no change					
sibling relationship better					
sibling relationship worse					
sibling relationship - no change					
child pushes limits/does not like rules					
child is more independent					
parent-child talk about problems					
<b>Perception of family relationships:</b>					
Mother and Father					
Mother and Oldest					
Mother and Second					
Mother and Third					
Father and Oldest					
Father and Second					
Father and Third					
Oldest and Second					
Oldest and Third					
Second and Third					

Figure 6. 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."

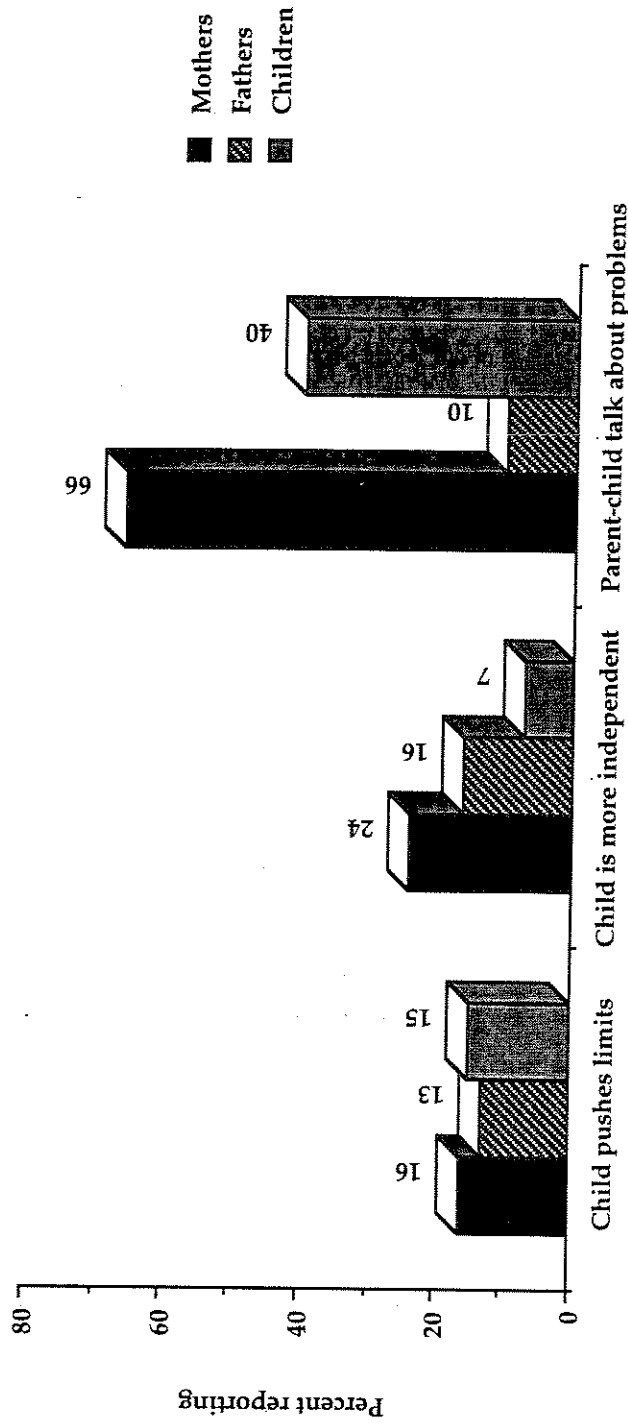
**BETTER** ◊ "It's gotten better over the past five years - raising kids and going to activities together."

**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 7. 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."