

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding Families : Role of Family in Adolescent Development

Developmental theories view adolescence as a period of growth in which identity formation is addressed¹. This can be interpreted to mean that the role of family is lessening or that family have only a limited role in the lives of young people at this time.

Research shows, however, that ongoing positive family connections are protective factors against a range of health risk behaviours. Although the nature of relationships is changing, the continuity of family connections and a secure emotional base is crucial for the positive development of young people².

Family is still important

It is normal for young people to begin to think for themselves and question aspects of their lives and of family relationships. These changes may mean times of anger and frustration that is levelled at the family, but in the majority of circumstances these feelings are likely to be temporary or circumstantial.

Parents will benefit from being supported to understand the role of rebellion in young people's development. Limit setting still needs to occur for poor or unacceptable behaviour. Many young people who display difficult behaviour are actually doing so in an attempt to have someone set some boundaries and limits³.

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the importance of peer groups, and how they become more influential than parents at this age. Whilst peers do become significant, the quality of the relationship is different, with peers providing intimacy based on equality, and parents providing a relationship still based on a power imbalance. Peer relationships, therefore, have a purpose, but do not usually become more important to young people⁴.

The need for a secure-base

Adolescents are moving towards becoming independent physically, emotionally and cognitively, and yet they are still growing.

Young people still require stability in a home environment, and a secure emotional base from which to explore and experience the world. This also provides them with somewhere to come back to for reassurance, support and unconditional love in tough times.

A young person benefits from expectations of respect, consideration and reciprocity in family relationships. They still benefit from 'trying out' thoughts, feelings and behaviours within the family environment, and from observing and experiencing relationships within families. There will still be times when they fall, and will benefit from understanding and support to pick themselves back up.

Changing role of parents

A parent's relationship and caring role with a young person continues to be important, although the relationship will need to be flexible to adapt to the teenager's changing needs. At this time, there will need to be a gradual change from a more authoritative approach, to a more collaborative approach.

Parents have to face the (sometimes hard) reality that their child is no longer a child, is becoming independent and is no longer within their control. They may feel distressed as they perceive that the young person won't listen to them, or does the opposite of what they may suggest.

They may have to watch their young person disregard the things they thought they taught them were important, such as ways to look after their health, or their future goals (as the parent envisaged it).

Parents have to learn to 'let go', not of the relationship, but of their dreams for the young person, and their authority over the young people, so that they may allow a young person to develop their own dreams and greater self-responsibility.

Guidance and boundaries

Guidance and boundaries are still important, however the quality of the relationship, and collaboration rather than 'obedience', becomes increasingly important if a relationship is to survive and be maintained.

Joint discussions about rules/options, compromise and flexibility for win/win solutions are important. Warmth and understanding are important, rather than judgmental comments or telling a young person what to do.

Consequences need to be age-appropriate, and not punitive. (See: **Setting Boundaries**) Monitoring of a young person's whereabouts is still important to the extent possible, especially when adolescents are still young. Parental supervision, and access to a parent for support and assistance, are crucial protective factors in young people's health⁵.

1. Muuss, R. (1996) Theories of Adolescence. New York: McGraw Hill. Sixth Edition.

2. Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D. and Schofield (1999). Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support. A Practice and Assessment Model. Palgrave: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York.

3. Fuller, A. (2000) Raising Real People: Creating a Resilient Family. Melbourne: ACER

4. Daniel, B., Wassel, S. & Gilligan, R. (1999) Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers. UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

5. Blum, R. & Rinehart, P. (1998) Reducing the Risk: Connections that Make a Difference in the Lives of Youths. Internet: http://www.allaboutkids.umn.edu/cfahad/Reducing_the_risk.pdf

It can be helpful for caregivers to consider the age at which they think their young person will be an adult, and to think about and look forward to, how they would like their relationship with their child to be then. This may lead them to think about and nurture the relationship shift needed between now and then.

See: **Building our Relationship**

Role modelling

A family and its members continue to provide valuable role models for a range of behaviours, including effective communication, relationship skills, and socially acceptable behaviours. The ways in which conflict and disagreements are negotiated within the family are important blueprints for dealing with issues in other arenas.

Appropriate boundary setting also gives young people clear guidelines as to what is acceptable and what is not; skills which can be generalised to a wider context. Young people benefit from modelling about how to have constructive disagreements while maintaining a continuing positive relationship. They still benefit from experiencing an effective model for relating to others and negotiating life and the world.

When families are not providing a secure-base

Where there is no apparent family on the scene, efforts need to be made to reconnect young people with appropriate family members. Alternatively, other significant adults are needed who may provide the elements and safety net for emotional development. The developmental needs of a young person, as outlined in this help sheet, must be met somehow to optimise health outcomes.

Some families seem to work against a young person developing their own sense of self-worth, self-identity and their capacity for independent decision-making and emotion-regulation. Understanding and working with the family dynamics may assist the family's capacity to provide a young person with a secure-base on which to continue to develop.

Caregivers and other family members and particularly the young person will benefit from being told more about how the family may be operating in a way which is detrimental to a young person's development. It can be useful to try to build a more positive picture of the young person in the family.

See: **Family Dynamics**

Encourage carers to gain support in dealing with issues relating to their adolescent, either through family and friends or other support groups. The help sheets in the Parent section of this website may be useful.

There are times when contact with some or all family members is detrimental and alternative 'families' need to be engaged.



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Promote the importance of supportive relationships with family members and connections to community. Even a sense of family can help a young person through transitional times. Use a broad definition of "family".
- An extended family member or a caring, responsible adult in the young person's community may be able to act as a positive role model in the young person's life when relationships with the immediate family are conflictual.
- Extreme feelings and attitudes towards family and/or family members may at times need to be challenged. Has the young person tried to look at the situation from the perspective of other family members?



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Family Development and Transition Points
- Family Dynamics
- Impact of Family Issues on Adolescents
- When Contact with Family is Unhelpful

Parent Help Sheets

- Dealing with past hurts and traumas
- Building our Relationship
- Feeling blamed
- Setting Boundaries



Other Related Links

- Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies:
<http://www.acys.utas.edu.au/ysa/index/develop.html>



Suggested Reading

- Sells, S. (1998) *Treating the Tough Adolescent: A Family-Based. Step-by-Step Guide*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Selekman, M., D., (1997) *Solution-Focused Therapy with children: Harnessing Family Strengths for Systemic Change*, Guilford Press, New York
How do I parent my adolescent?



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