Development of Parent–Adolescent Relationships: Conflict Interactions as a Mechanism of Change

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ABSTRACT—*Adolescence is a period of rapid biological and psychosocial changes, which have a salient impact on parent–child relationships. Parents and adolescents have to reorganize responsibilities and move toward a more egalitarian relationship. Although conflicts between parents and children become more frequent and more intense during adolescence, these conflicts are also thought to be a means to negotiate relational changes. The short-term dyadic processes that occur during conflict interactions are important in the development of parent–adolescent relationships. Parent–adolescent dyads with more emotional variability during conflict interactions tend to adapt effectively and reorganize their relationships in response to the developmental needs of adolescents. Thus, parent–adolescent conflicts are adaptive for relational development when parents and adolescents can switch flexibly between a range of positive and negative emotions.*

KEYWORDS—*parent–adolescent relationships; conflict interactions; adolescence*

Parent–child relationships are among the most important relationships for adolescents. Adolescence is a period of rapid biological, cognitive, and neurological changes (1), which have a salient impact on psychosocial functioning and relationships (2). During adolescence, parent–child relationships are thought to become more equal, interdependent, and reciprocal (3), changes that co-occur with a temporary decrease in the quality of the relationship and an increase in conflict (4). Indeed, adolescents report that their parents are less supportive in early to middle adolescence, and they gradually perceive their parents as less powerful and controlling over the course of adolescence (5, 6).

In this article, I review theories and empirical evidence of development in parent–adolescent relationships, highlighting change and continuity. I address the role of short-term dyadic processes during conflict interactions in parent–adolescent relationships. Although I focus on developmental changes, most studies of parent–adolescent relationships examine ties between mothers and their adolescent children.

THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT IN PARENT–ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

Developmental changes in parent–child relationships have been attributed to adolescents' biological or cognitive maturation. Hormonal changes related to puberty are thought to lead adolescents to strive for autonomy and individuation from parents (7), and result in conflicts with parents that permit adolescents to form mature and egalitarian relationships. Cognitive models imply that developments in adolescents' abstract reasoning foster an increasingly reciprocal and egalitarian view of parent–child relationships (8). Cognitive advances may also prompt adolescents to perceive issues that were considered to be under parental jurisdiction as personal decisions (8). This biological and cognitive development facilitates reorganization of the parent–adolescent relationship from a vertical relationship, in which parents have more knowledge and social power than their children and are expected to provide security and warmth, toward a more horizontal relationship, characterized by equal, symmetrical, and reciprocal interactions (9–11).

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The process of transforming a vertical affiliation into a more horizontal one creates conflict and restrains closeness (12). According to the expectancy-violation realignment model (4), these conflicts arise because adolescents and parents differ in their expectations regarding appropriate behavior, in particular the timing of transitions in authority, autonomy, and responsibilities (8, 13): Teenagers strive for autonomy and less parental control more rapidly than they develop self-regulation, which is related to the imbalance in changes in the ventral affective system and the prefrontal cortex (1). Since many parents wish for a stronger balance in their teenagers of autonomy and self-regulation, parents and their teenage children feel less connected and experience more conflicts (4, 14, 15).

However, these conflicts are suited to renegotiating parents' authority and adolescents' increasing needs for autonomy (8, 12, 14). They are thought to help adolescents become more autonomous (15–17), and to realign the parent–adolescent relationship toward more horizontality and reciprocity, with more equality in exchanges, power, and decision making (4, 6). Once expectations about the relationship are renegotiated in a mutually satisfactory way and parents reduce their control, conflict usually diminishes and parents and adolescents may reestablish closeness. Thus, conflicts with parents play an important role in these changes in the quality of the parent–child relationship.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

The aforementioned developmental changes should be understood in the context of relational continuity. Whereas the content and form of parent–child relationships alter as adolescents mature, the functional properties of relationships continue because relationships are inherently stable (14). Individual differences in perceptions of the quality of the relationship tend to be stable, even though the patterns of interaction between parent and child might change. Thus, the extent to which parent–adolescent relationships are characterized by heightened conflict and diminished feelings of closeness depends on the history of the relationship (18). Adolescents and parents with a history of sensitive, responsive interactions and with high-quality relationships in childhood tend to experience temporary and minor relational difficulties, whereas those in relationships of lower quality tend to experience more severe relational difficulties (19, 20).

In one study, only 14% of young adolescents (around age 12) reported turbulent relationships with parents characterized by low support and high conflict. Although this number increased to 29% in middle adolescence (around age 16) and decreased again to 10% in late adolescence (around age 20), most teenagers had the same type of relationship with their parents throughout adolescence (21). Thus, parent–adolescent dyads differ substantially and many do not experience increased conflict and decreased closeness.

CONFLICT INTERACTIONS AND CHANGES IN THE PARENT–ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

Emotional Variability During Conflict Interactions

Some conflict with parents can be regarded as a normal part of family relations during adolescence, and these conflicts are thought to affect adolescents' development of autonomy and individuation (16). However, too many conflicts are risky for adolescents' psychosocial adjustment and well-being. Adolescents who have more conflicts with their parents have more externalizing and internalizing problems; lower levels of self-esteem, well-being, and adjustment to school; and more frequent substance use (22). This might reflect bidirectional processes: Adolescents' conflicts with parents might lead to lower psychosocial adjustment and their adjustment problems might trigger more conflict with parents. The conditions under which parent–adolescent conflicts are positively versus negatively related to development of the parent–adolescent relationship are less clearly understood. Therefore, to understand more about the role conflicts play in realigning parent–adolescent relationships toward more egalitarianism, we need to understand what parents and adolescents do during conflict interactions, that is, instead of exploring the number of conflicts parents and adolescents have, we should consider what they do during their conflicts.

An important aspect of conflict interactions is the extent to which parents and adolescents display different emotions and switch flexibly between these emotions during conflicts (23–25). This flexibility to express different emotions, or emotional variability, enables parent–adolescent dyads to explore new patterns of interaction (26, 27). When parents and children can express both negative and positive emotions during conflicts, they are more likely able to find alternative interaction patterns and renegotiate their relationship (23). For example, when parents and children can express their anger and irritation toward each other during a disagreement, but also show affection to each other, express interest in each other's opinions, and laugh about the conflict, the conflicts might help them find new ways to relate to each other. Parents and children who get stuck in anger or other negative emotions, or who express only positive emotions toward each other and are afraid to express anger, might have more problems renegotiating their relationship. Thus, greater emotional variability during parent–adolescent interactions involving conflicts reflects behavioral flexibility or the ability to adapt effectively and reorganize behavior in response to varying interpersonal and contextual demands related to adolescence (23, 28).

Focusing on emotional variability addresses the structure of parent–adolescent relationships and interactions rather than the content. Aspects of relationships are usually assessed as relatively static characteristics, and changes are examined over an extended period. Short-term fluctuations in behavior during interactions are often ignored or attributed to lower reliability and measurement error. However, since moment-to-moment

interactions are the proximal engines of development (29), these fluctuations may be a key feature of relationships and relationship development. Thus, investigating variability during conflict interactions between parents and adolescents may expose fundamental relational processes.

A dynamic systems approach considers relationships as self-organizing developing systems that organize behavior around coherent and stable patterns of interaction or attractors (26, 27). The system is multistable, with multiple attractors or preferred interaction patterns coexisting. Systems tend to stabilize and settle into regularly occurring patterns of interaction or attractor states, but at the same time, the system is also characterized by some variability. A dynamic systems approach suggests that this variability reflects intrinsic processes in which the characteristics of relationships fluctuate around an equilibrium to which the relationship is attracted.

Adaptive relationships can flexibly reorganize when changes occur (27). In these relationships, members of dyads can adjust easily and fluidly to environmental changes. For instance, a mother and a daughter might express negative emotions when disagreeing about the daughter's curfew, but express support and mutual trust when they talk about fun activities. Lack of flexibility (also called *rigidity*) can be conceptualized as a limited capacity to switch among behaviors in response to changes in the environment or developmental changes (30), for example, when mother and child cannot exit a negative state when they switch from their conflict about curfews to talking about fun activities, or when they have conflicts in different domains. From this perspective, variability in interaction behaviors reflects an important aspect of relationships.

Emotional Variability and Relationship Quality

Emotional variability is positively related to the quality of parent–child relationships during adolescence. Mother–adolescent dyads with greater emotional variability during conflict interactions in early adolescence reported more optimal relationship quality over time than dyads with less emotional variability (31). Over adolescence, mothers and adolescents from dyads with greater variability reported more maternal support for autonomy. Adolescents (but not mothers) in these dyads also reported less frequent conflict than adolescents in dyads with less variability. These results suggest that dyads with greater variability adapt more efficiently to adolescents' increasing needs for autonomy than dyads with less variability (17).

In addition, adolescents' reports of less conflict might indicate that dyads with greater variability develop more egalitarian relationships during adolescence. When power in the parent–child dyad is divided more equally, conflicts might not be needed to express conflicting expectations, ideas, and wishes. The finding that mothers from dyads with lesser and greater variability did not differ in perceived frequency of conflict might reflect that mothers have difficulties granting autonomy to adolescents and are affected more strongly by relational detachment than

adolescents, so they perceive interactions as more conflicted than adolescents do (32). Moreover, adolescents might recover more quickly from conflicts than mothers (16, 33) because parents and adolescents tend to frame topics discussed during conflicts differently: Mothers tend to perceive these conflicts as social conventional issues (e.g., cleaning your room is an agreement made in the family where everyone has to do household chores), while adolescents perceive them as personal issues (e.g., whether you clean your room is something you can decide for yourself because your room is your private space; 8).

Emotional variability during conflict interactions in early adolescence is also related to developmental changes in parents' control and adolescents' disclosure (34). As adolescents get older, they increasingly consider information regarding their life private, yet their parents tend to see it as falling under their jurisdiction (32). Parents and adolescents have to find a balance between adolescents' autonomy and privacy on the one hand and parents' control and access to information on the other. Put differently, parents and children have to create a relational context in which adolescents' sharing of information is supported without threatening their increasing need for autonomy.

When mother–adolescent dyads revealed greater emotional flexibility in conflict interactions during early adolescence, mothers reported that adolescents disclosed more about their friends, activities, and whereabouts in early adolescence. These findings support the idea that when mothers and adolescents can switch flexibly between positive and negative emotions and freely express thoughts, feelings, and emotions during conflict interactions, they are engaging in more open communication patterns and creating a context in which both positive and negative emotions are accepted and understood (35).

Adolescent disclosure seems to be enhanced when parents and adolescents more openly and flexibly express different positive and negative emotions toward each other. One reason adolescents refrain from disclosing what is happening in their lives is their concern about potential negative reactions from parents (36). Thus, adolescents seem to feel it is safer to share information with their mothers in a context where positive and negative emotions are accepted.

Greater emotional variability in early adolescence was not related to concurrent maternal control but predicted a relative decrease in perceived maternal control in late adolescence. This corresponds to the idea that more parental control is considered normative in early adolescence (37), but from midadolescence, youth tend to see issues that were previously under parents' jurisdiction as part of the personal domain; parents need to accommodate adolescents' increasing need for autonomy and allow them to make decisions without informing parents (14).

Adolescents tend to interpret parental control differently depending on the social domain of the topic parents try to control. For example adolescents who said their parents exerted restrictive control over issues in the personal domain perceived their mothers as more controlling psychologically, whereas

adolescents who said their parents exerted restrictive control over issues in the social domain did not say their mothers were controlling psychologically (38). Perhaps these dyads negotiated about autonomy more successfully, resulting in mothers needing to express less control in late adolescence (37) as well as a more horizontal relationship with their adolescents. When mothers and children can flexibly express their different emotions during conflicts, adolescents might perceive a safe, open and supportive context in which to share information, further allowing mothers to release control gradually.

The Role of Emotional Variability in the Reorganization of Mother–Child Relationships

Greater emotional variability might indicate that the mother–adolescent dyad is moving toward new behavioral patterns and a more horizontal relationship when old patterns no longer work (25, 39). Although not all dyads are characterized by greater variability, emotional variability in conflict interactions typically tends to peak in early adolescence (24, 28, 31); most interindividual differences in variability also occur in early adolescence (31). This is in line with the notion that emotional variability has a potential role in developmental change in early adolescence.

From a dynamic systems approach, greater intraindividual variability is typical for periods of developmental change and reorganization (26), after which the relationship restabilizes and settles into new, more age-appropriate patterns of interaction. The greater diversity of emotions enables more flexible parent–child dyads to adapt to the relational challenges of early adolescence and reorganize interaction patterns toward more horizontality and equality (25). Mother–child dyads with less variability that have a smaller and more rigid emotional repertoire may not be reorganizing their patterns of interaction (23), resulting in lower relationship quality later in adolescence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Mother–child dyads with by greater emotional variability in conflict interactions change more toward an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship than dyads with less emotional variability (4). They can create a safe context in which adolescents can be negative while also acquiring emotion-regulation skills (23) and learning to regulate their negativity effectively. Mother–adolescent dyads with more emotional rigidity seem to have difficulties expressing, adjusting, and regulating emotions during conflict interactions (23, 25, 28). They do not experience a supportive and safe context to discuss diverging views and opposing emotions (39), and are therefore less equipped to flexibly handle different emotional challenges (14). In general, these results suggest that conflict interactions between parents and adolescents are adaptive for relational development when these interactions are characterized by the ability to switch flexibly between a range of emotions.

Until now, most research has focused on the role of emotional variability in mother–child relationships. Further research is needed to examine whether emotional variability in father–child interactions is linked similar to well-being and relational development. Also, emotional variability should be regarded in the context it is observed. In different contexts, emotional variability might have different implications for development. In conflicts, being able to express one's emotions freely might help members of the dyad reach mutual understanding. In other contexts, such as positive interactions, emotional variability might be less adaptive, especially when it is unpredictable. Moreover, the age of the dyad members might matter, because younger children might experience their mothers' emotional variability as unpredictability, which might not support children's development.

The findings I have discussed may help families understand how they can adjust their patterns of interaction to the developmental challenges of adolescence. Parents often think they should suppress the negative emotions of their adolescent children and encourage their positive emotions, or they should avoid expressing their own negative emotions during conflicts. Instead, adaptive interactions during adolescence seem to be characterized by a range of emotions. Parents should learn to guide adolescents to express, share, and regulate a range of positive and negative emotions.

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