

Puberty: a challenge for parents and adolescents

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working paper



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Puberty – A Challenge for Parents and Adolescents

Central Findings

A. Conducive and inhibiting factors in mastering the developmental challenges facing families with pubertal adolescents, as identified in the specialized literature

Empirical studies have shown that adolescence does not have to be a period of crisis. To characterize the parent-child relationship during the transition from childhood to adolescence as particularly crisis- and conflict-ridden would not appear to be justified. There is no doubt that during adolescence the parent-child relationship undergoes a period of change. On the whole, however, it has been found that the majority of adolescents have a positive relationship with their parents, and demonstrate a high rate of agreement and satisfaction with the manner in which they are being raised. The relationship with the mother tends to be more intensive than that with the father.

From the overall picture presented by various studies one may conclude that the following conducive and inhibiting factors aid or hinder parents and adolescents in jointly overcoming the challenges of puberty:

- The process by which adolescents increasingly distance themselves from their parents as part of their move towards independence should not obscure the fact that, for the sake of their own positive development, adolescents **need to have a basic feeling of acceptance and protection from the side of their parents as well as a sense of being taken seriously by them**. For there to be familial trust between parents and adolescents, **mutual understanding** is vital.
- The existence of **satisfactory communication structures** is identified as being of particular importance in creating a satisfactory relationship between parents and adolescents
- Parents should **grant** their adolescent children **areas of freedom**, for example in their choice of friends and other persons they relate to outside the family, in the choice of whom they approach with their problems, and in the acceptance of relationships with the opposite sex. The “delicate balance between attachment to the family and permitted individuality” (Schneewind 1991) is in many ways made possible by allowing dissent and conflict.
- Parenting styles and goals have changed. The parental approach to child-rearing is seen by adolescents as positive when **their stated interests are respected by their parents, their freedom is not overly restricted, and parental punishment is only rarely applied**. It is critical to the family’s success in meeting the challenges that **the parents themselves have a satisfactory relationship** and that **they exercise their parental role together**.
- Within the family, it is balanced emotional relationships which allow for both solidarity and the individual freedom to cope with the continuously changing challenges.

B.1 How do parents and adolescents experience puberty, and how do they overcome the challenges faced? (Empirical findings)

What adolescents want/expect from their parents

From the adolescent's point of view, the important thing is that parents ...

- regard their child as an independent, mature person,
- take an interest in their children,
- accept and understand the adolescent,
- trust their child,
- engage in calm discussions with their child calmly and examine problems in depth,
- allow their child areas of freedom
- reflect on their own childhood.

When asked what parents should avoid doing, adolescents responded:

Parents should not ...

- constantly punish by prohibition,
- shout, mother or inflict corporal punishment,
- put children under pressure
- have no time for them.

To what extent do adolescents feel that they are taken seriously, accepted and understood in their family as a person and as a partner in a relationship, and to what extent are they?

How do adolescents see their parents?

The adolescents surveyed see their mother primarily as an understanding relationship partners whom they can trust and who trusts them in return. Sons as well as daughters can talk about almost anything with their mothers. The relationship with the mother is felt to be closer than that with the father.

Irrespective of gender, adolescents also feel understood to a large extent by their fathers, however. That a smaller number of adolescents feel they can talk easily to their fathers is due, among other reasons, to the "absence" of the father, even in nuclear families

How do parents see their adolescent child?

Mothers and fathers perceive the changes in their adolescent child as quite positive and describe their adolescent children as being more self-assured, more independent, more responsible, more sensible and more mature. They are aware that the problems that can arise in day-to-day life during a child's puberty are usually only a temporary phase in his or her development.

Mothers see themselves as the main person to whom the children come and talk to, and are seen as such by their partners as well. Fathers in nuclear families (only these fathers were surveyed) concede that they are to a great extent

barely present within the family, although they would like their children to come and talk to them and they would like to bear responsibility.

Do parents respect the interests, views and opinions of adolescents, and how do they regard their adolescent children's increased level of knowledge?

Adolescents have the impression that they form their own opinions and views and share these with their parents. Their parents give them the impression that they accept and respect their children's attitudes and opinions.

The parents' statements, however, present a different picture. The parents overwhelmingly believe that their adolescent children still accept their parents' basic values. Very few mothers recognise that their children are developing their own opinions and their own view of the world.

Criticism of parents is mainly perceived by the mothers. They see themselves criticised on account of their clothes and the way they act. Fathers, on the other hand, report hardly any criticism from their children.

The parents view their adolescent children's increased level of knowledge positively.

Do parents and adolescents achieve a balance between the demand for freedom and restrictions?

Parents make great efforts - often in imaginative and diplomatic ways - to achieve a balance between granting freedom and imposing restrictions. The limits are negotiated with the adolescent but are then binding, and parents place considerable emphasis on their being observed. Adolescents for their part perceive these limits as being part of the parental control factor, whereas for the parents, the child's safety is of primary importance. These different viewpoints can result in problems.

The interviews show that most parents do not describe the process of relinquishing their hold on their children as problematical or predominantly conflict-prone, but that they see it as presenting them with the major challenge of finding the necessary balance between their own fears and their trust in their children.

How do mothers and fathers look at the question of how to raise their pubertal children, and to what extent do parents agree on it?

The upbringing that they themselves experienced very much affects the way mothers and fathers raise their children. Through critical reflection on their own upbringing, they try to apply those aspects that they remember as positive to the rearing of their children, while seeking to avoid the negative ones. Some mothers see discussion and exchanging experiences with other mothers as an

additional orientation aid. In addition, mothers and fathers gain information from books and lectures.

With regard to parenting goals, three areas of their children's upbringing were identified as being particularly important to parents: learning to handle money, receiving a sound education, and, especially important to mothers, the achievement of independence and autonomy.

Parents are fully aware of the need for both parents to take an active role in bringing up their children. They try to achieve consensus through consultation with each other, at least on basic questions. In everyday life, one or the other of the parents is often more permissive, although it is usually fathers who are stricter.

No differences were found between adolescents from single-parent families and those from nuclear families, or between boys and girls.

Conducive and inhibiting factors in mastering the developmental challenges facing families with pubertal adolescents - an overall view of the empirical findings of the pilot study

Based on the empirical findings of the pilot study, the influencing factors which aid or hinder families with pubertal adolescents in meeting the challenges they face can be summarised on different levels.

Unhelpful are:

- **... In the case of specific internal family dynamics ...**

... misunderstood cohesiveness

Cohesiveness in the family does not mean that conflicts are not allowed or that individual wishes and needs may not be expressed and experienced. Families which misunderstand solidarity and do not allow conflicts or changes to the family rules for fear of upsetting the family balance, impede the adolescent's development.

... tight family boundaries

If the family system is very tightly knit, this prevents outward orientation. It makes the initiation and development of relationships outside the family difficult. This is a particular problem for adolescents, since their male and female peers represent an indispensable part of their development and socialisation.

... unclear subsystem boundaries

Adolescents should not become "substitute partners" and parents should not become "substitute sisters or brothers". If adolescents are "parentified", parents cannot sufficiently let go and adolescents are unable to articulate their own needs properly.

... relationship problems between the parents

Relationship problems and conflicts between the parents that are not expressed directly between them but rather via the adolescent, hinder the latter's ability to become independent. If both parents try to "win" the child over, this often results in conflicting loyalties, with the adolescent ending up feeling responsible for parental quarrels.

- **... Uncertainty over how to cope with present-day challenges ...**

... uncertainty about parenting

Parents can no longer apply the methods they experienced in their childhood and adolescence to bringing up their own children because the social conditions and challenges to parenting have changed so much. But when parents swing back and forth between traditional and new parenting values, adolescents find it difficult to orient themselves and find their way.

... disagreement over parenting

Adolescents also find it difficult to orient themselves if their parents hold very different views on parenting and use very different methods in their attempt to determine the "right" way to bring up their children.

... rigid adherence to traditional values

Yet problems can also arise between parents and their pubertal children if the parents strictly adhere to a very traditional value system. Adolescents who seek to distance themselves from these traditional values which are no longer suitable today, resort to extreme types of behaviour with the aim of provoking their parents.

... fear of external dangers

The multiplicity of values, standards and behavioural attitudes with which they are confronted and the fast pace of life today make orientation difficult for adolescents. Particularly during puberty, a time of curiosity, experimentation and exploration, but also of rebellion, parents fear that their adolescent children, in their search for a foothold and orientation, could become involved with the “wrong crowd”. They might feel attracted to extremist groups, such as far-right factions or sect-like organisations that appear to offer support. Some parents have massive fears in this area which, however, are not commensurate with the actual risk.

- **... Gender-specific role assignment ...**

... “female” and “male” worlds

While fathers tend more to share leisuretime activities with their sons (e.g. sports), shared points of reference are to a large extent missing from their relationships with their daughters. There is the danger that father and daughter remain strangers to each other. A relaxation of the gender-specific role assignment within the family could help the father to gain more insight into the “female” world. If child-rearing were no longer exclusively the domain of women, fathers would find it easier to understand their daughters. They would then perhaps be better able to adapt to the extent required of them by their children during puberty.

- **...Additional stress factors...**

...ignoring the stresses of critical life events

Puberty is a time for reorientation by both the adolescent and the parents. It involves role redistribution and changes in the rules that previously applied in the family. This realignment takes time and energy. If, in addition, families have to master critical life events at the same time, such as remarriage or establishing a relationship with a new partner, building a house, unemployment, etc., which in themselves demand a great deal of energy from each family member, there is a danger that the challenges of puberty will or cannot be properly perceived and the necessary reorientation and adaptations made.

Parental training is one way to support parents with pubertal children, to develop conducive factors and to minimise the inhibiting factors that make it more difficult to master the challenges.

2. How can parental training help parents with pubertal children meet the challenges?

Parental training is designed to support parents in their efforts to meet the challenges of parenting, based on the principle of “helping towards self-help”.

Experience with and requirements of parental training

Basically the parental training courses that are currently available are not widely known and have been little used. When courses are attended, they are found to be helpful as long as they are relevant to real life. What parents want is that the teaching staff and speakers should be highly trained professionals.

The type of support families look for varies enormously. It ranges from working groups, practically oriented talks and family conferences, to discussions with friends and family. It is mainly mothers who find it helpful to exchange experiences, usually on an informal basis within parent groups, whether self-help groups or under professional guidance.

Where do parents see the dangers for adolescents?

Both mothers and fathers believe that the greatest dangers are to be found above all in the consumerism and performance-orientation of today's society, as well as in the pace of modern life with its multiplicity of values and standards, bearing the inherent risk of disorientation and lack of direction. One criticism is that achievement is rated higher today than social commitment. Parents perceive a certain brutalisation and an advanced state of disintegration in human relations.

Closely associated with the lack of orientation is the fear of parents that adolescents searching for support and direction could become involved with the “wrong crowd”, whether sects, right-wing extremist groups or the drug scene.

Parents regard communicating with their children as the best preventative measure. Both fathers and mothers find it easy to talk in general terms about the risks of drugs, sects, etc. They find it much more difficult to talk to their children about more intimate matters, such as how to handle their sexuality or questions of contraception.

The challenges of parental training

The most important criteria of the “new parental training” are:

- *not to form the participants' opinions for them*
- *to respect participants' own individuality*
- *to individualise each phenomenon*
- *in parenting there is no absolute truth*

- an *advisor* is an *interpreter*, not a transmitter of parenting standards
- *communication* between parents and adolescent children is important
- *information* about the identified parameters
- parents and adolescents need *guidelines for action*

These tenets produce a package of measures **for possible parental training approaches** that become all the more effective the better coordinated the measures.

- ⇒ In view of increasing individualisation, greater commitment and indeed also pressure, the setting up of temporary self-help groups for parents who feel themselves to be in similar parenting situations with their pubertal children should be supported.
- ⇒ The need of parents, and also of adolescents, for information should be met by offering a guide that would provide advice through concrete practical examples, explanations and possible solutions. This information should be made available in all the modern media (e.g., CD-ROM, Internet).
- ⇒ Typical situations that crop up repeatedly in relationships should be explored in joint and independent training seminars for parents and adolescents, in which successful handling strategies are practised.
- ⇒ The communication channels offered by the Internet can be used to exchange opinions and attitudes between parents and adolescents.
- ⇒ A series of short TV spots should be produced showing recurring phenomena of the parent-child relationship, explaining how and why they arise, and suggesting possible solutions.

Design and evaluations methods of the pilot study

The qualitative pilot study surveyed 26 families with children aged between 13 and 15, where the adolescent, the father and the mother were all prepared to be interviewed and to join in a family discussion (*multiple perspective approach and multiple method approach*). The families lived in different regions and the brothers and sisters were also taken into account, as was the type of family (nuclear or single-parent). The design of the survey allowed first a comparison of the points of view within each group - the mothers, the fathers and the adolescents - and second, the various points of view within each family.

In the joint family discussions, each member of the family was asked to make building blocks to enable him or herself to feel comfortable in the family. A shared house was built with these building blocks. A second point was a group discussion about a fictitious situation, e.g., how to deal with winning the lottery.

A qualitative computer-supported text analysis method was used to evaluate the individual interviews with the mothers, fathers and adolescents and determine

commonalities and differences in perceptions and experiences. The software used was "WINMAXprofessional".

In addition to the group evaluations, after all the interviews had been examined a few families were selected and used to identify typical patterns of interaction between conducive and inhibiting factors for mastering the challenges in families with pubertal children.

The family discussions, which took the form of group discussions with predefined tasks and problems, were evaluated from a system-theoretical point of view.