

PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE: RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMS

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The early years of adolescence are characterized by dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes initiated by the onset of puberty. These changes are associated with transformations in family relationships and with the emergence and escalation of conflict between young adolescents and their parents. Research indicates that parent-adolescent conflict increases during the middle school years and involves the everyday events of family life. During this period, conflict has been found to be most evident in interactions between adolescents and their mothers. The prevalence of parent-adolescent conflict during the early adolescent years has direct implications for middle school programs, presenting an opportunity for family and consumer sciences teachers to address the real-life problems and concerns of students. By incorporating a practical problem-solving approach, teachers can empower young adolescents to resolve conflicts with parents in more effective ways, and thereby enhance family relationships.

Family and consumer sciences is concerned with the functioning of families and the significant problems of everyday life (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). By using a problem-based curriculum, family and consumer sciences teachers prepare young people for the challenges of family life. At the middle school level, family and consumer sciences teachers deal with a population of students who are undergoing dramatic physical changes and a host of cognitive, social, and emotional transitions associated with the maturational process of puberty.

The changes initiated at the onset of adolescence impact, among other things, young adolescents' conceptions and feelings about themselves and their relationships with others, including parents. In terms of family life, research has substantiated that adolescence is a period in life characterized by a transformation and reorganization in family relationships (Steinberg, 1981; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The early years of adolescence in particular, encompassing the period of ages 10-15 years, have been linked with the emergence and escalation of conflict between young adolescents and their parents (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Montemayor, 1986; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). The heightened conflict that surfaces in the families of young adolescents presents unique challenges to both young people and their parents as they attempt to deal with the changing nature of their relationship. It also presents unique educational opportunities for family and consumer sciences teachers as they address the current and reoccurring practical problems confronting young adolescents in their personal life and in their family life.

The research examining parent-adolescent conflict during the transitional years of early adolescence has identified a number of important characteristics of these negatively charged interactions. First and foremost, it is important to elucidate that conflict in parent-adolescent relationships serves an important developmental function. Engaging in reciprocal exchanges that involve divergent and opposing points of view provide adolescents with opportunities to enhance interpersonal negotiation skills, think logically, abstractly and critically, and consider alternative

and/or opposing points of view (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993; Steinberg, 1990). Conflictive interactions provide the context for psychosocial development, and in particular, the development of psychological autonomy and identity (Mazor & Enright, 1988).

Literature supports the claim that conflict is an integral and inevitable component of parent-adolescent relationships. On the other hand, although conflicts are typical during this period, they are not necessarily problematic for these relationships. In fact, the majority of families with adolescents report satisfying relationships that are generally harmonious (Adams, Montemayor, & Gullotta, 1989). Conflicts between adolescents and parents in most families are relatively infrequent, short lived, and mild in intensity (Montemayor, 1986). When disagreements do occur, they tend to involve the normal, everyday events of family life, such as household chores, family rules, personal habits and choices, social relationships, and family obligations (Allison, 1999; Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1989). Although arguments about major issues such as sex, drugs, religion, and politics are much less frequent during the early years of adolescence (Allison, 1999; Montemayor, 1983; Smetana & Asquith, 1994), they are a real source of conflict for some families.

A review of research suggests that conflict between parents and adolescents increases and peaks during the early years of adolescence and is associated with the onset of puberty (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991; Steinberg, 1988). Within the middle school years, several studies have found heightened levels of conflict to be most prevalent in grades six and/or seven, the transitional years between later childhood and adolescence (Allison, 1999; Galambos & Almeida, 1992; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). In addition, conflict within families occurs more often between adolescents and their mothers, and between mothers and daughters in particular (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991).

This research-based information regarding the nature and extent of conflict in parent-adolescent relationships is pertinent to the family and consumer sciences curriculum and to middle school teachers, specifically, who prepare young adolescents for family living during a difficult and often challenging stage in the family life cycle. What, then, are the implications of this research for family and consumer sciences programs at the middle school level?

Implications

Prepare middle school students for the developmental changes associated with early adolescence.

Early adolescence is a time when dramatic changes occur in a child's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. During this transitional time in life, young adolescents need teachers who are knowledgeable about the changes that transpire at the onset of puberty and who are empathetic to the needs of young people at this stage in life (Tippett, 1994). Furthermore, teachers must be prepared to help young adolescents understand and deal with the sometimes confusing array of changes and emotional shifts they are likely to experience during this period (Strahan & Van Hoose, 1994).

Be responsive to individual differences and variation in young adolescent growth patterns

The variation among individual students is tremendous during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Extreme differences are evident in height and weight and in rate of maturation during the middle grade years. Because children will not exhibit the same developmental changes at the same time or in the same way during these years, a number of

children in middle school classes will be ‘out of step’ with their peers (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Teachers need to be prepared for a considerable amount of variation in the maturational changes of their middle school students and be prepared for how young adolescents will react to and experience these changes (Lounsbury, 1994; Strahan & Van Hoose, 1994). This variation among children presents unique challenges to the middle school teacher. By designing instructional strategies that will be effective with a diverse group of young adolescents, teachers can be sensitive and responsive to individual needs, differences, and concerns of their students.

Incorporate research-based knowledge about parent-adolescent conflict into the family and consumer sciences curriculum

Family relationships undergo a transformation during the transition to adolescence that is often accompanied by an increase in conflict between adolescents and their parents. Teachers and students alike need to realize that conflict is a normal and expected component of adolescent-parent relationships that often escalates during this time as young people push for more independence, challenge parental authority, and seek rationales for parental demands (Santrock, 2000). This reality provides an educational opportunity for middle school teachers, especially in grades six and seven, to discuss the disagreements that young adolescents experience in their relationships with parents and help them to explore their feelings and frustrations about conflict. In addition, the prevalence of conflict in family relationships during this time provides a personally meaningful context for identifying and exploring alternative problem solving and coping strategies, as well as conflict resolution strategies. The incorporation of the research on parent-adolescent conflict into the family and consumer sciences curriculum enhances the educational and learning objectives of the middle school program while helping young people to strengthen and improve family relationships.

Recognize that gender may be an important factor in parent-adolescent conflict during the middle school years

The research literature on parent-adolescent conflict has indicated that while conflict is normative during the early years of adolescence, it is particularly evident in interactions between female adolescents and their mothers (Laursen, 1995; Montemayor, 1982). Middle school teachers, therefore, need to be aware of, and prepared for, the possibility that male and female students in their classrooms may not be experiencing the same frequency or intensity of conflict with parents, that the conflict more often involves mothers than fathers and that the mother-daughter relationship may be more strained during this period. Class discussions that contrast typical disagreements with mothers and fathers and compare the experiences of females and males within the class would be instructive in emphasizing the potential importance of gender in family conflicts and aid in the development of effective resolution strategies.

Educate parents about developmental characteristics and changes that young people confront during adolescence

Because development takes place in the context of the home and the school environment, family and consumer sciences teachers should serve as a link between early adolescents and their families (Smith & Ndon, 1994). Teachers need to inform parents about developmental characteristics of children during the transitional years from childhood to adolescence. By educating parents about the normative changes associated with the onset of puberty and discussing concerns of young adolescents, teachers can prepare parents for the conflict they will

likely experience in their relationships with young adolescents, as well as the specific issues likely to be catalysts for disputes. The 1989 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development has recommended that middle grades schools need to help parents engage in the school and provide opportunities for parents and teachers to share and learn from each other. Through family support programs and parent advisory boards, parents can be better informed about the concerns and attitudes of adolescents that impact family relationships (Erb, Wissman, & Havlicek, 1994).

Implement FCCLA projects that focus on family relationships

Family and consumer sciences teachers should encourage students to become involved in FCCLA chapter projects that focus on healthy home relationships and help young adolescents to further explore personal interests and concerns. In-class and extended FCCLA activities enhance classroom instruction and provide additional learning opportunities for adolescents while helping them to develop leadership skills and self-confidence through their achievements.

Utilize a practical problem solving approach to teach about family relationships

Early adolescents are increasingly capable of understanding relationships because of intellectual changes that enable them to use abstract reasoning and introspection (Santrock, 2000). In family and consumer sciences, students are helped to understand that the actions and the decisions they make about and within the family have implications for other family members and for the well-being of the family. The concern with consequences for others makes family and consumer sciences unique among other school subjects, such as health and social studies, that may also include family-related concepts (Thomas, 1998). Through the practical reasoning approach, students are acquainted with multiple perspectives to a problem, thus requiring them to consider the viewpoints of others and be willing to reason with others. Through this process, early adolescents not only think about themselves in specific situations, they must also consider the impact of their actions and decisions on others (Dohner, 1994).

By addressing family conflict, family and consumer sciences teachers afford young learners the opportunity to solve real-life problems and address concerns in their daily life. By implementing practical problem-based strategies and incorporating real problems from students' actual experiences in the family, middle level family and consumer sciences teachers can challenge and empower young adolescents to resolve conflicts with parents in more effective and satisfying ways.

Conclusion

The incorporation of the research on parent-adolescent relationships during the early years of adolescence, and parent-adolescent conflict in particular, into the family and consumer sciences curriculum at the middle school level provides a means for middle school teachers to focus on issues that are of immediate concern to young adolescents. In this way, family and consumer sciences teachers can be responsive to the needs of this unique age group as they help them to understand the changes that often create tension and frustration in their relationships with parents. Further, by addressing the reoccurring, practical problems of individuals and families, family and consumer sciences teachers are in a logical position to help young adolescents understand the nature of changing family relationships at this stage of life by challenging them to reflect on their relationships with parents, gain new insights into their interactions, and ultimately enhance their relationships with parents.

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