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## Parents and Adolescents in Conflict: All Families Some of the Time and Some Families Most of the Time

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According to some, the young and the old are paired-off and engaged in a continual and oftentimes heated generational conflict that pits energy and idealism against wisdom and realism. Although the phrase “generation gap” was invented during the decade of the 1960s, the idea itself is not new. Indeed, as Goethals (1975) pointed out, the theme of generational conflict is a basic motif in the portrayal of the relations between generations and its origins are ancient, appearing in one of its most widely known forms in the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus the wise and skilled craftsman constructs wings of wax and feathers by which both he and his son can escape from their tower prison. The father carefully instructs Icarus on the proper use of the wings and tearfully kisses him before they both set out on their flight to freedom, a flight that ends fatally for Icarus who impetuously disobeys his father and flies too close to the sun, melting the wax and plunging the boy into the ocean. If one side of the moral of this story is that to disobey one’s parents may have disastrous, even fatal consequences, the other side is that the young must discover this for themselves. Thus the conflict—life must be experienced and the knowledge of the old may serve as only a partial guide for the young, to the continual dismay of parents.

Does this charming story with its ancient warning accurately capture the essence of parent-adolescent relations, or does it merely highlight and bring to the fore one aspect of those relations? The interactions between parents and their adolescent sons and daughters are sometimes, perhaps even oftentimes, disagreeable and stressful. But are those interactions characterized by turmoil to the degree that it is both normal and normative for parents and their adolescent children to be in conflict?

## THEORIES OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT

Virtually all adolescent theorists agree that the stage of adolescence is inherently stressful and that parent-adolescent relations are likely to be more conflictual than parent-child relations, but there is disagreement about what produces the stress. Explanations of parent-adolescent stress can be divided into two broad classes, those that emphasize individual characteristics and those that focus on family relations.

Traditionally, parent-adolescent stress has been viewed as the result of changes in adolescents brought about by puberty. A variety of adolescent factors have been proposed to account for stress with parents, such as biological changes in levels of aggression (Hall, 1904), the appearance of adult sexuality (Blos, 1962; Freud, 1905/1953), the need for independence (Ausubel, Montemayor, & Svajian, 1977), and the search for an identity (Erikson, 1968). More recently, the cause of this stress has been laid on the parent's doorstep, and it has been suggested that many parents of adolescents experience a midlife dissolutionment with their career and marriage which could lead to increases in parenting stress (Hill, 1980; Prosen, Towes, & Martin, 1981). Also, mothers have been regarded as at least partly responsible for some mother-adolescent difficulties. Specifically, it has been claimed that many mothers are reluctant to relinquish control of their adolescents, and that much mother-adolescent interaction revolves around her effort to keep her adolescent within the family circle, while the adolescent attempts to break free (Turner, 1970).

More recent attempts to explain parent-adolescent stress have not focused on the individual characteristics of adolescents or parents but have emphasized transformations of family patterns of interaction. The parent-child social system is pictured as relatively stable and predictable. Presumably, family members have spent years developing patterns of interaction which are known and acceptable to all. The physical, psychological, and social changes that occur during the adolescent period are thought to disrupt this smoothly functioning system and, it is argued, a readjustment of the parent-child system must occur in order to achieve a new homeostasis (Morton, Alexander, & Altman, 1976). The hierarchical parent-child system must be replaced by an egalitarian peer-peer system in which parents and adolescents occupy a more nearly equal status. During the replacement process family members must learn new behaviors based on their new statuses. This relearning is regarded as stressful for the participants and, until new relationships are established, conflicts due to poor communication and unmet expectations are supposed to be common (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1973).

The above theorists postulate different mechanisms to account for conflict, but their theories all share three common features. First, adolescence is regarded as a major transitional period during which important qualitative changes occur in development. Adolescence is seen as a time when individuals enter adulthood and acquire mature forms of thought, emotion, and behavior. Second, the transition from childhood to adulthood is regarded as inherently stressful. It is widely held that

adolescents experience the biological, psychological, and social changes that occur during puberty as disorientating and perturbing. Third, adolescents are thought to lack mature skills to cope with these changes and, therefore, experience a high degree of what has been referred to as "transitional stress."

The idea that parent-adolescent relations are stressful is widely accepted not only by adolescent theorists and many practicing clinicians, but also by many parents of adolescents and the adolescents themselves. For example, in one study of the difficulty of parenting children of various ages mothers reported more problems with their adolescents than with any other age group, especially in regard to the adolescent's moodiness, independence and discipline (Ballenski & Cook, 1982). In another study, a multidimensional scaling technique was used to examine late adolescents' perceptions of interpersonal relations. These college students described the typical parent-teenager relationship as most similar to the relationships of mother-in-law and son-in-law, and guard and prisoner (Wish, Deutsch, & Kaplan, 1976).

Given these perceptions, it is no wonder that clinicians, parents of adolescents, and adolescents have an interest in information on parent-adolescent conflict. Most self-help books written for parents of adolescents (e.g. Ginott, 1969; Schowalter & Anyan, 1979) and some written for the adolescents themselves (Gnagey, 1975) contain chapters on adolescent management skills and conflict resolution strategies. Apparently many parents have some temporary problems in these areas and some have serious difficulties with adolescent conflict. Within the past few years a number of treatment programs have been developed which are designed to help family members control parent-adolescent conflict. These approaches are based on social learning theory (Gant, Barnard, Kuehn, Jones, & Christophersen, 1981), behavioral contracting (Stuart, 1971), systems theory (Alexander & Barton, 1976), and communication skills training (Robin, 1981).

## RESEARCH ON PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT

Although many clinicians, parents, and adolescents believe that conflict between parents and adolescents is widespread, this idea lacks credibility among professional social scientists. Recent articles on parent-adolescent relations often begin with a statement that these relations have not been found to be stressful (Coleman, 1978), and many adolescent textbook writers also attempt to persuade their readers of this view (e.g. Santrock, 1981). Few ideas in adolescent psychology are as accepted by researchers with such unanimity as the notion that parent-adolescent relations basically are not stressful. One gets the strong impression that most adolescent psychologists regard theories of parent-adolescent conflict as explanations in search of a problem. Yet one must wonder why in the presumed face of what is regarded as overwhelming evidence to the contrary the idea of parent-adolescent stress remains alive in the minds of many parents of adolescents and therapists.

Some have argued that the persistent belief in the notion of stressful parent-adolescent relations is the result of a variety of distortions. For example, as early as

1937, Reuter (1937) wrote: "The assumption of a period of 'flaming youth' appears in large measure to be the creator of such 'flaming youth' behavior as the younger generation manifests. The assumption creates the reality" (p. 416). More recently, Bandura (1964) argued that the view that parents and adolescents are in turmoil is the result of such biases as mass media sensationalism, an over interpretation of superficial signs of nonconformity, and inappropriate generalizations from samples of deviant adolescents. Without denying the fact that these biases do indeed exist, one wonders if they account for the complete story. Recent evidence indicates that many of today's adolescents have serious problems with drugs, alcohol, sex, and crime, and that these problems are at least partly the result of stressful parent-adolescent relations. Also, many adolescents who are not involved in these kinds of serious problems still report that they have some difficulty relating to their parents. Are clinicians, parents, and adolescents attempting to tell researchers something that they should be listening to? Just how fictional is the view of the stressed parent-adolescent relationship?

Evidence for the view that the parent-adolescent relationship is essentially calm and pleasant is not as convincing as many believe. Some writers conclude that parent-adolescent relations are unstressful without reporting any data whatsoever (Elkin & Westley, 1955; Westley & Elkin, 1957), while the results of the few classic empirical studies of this question are not clear-cut (e.g. Bandura & Walters, 1959; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, 1969; Offer & Offer, 1975). A thorough review of the literature in this area does not exist. Before we discard the idea that parent-adolescent relations are stressful I would like to give it a fair hearing in order to examine what is known, point out the deficiencies of the literature which does exist, and suggest directions for future research.

One common way that parent-adolescent stress has been investigated is by examining generational differences in beliefs, attitudes, and values—the "generation gap." I have chosen to ignore these studies in this review and to focus on those investigations in which parents or adolescents were questioned about *actual* conflicts or disagreements, or measures of conflict *behavior* between parents and adolescents were obtained. The reason for this focus is that the overt expression of conflict poses a greater threat to a relationship than does the mere existence of attitudinal differences, which may or may not lead to arguments. Conflict has been shown to be a key element in the maintenance and dissolution of other types of relationships, particularly marriages (Gottman, 1979). The frequency and intensity of disagreements are better predictors of marital satisfaction and spouse involvement than are differences in attitudes or values. What is true for marriage probably is true for the parent-adolescent relationship as well, and studies of generational differences in attitudes reveal little that is important in our attempt to understand the quality of the relationship that parents and adolescents have with each other. An understanding of attitudinal similarities and differences between the generations is important for other reasons, however, and excellent reviews of this literature exist elsewhere (Bengtson & Starr, 1975; Bengtson & Troll, 1978; Braungart, 1975; Tolor, 1976).

In reviewing the literature on parent-adolescent conflict one curious fact quickly becomes evident—there is virtually no connection between the theories and the research in this area. For example, if an adolescent's desire for independence is thought to be partly responsible for parent-adolescent conflict then one would expect to find studies in which the relationship between different levels of this trait in adolescents were related to different levels of conflict. Studies which use adolescent or parent characteristics, or types of family organization to predict different levels of parent-adolescent conflict do not exist. Indeed, most studies in this area are not based on any formal theory of individual development, parent-child relations, or family life-cycle change. The research has been notably atheoretical. Strong hypotheses formally derived from theory have not been tested (see Edwards and Brauberger (1973), who examined several hypotheses derived from exchange theory, for a notable exception). If theory plays any part at all in the investigation of parent-adolescent stress it is as an *a posteriori* explanation of conflict, usually in terms of adolescents' need for autonomy. Therefore, different explanations about the causes of parent-adolescent conflict cannot be evaluated, and the literature cannot be organized around tests of different theoretical models.

One way to organize the literature in this area is in terms of the two different research designs that investigators have employed to study this question. These designs correspond to two different interpretations of the parent-adolescent conflict issue. A number of researchers only studied a sample of adolescents or their parents and did not include a comparative sample of children or their parents. What hypothesis can be tested with this design? Without a comparison group only statements about adolescents are possible. It appears that researchers using this design are examining a notion about conflict such as the following: by an absolute standard parents and adolescents are miserable when they are together and their relationship is characterized by constant turmoil. How much conflict would have to be found between parents and adolescents before this hypothesis would be supported? Presumably, confirmation would require finding that over 50% of adolescents or parents of adolescents reported that their relationships were typically characterized by conflict and argument, or that parents and adolescents argue with each other over 50 percent of the time that they are together. This is a very strong interpretation of the conflict hypothesis, but it is the only version that could be tested without a comparison group. The second design used by researchers is to compare parent-child with parent-adolescent relations. With this design differences in relations can be investigated and a weaker, but equally interesting, version of the conflict hypothesis can be examined, which is that relations between parents and adolescents deteriorate during adolescence. Here the claim is not that parent-adolescent relations are bad, but that they are worse than parent-child relations. Confirmation of this hypothesis would not require that conflict be high during adolescence merely higher than in childhood.

These two different research designs are used in this review to organize the literature on parent-adolescent conflict. First is an examination of whether conflict changes in frequency between childhood and adolescence and then again between

adolescence and youth. Second, the literature on the extent of conflict with parents during adolescence is reviewed. Third, the relationship between parent-adolescent conflict and other adolescent behaviors is examined.

### Conflict With Parents Before, During, and After Adolescence

A number of investigators have examined the question of whether conflict with parents increases around the time adolescents enter puberty. Data gathered through interviews or self-reports of conflict are inconsistent on this issue. Block (1937) and Offer (1969) found that conflict was more common in grades seven and eight than at later grades. In other studies, however, quarreling was reported to be less frequent before age 15 than after (Johnstone, 1975; Liccione, 1955; National Center for Health Statistics, 1974; Powell, 1955). A variety of methodologies were employed in these studies which included administering questionnaires to parents or adolescents, interviewing adolescents, and obtaining projective measures of conflict from adolescents. These differences make strict comparisons among studies impossible and may explain some of the discrepancy among the findings. Another problem with these investigations is that children under 12 years of age generally were not examined. The absence of younger aged children makes it hard to establish the true rate of prepubescent conflict since some 12-year-olds would be prepubescent and others postpubescent.

Consistent results were reported in three behavioral observational studies of the relationship between conflict with parents and the pubertal status of children. Jacob (1974) observed the verbal interactions between parents and their sons who were either 11- or 16-years-old. The majority of males in these two age groups very probably were pre- and postpubescent. No important age differences were found for such process measures of family interaction as conversation interruptions and talk time. Age differences were reported for the two outcome measures, however. Eleven-year-olds initially disagreed with their parents more than did 16-year-olds, but the latter group had more influence over their parents which came at the expense of their mothers. In two other studies of 11- to 14-year-old boys conflict with mothers was reported to be greater during the early rather than the later part of the pubertal cycle (Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg & Hill, 1978). During audiotaped discussions, adolescents who were in an early pubescent stage were interrupted by their mothers more frequently but deferred to them less often than did more physically advanced boys. Taken together, the results of these three behavioral studies indicate that family relations undergo a transformation during early adolescence such that sons acquire more family power and influence at the expense of their mothers. This alteration of the mother-son relationship leads to heightened conflict. By middle adolescence mothers and sons have developed new forms of interaction based upon the sons' adult physical status and conflict subsides.

In a few studies possible age differences in conflict with parents were examined among adolescents who were between the ages of 13 and 17 years, and none were found (Block, 1937; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Liccione, 1955; Moore & Holtzman, 1965; National Center for Health Statistics, 1974; Powell, 1955). For

example, interviewers from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare collected health surveys from a random sample of 6768 mothers with adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 1974). As part of the survey mothers were asked how difficult their adolescents were to bring up. The percentages who answered "some" or "a lot" ranged between 9.8 percent for mothers of 12-year-olds and 15.5 percent for mothers of 15-year-olds, and the average was 13.0 percent.

Little is known about possible changes in conflict with parents as adolescents enter young adulthood, typically considered to begin between 18 and 21 years of age, but the evidence that is available is very consistent—conflict with parents decreases after about age 18 (Connor, Johannis, & Walters, 1954; National Center for Health Statistics, 1974; Powell, 1955; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980). It isn't clear why this change occurs but at least two explanations are possible. One is that conflict declines when an individual acquires full adult status and becomes a peer of his parents. The other is that the lessened conflict is the result of a decrease in interaction time which follows the move away from home that often takes place around the age of 18. At present the latter explanation seems more likely, based upon a study by Sullivan and Sullivan (1980) of two groups of boys attending college, some of whom lived at home while others lived away. No changes were found in relations with parents before and after entry into college for those boys who remained at home, while among the boys who moved away there were increases in parental affection, quality of communication, and relationship satisfaction. Apparently absence does make the heart grow fonder.

Taken together, the results obtained from studies of conflict with parents at the start, during, and after adolescence indicate that conflict and age are related in an inverted U-shaped function; conflict increases during early adolescence, is reasonably stable during middle adolescence, and declines when the adolescent moves away from home. This conclusion is further strengthened by the converging findings from other types of investigations. For example, in studies of the family life-cycle it has been shown that satisfaction with parenting is at a low point when children are in their teenage years (Burr, 1970; Hoffman & Manis, 1978). Further, investigators of the "empty nest syndrome" have shown that the departure of adolescents from the home brings both an increase in marital satisfaction for women and an increased sense of well-being (Rubin, 1980). In general, mothers indicate that parental satisfaction is higher with a preteenage child or an older child who has moved away from home than with a teenager.

On the basis of the research reviewed here it appears that some worsening of the parent-child relationship occurs during early adolescence. This deterioration has two components, an increase in parent-adolescent conflict and mothers' loss of power and influence over their adolescents. Let me suggest a few directions for future research based upon these findings.

First, we need to know why quarrels are associated with alterations in the mother-child relationship. It is probably not the case that the loss of mothers' power is the result of fatigue due to an increase in the total number of aversive interactions

that they have with their adolescents. In fact, the number of intrusive interruptions undoubtedly declines greatly between childhood and adolescence. For example, Fawl (1963) conducted in-home observations of the interactions of middle-class mothers and their non-problem preschool children and reported that these mothers averaged 3.4 disturbances per hour. This rate is considerably higher than the infrequent arguments that mothers and adolescents have, as will be discussed shortly. It may be that a change in the nature of the arguments has a greater impact on a mother's declining influence than does an increasing reluctance to argue with her adolescent. A promising direction for research on possible differences in the types of arguments that mothers have with their children and their adolescents comes from Turiel's work on the development of reasoning about conventional or social issues (Turiel, 1975, 1977). Turiel has reported that adolescents around the age of 12 or 13 consider social conventions to be arbitrary, even when they are governed by formal rules. Adolescents at this stage may defer to a conventional rule for pragmatic reasons but reject the legitimacy of the rule. Thus, a child may agree that a parent has a right to establish a rule, even though he might argue about its execution (e.g. "Why do I have to be home at 8:00 p.m. instead of 9 p.m.?"'), while an adolescent may question the very justification for the rule and, ultimately, the legitimacy of maternal authority itself (e.g. "It's no business of yours when I come in.'). This type of an attack may be considerably more damaging to traditional maternal authority than the more frequent, but in the long run, less challenging irritations caused by children.

A second important area for investigation concerns family variation in transitional stress. It is time that we moved beyond the old tired debate of whether the transition between childhood and adolescence is stressful or not to a more important and interesting question—why is it that this transition is stressful for some families but not so for others? Burr and his colleagues have argued that the degree of difficulty that individuals experience as they undergo a transition from one role to another is highly related to their anticipatory socialization into that role (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). Individuals who are desirous of making a change and who know how to correctly act in their new role will have an easier transition than those who are reluctant to change or don't know the proper way to behave in their new role.

Recognition of the importance of role preparation may have important implications for the education and training of parents. It is interesting to note that most parent training programs focus on teaching soon to be or recent parents effective skills for managing infants and small children (Fine, 1980). These programs usually neglect the adolescent period, however, and do not emphasize enough the new abilities and problems that appear during adolescence and the crucial need to adjust parenting styles to these changes. The skills that are required to be a successful parent of a child may not be the same as those necessary during the adolescent years, and some parent-adolescent conflict may be the result of a parental deficit in adolescent management skills.

### Parent-Adolescent Conflict

In this section those studies which included only a sample of adolescents, usually defined as individuals between the ages of 12 and 18 years of age, are reviewed. The earliest data on parent-adolescent conflict are reported in the Lynd's study of life in Middletown during the late 1920s (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). The Lynd's administered a 12-item checklist to 730 students in grades 10 through 12 who were asked to check those issues "about which you and your parents disagree." Most adolescents checked between three and four issues. Those most often picked were "the hours you get in at night," and "the number of times you go out on school nights during the week." Over 43 percent of adolescents checked these problems as sources of disagreement between themselves and their parents. Issues which fewer than 14 percent of adolescents checked were "Sunday (or Sabbath) observance," and "clubs or societies you belong to."

Recently, the Middletown study was replicated and the same "Source of Disagreement" checklist was used to examine parent-adolescent conflict (Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill, & Williamson 1982). Remarkably, the issues that were picked by the Middletown adolescents in the 1980s as most and least likely to lead to arguments with parents were virtually identical to those selected by adolescents living in the 1920s. Over 42 percent of contemporary adolescents checked "the hours you get in at night," and "home duties" as sources of disagreement. Again, "Sunday (or Sabbath) observance," and "clubs or societies you belong to" were reported to be the issues which led to the least amount of disagreement.

In most studies it has been shown that the majority of arguments between parents and their adolescents are about normal, everyday, mundane family matters such as school work, social life and friends, homes chores, disobedience, disagreements with siblings, and personal hygiene (Bath & Lewis, 1962; Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill, & Williamson, 1982; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Hicks & Hayes, 1938; Landis, 1954; Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Montemayor, 1982; Offer, 1969; Remmers, 1957; Rosenthal, Note 1; Schaneveldt, 1973). Some researchers have concluded that these types of arguments are indicative of adolescents' growing desire for autonomy and independence from parents. This interpretation is certainly plausible, but one should not lose sight of the fact that normal socialization continues throughout adolescence. Based on the content of most parent-adolescent arguments, one might plausibly conclude that this conflict is the result of nothing more, nor less, than parents' continuing efforts to teach their children to delay gratification and to conform to a set of social and family rules. This task inescapably produces a certain amount of tension between socializer and the one socialized, a tension that is present throughout development. At this point it is simply not clear whether parent-adolescent conflict has a "deeper meaning" than this.

There are two especially notable features about the content of the arguments that adolescents have with their parents. The first is that parents and adolescents apparently rarely argue about such "hot" topics as sex, drugs, religion, or politics. The absence of overt conflict about these issues is all the more remarkable given the

great differences that exist in the attitudes of adults and youth about these topics (Bengtson & Starr, 1975). The reason why these generational differences do not lead to much intrafamily conflict might be because the positions held by parents and adolescents do not directly affect day-to-day relations among family members. Parents and adolescents may feel that what is not relevant to daily family life need not be discussed, an attitude which would reduce conflict. For example, there is abundant evidence that the young are more sexually active today than were their parents (Hopkins, 1977). But this difference rarely brings adolescents into conflict with their parents since they simply do not discuss sexuality (Thornburg, 1981). Apparently most families cope with potentially explosive generational differences by silently ignoring them.

A second interesting aspect about parent-adolescent conflict is that over the years very little has changed in what parents and adolescents argue about. An examination of the 17 studies contained in Table 1 reveals that between 1929 and 1982 the same problems about daily family functioning appear in study after study. This conclusion also is true for the three studies done during the socially and politically turbulent years between 1966 and 1973 (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Offer, 1969; Schanefeldt, 1973). Arguments about the crucial issues of the 1960s, such as civil rights, the Vietnam war, and college protest, never were mentioned by students as significant sources of disagreements between themselves and their parents. Adolescents today apparently have the same kinds of disagreements with their parents that their parents had when they, themselves, were adolescents. Modern family life undoubtedly is quite different in many important respects than it was 50 years ago, but one area that has not changed is what parents and adolescents argue about. The issues remain the same, but when adolescents become parents their perspectives on the issues are altered. So when adolescents complain that their parents don't "understand" them they must not be using the first definition of that word, "to grasp the meaning of," but the second, "to show a sympathetic or tolerant attitude toward."

When adolescents are given a list of possible sources of disagreements between themselves and their parents they pick three or four as typical of their relationship (Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill, & Williamson, 1982; Dinkel, 1943; Kinloch, 1970; Lynd & Lynd, 1929). In most families parents and adolescents argue about a small number of issues, while many aspects of their relationship apparently are peaceful and free of stress. This is a potentially important clinical finding and one that deserves further investigation. It may be that this pattern of conflict is characteristic of normal relations between parents and adolescents, while an abnormal pattern is one in which conflict pervades virtually every area of the relationship. Parents and adolescents in a distressed relationship do report more conflict than those in a non-distressed relationship (Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979), but the importance of how pervasive conflict is has not been examined.

Some researchers have attempted to assess the overall frequency of conflict in non-clinic families with adolescents. In a number of older studies it was reported that a majority (Punke, 1943) or a substantial minority of adolescents (Douvan &

TABLE 1  
Three Most Common Causes of Arguments With Parents  
According to Adolescents (1929–1982)

| Study                        | Sample                                              | Causes of Arguments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lynd & Lynd, 1929            | 348 males, 382 females<br>Grades 10–12              | Males and Females<br>1. The time I get in at night<br>2. Number of times I go out during school nights<br>3. Grades at school                                                                                                                                |
| Block, 1937                  | 528 males and females<br>Grades 7–12                | Males<br>1. Won't let me use car<br>2. School marks aren't high enough<br>3. Insists that I eat foods I dislike<br><br>Females<br>1. Objects to car riding at night with boys<br>2. School marks aren't high enough<br>3. Insists that I eat foods I dislike |
| Hicks & Hayes, 1938          | 57 males, 66 females<br>Ages 11–16 yrs.             | Males and Females<br>1. Coming home late<br>2. Quarreling with siblings<br>3. Teasing siblings                                                                                                                                                               |
| Stott, 1940                  | 1878 males and females                              | Males and females<br>1. Getting home late from a date<br>2. Disobedience<br>3. Being impudent, sassy                                                                                                                                                         |
| Punke, 1943                  | 989 males, 1721 females<br>High school students     | Males and Females<br>1. Social life and friends<br>2. Work and spending money<br>3. Clothes                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Connor, <i>et al.</i> , 1954 | 119 females<br>Ages 17–26 yrs.                      | Females<br>1. Dating and mate selection<br>2. Standard and values in activities with the world outside the family<br>3. Standards and values of personal appearance, conduct, and health                                                                     |
| Landis, 1954                 | 1900 males, 2410 females<br><br>High school seniors | Males and Females<br>1. My share of the work around the house<br>2. My spending money<br>3. My attitude towards my parents                                                                                                                                   |

**TABLE 1 (Continued)**  
**Three Most Common Causes of Arguments With Parents**  
**According to Adolescents (1929–1982)**

| Study                  | Sample                                           | Causes of Arguments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Remmers, 1957          | 15,000 males and females<br>High school students | Males and Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Afraid to tell parents when I've done wrong</li> <li>2. Too strict about my going out at night</li> <li>3. Too strict about family car</li> </ol>                                                                                         |
| Bath & Lewis, 1962     | 103 females<br>Ages 19–30                        | Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discipline</li> <li>2. Responsibilities</li> <li>3. Family rules and regulations</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                         |
| Douvan & Adelson, 1966 | 1925 females<br>Grades 6–12                      | Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clothing</li> <li>2. Friends</li> <li>3. Driving</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Offer, 1969            | 73 males<br>High school freshmen                 | Males<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Orderliness</li> <li>2. Completion of tasks</li> <li>3. Cleanliness</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Kinloch, 1970          | 100 males and females<br>College freshmen        | Males<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Eating dinner with family</li> <li>2. Getting to use the car</li> <li>3. Arguing</li> </ol> Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Arguing</li> <li>2. Going around with certain boys or girls</li> <li>3. Being home enough</li> </ol> |
| Schvaneveldt, 1973     | 85 males, 145 females<br>Ages 12–15 yrs.         | Males and Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Performing home chores</li> <li>2. Use of time</li> <li>3. Attitudes towards studies</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                           |
| Johnstone, 1975        | 1261 males and females<br>Ages 13–20 yrs.        | Males and Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Studying</li> <li>2. Spare time use</li> <li>3. School</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Cromer, 1978           | 80 males and females<br>Ages 15–21 yrs.          | Males and Females<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who I go out with</li> <li>2. The places I go</li> <li>3. Physical appearance</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                  |

TABLE 1 (Continued)  
Three Most Common Causes of Arguments With Parents  
According to Adolescents (1929–1982)

| Study                        | Sample                                   | Causes of Arguments                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rosenthal, 1982              | 630 males and females<br>Ages 13–16 yrs. | Males and Females<br>1. Drinking and/or smoking<br>2. Time and frequency of going out<br>3. Doing jobs around the house                                                                            |
| Caplow, <i>et al.</i> , 1982 | 442 males, 488 females<br>Grades 10–12   | Males<br>1. The time I get in at night<br>2. Home duties<br>3. My spending money<br>Females<br>1. Home duties<br>2. The time I get in at night<br>3. The number of times I go out on school nights |

Adelson, 1966) never quarreled with their parents or had little or no conflict with them (Bath & Lewis, 1962). In two studies in which the overall quality of family relationships was investigated, it was found that adolescents expressed a high degree of satisfaction with relations with their parents and reported little conflict with them (Moore & Holtzman, 1965; Offer, 1969). In an excellent epidemiological study, Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, and Yule (1976) examined adolescent turmoil among 200 14- and 15-year-olds living on the Isle of Wight. Mothers were asked if they had “any arguments with their adolescent children concerning when and where they went out, or about other activities,” and a similar question was asked of the adolescents. Approximately 18 percent of mothers responded that they did, while about 36 percent of adolescents reported that they had these kinds of conflicts with their mothers. This response difference may reflect mothers’ unwillingness to report a high degree of conflict, but it may also indicate that adolescents perceive more conflict with their mothers than their mothers perceive with them. For example, one could imagine a mother telling her adolescent to pick up his clothes. An adolescent’s silent compliance might mask an underlying resentment, and he would consider the interaction a conflictual one while the mother would not. In general, when self-report measures of overall relationship conflict or satisfaction are obtained from adolescents or parents, both groups report that conflict is low and satisfaction high, although mothers may have a somewhat more positive view of the quality of the relationship with their adolescents than do adolescents.

Rather than obtain reports of overall conflict, a number of investigators have had adolescents report on amount of conflict with parents for a specified period of time. This methodological improvement results in a somewhat different picture of

the parent-adolescent relationship. In one study, about 17 percent of adolescents reported that they had a quarrel or serious disagreement with their parents "yesterday" (Propper, 1972), a figure that indicates a fairly substantial amount of quarreling over a long period of time. In regard to frequency of parental discipline, in two older studies it was found that about 30% of adolescents indicated that they had been punished by their parents during the previous week (Stott, 1940) or were frequently scolded by them (Meissner, 1965).

Finally, in one recent study daily accounts of conflicts with parents were obtained from 64 high school sophomores (Montemayor, 1982). Interviewers telephoned each adolescent at home on three randomly selected evenings during a three week period. The adolescents were asked to recount the events of the previous day, including any conflicts that they had with their parents. Conflict was defined for the adolescents as follows: "Either you teased your parent or your parent teased you; you and your parent had a difference of opinion; one of you got mad at the other for some reason; you and your parent had a quarrel or an argument; or one of you hit the other." The three days of data for each of the 64 adolescents resulted in 192 days of tracking. During this period adolescents reported a total of 68 arguments with both their parents. This is a rate of .35 arguments with parents per day or about one argument every three days. Further, the average length of each of these arguments was about 11 minutes and, according to the adolescents, the disagreements were moderately upsetting. In addition, most conflicts were with mothers rather than fathers and usually occurred between mothers and their daughters.

The results of these studies indicate that reports of the frequency of parent-adolescent disagreements are directly related to the method used to gather this information. When general levels of conflict are assessed parents and adolescents report that they rarely quarrel. When more specific measures of conflict are obtained, it appears that moderately upsetting arguments may occur as often as twice a week and that a large majority of adolescents may be disciplined by their parents weekly.

### Relationship Between Parent-Adolescent Conflict and Adolescent Behavior

In this section the question of whether conflict is in some way good for the adolescent or for the parent-adolescent relationship is examined. The idea that conflict facilitates growth is echoed by some developmental theorists such as Erikson (1968) and Kohlberg (1969), and by most life-span theorists who argue that psychological growth takes place in the give-and-take interplay of interpersonal interaction (Baltes & Schaie, 1973). Conflict in general is viewed by some as a normal and essential factor in adolescent development and, within limits, beneficial (Count, 1967; Peskin, 1967). Are these claims true for parent-adolescent conflict?

Very little is known about the possible association between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent development or the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. Montemayor (1982) investigated the widely held hypothesis that frequent conflict with parents would be associated with greater peer involvement. The

hypothesis was not supported. In this sample of normal adolescents who were all living in intact families, conflict with mothers was associated with spending more time with fathers not peers. This finding is remarkable considering the fact that the adolescents only reported about two arguments per week with their parents. Apparently an aversive event does not have to be frequent for it to have an important impact on a relationship, as Patterson (1980) also has shown.

In a study of the relationship between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent personality development, Grotevant and his colleagues reported that adolescent identity exploration was positively related to frequency of expressions of disagreement with parents during a family discussion task (Cooper, Grotevant, Moore, & Condon, Note 2). Taken together the results of these two studies suggest that within some normal range, conflict with parents may be healthy for the personal development of adolescents, but that even infrequent conflict may be associated with less involvement with the disagreeable parent and more involvement with other family members.

At some point normal healthy conflict becomes serious distress. It is not known when this point is reached in a relationship, or what percentage of families with an adolescent could be classified as distressed. According to Offer and Offer (1975) 21 percent of their sample of "modally adjusted" adolescents experienced "tumultuous growth," which included serious conflict with parents. On the basis of this figure and the data reviewed in this presentation, a conservative estimate of the percentage of adolescents who have serious conflict with their parents is between 15 percent and 20 percent. According to the 1980 U.S. Census there are about 25 million individuals between the ages of 12 and 17 years. Fifteen to 20 percent of that group would be between four and five million families in which parent-adolescent conflict would be serious enough for the individuals to feel stressed and, perhaps, to desire help.

A high degree of conflict between parents and their adolescents is not related to psychological growth but is predictive of a variety of adolescent problems. The physical abuse of adolescents by their parents is oftentimes the culmination of a history of intense arguments between parents and adolescents (Garbarino, 1980; Libbey & Bybee, 1979). Similarly, incidents of the physical abuse of parents by adolescents are more frequent in homes that are characterized by turmoil and conflict (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, Note 3). High levels of parent-adolescent conflict are related to adolescents moving away from their parents (Gottlieb & Chafetz, 1977), running away from home (Blood & D'Angelo, 1974; Shellow, Schamp, Liebow, & Unger, 1967), and joining a religious cult (Ullman, 1982). Teenage girls who report that their relations with their parents are very stressful are more likely to marry early (Moss & Gingles, 1959) or become pregnant (McKenry, Walters, & Johnson, 1979) than their schoolmates who report calm relations with their parents. Adolescents who drop out of school in comparison to adolescents who graduate from high school report more conflict and less communication with parents (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Cervantes, 1965). In addition to school

related problems, more male juvenile delinquents than non-delinquents indicate that their parents do not understand them (Duncan, 1978), often nag and scold them (Nye, 1958), and use harsh and restrictive disciplinary techniques (Bandura & Walters, 1959).

Other adolescent problems related to high levels of parent-adolescent conflict are psychiatric disorders (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976), low self-esteem (Bachman, 1970), and suicide (Jacobs, 1971). Negative and conflictual parent-adolescent relations are associated with adolescents' use of heroin (Eldred, Brown, & Mahabir, 1974), depressants and stimulants (Streit, Halsted, & Pascale, 1974), hallucinogens (Sanborn, Daniels, Jones, Salkin, & Shonick, 1971), marijuana (McGlothlin, 1975; Tec, 1970), and illicit drugs in general (Kandel, Kessler, & Margulies, 1978).

Since all of the above studies are correlational, it is impossible to know if parent-adolescent conflict causes problems for adolescents or if the relations between parents and adolescents are strained and unpleasant as a result of the problems that adolescents may already have. But whichever the direction of causality, severe parent-adolescent conflict must be viewed as symptomatic of a variety of serious adolescent problems. In general, high levels of parent-adolescent conflict are associated with a wide range of non-specific acting-out behaviors during adolescence. The particular form of the problem behavior is probably a function of a variety of personal, family, and peer influences.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this review do not indicate that the old "sturm und drang" view of parent-adolescent relations was right after all. It wasn't. But, perhaps in our attempt to be modern and repudiate this view we have lost sight of the fact that conflict is a part of any relationship, and that the ability to satisfactorily resolve differences is a key element to the continuation of a relationship. Understanding the causes and consequences of conflict with parents may be particularly important during the adolescent period for two reasons. First, some conflict with parents appears to be a normal part of family relations during this time. This conflict may be an essential component of the transformation of relations with parents that occurs during puberty. Understanding this type of conflict is important for our overall understanding of normal adolescent development. A second type of conflict, however, may or may not be associated with transitional stress, and may have its origins in earlier parent-child relations. This conflict when it is severe, is associated with serious adolescent problem behavior. From clinical perspective, we cannot ignore this type of conflict and need to develop prevention and treatment programs to help families cope with it.

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