



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

# *Harmony in the Home*

*Resolving Conflict Between Parents and Adolescents*

**F**or young people and their parents adolescence can be a time of stress and confusion as families negotiate the transition between childhood and becoming adult. Previous patterns of family relationships that worked more or less adequately can be disrupted as young people desire and demand more independence. Parents are frequently perplexed about how to deal with teenagers who are testing limits and attempting to develop an autonomous identity.

Surveys of young people reveal that the majority of adolescents have positive feelings about their families even if there are disagreements (Offer, Ostrov and Howard 1981; Noller and Callen 1991). However, during this period some level of conflict appears inevitable, even necessary, if parents and adolescents are to establish new relationships that balance increased independence with continued connection and support. Either may exaggerate the negatives and minimise the positives of family life (Robin and Foster 1989).

A family's communication patterns, problem-solving abilities, belief systems and structure of relationships will influence whether adolescence is a time of normal challenge and adjustment or becomes a crisis of conflict.

**ILENE WOLCOTT**

and

**RUTH WESTON**

**discuss the Institute's evaluation**

**of Parent-Adolescent Mediation**

**and Family Therapy Programs**

**funded by the**

**Attorney-General's Department.**

Studies indicate that where parents are authoritarian and controlling, young people are likely to respond more to external controls, react in rebellious ways and develop lower self-esteem and confidence. Too permissive an environment may promote freedom without the necessary boundaries that allow testing within safe limits. A more democratic but not permissive style of parenting that encourages participation in decision-making appears to promote internal judgement and control, less susceptibility to

peer pressure and constructive identity exploration. Of course, influences are reciprocal, with the adolescent's behaviour contributing to the style of parenting (Montemayor 1986; Peterson and Leigh 1990).

For some families, the pressures of negotiating these transitions become too difficult emotionally and practically, causing intolerable levels of conflict and family dysfunction leading to the young person leaving home prematurely without adequate skills and resources for independent living.

## **Response to Parent-Adolescent Conflict**

While recognising the role of disadvantage and poverty associated with youth homelessness, the Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) also cited the lack of early intervention services for parents and adolescents which might potentially prevent youth from leaving home. In response, a number of organisations were funded by the Commonwealth and States to provide mediation and family therapy with the aim of intervening in the early stages of family conflict as a means of preventing young

people leaving home or, where a young person has already left home, to enhance access to emotional and financial support from families.

Interventions such as mediation and family therapy are thought to assist family members to renegotiate roles and rules, explore values and expectations and enhance communication and conflict resolution skills that will foster independence, promote self-esteem and maintain family connections (Merry, Rocheleau and Wixted 1985; Shaw and Phear 1988; Lam, Rifkin and Townley 1989).

This article presents some of the results of an evaluation conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1991 of eleven Parent-Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy Programs funded by the Attorney-General's Department. The impact of these services on the resolution of family conflict are discussed, and the living circumstances of young people that affect youth homelessness examined.

### Study Design and Sample

A two-stage longitudinal design was used. The first stage obtained a profile of families who came to the centre. The second stage examined the effectiveness and outcomes of the interventions approximately three months after the clients first contacted the centres.

Measures of effectiveness included: pre- and post-intervention ratings on problem resolution; ways of handling conflict; family relationships; dimensions of wellbeing; and risk of homelessness.

During October–December 1991, counsellors at the centres provided information on demographic variables and family dynamics for 336 new client families who attended the centres. Of these, 161 families (158 young people and 210 parents) completed the initial study questionnaire (Time 1) prior to the first session, and 92 families (65 adolescents and 95 parents) participated in the mailed follow-up phase approximately three months later (Time 2).

The majority of young people were aged 13–16 years, fairly evenly distributed by sex (45 per cent boys; 55 per cent girls) and born in Australia. Approximately two-thirds were living at home when they first attended a Centre and over three-quarters were attending school or a course of study.

Over one-third of families were one-parent families and a quarter were stepfamilies. Similarly high proportions of single-parent families are reported in other studies of parent-adolescent mediation services (Van Slyck, Stern, Newland 1992).

### Reasons for attending centres

Counsellors reported that the main presenting problems for all clients were discipline in the home (55 per cent), everyday routines such as chores and curfews (50 per cent) and desire for independence (46 per cent). These are common areas of disagreement reported in all studies of families with adolescents (Montemayor 1986; Noller and Callan 1991). Comments by both parents and adolescents who participated in the study confirmed the centrality of parental control and

a desire for independence on the part of the young person as underlying issues (Glick, Clarkin and Kessler 1987; Peterson 1990).

### Seriousness of problems

It is the level of perceived and actual seriousness of problems, not only their content, that is likely to differentiate 'normal' parent-adolescent conflict from behaviours associated with the risk of homelessness such as physical and verbal violence, hostility and truancy (Peterson 1990).

At intake, nearly two-thirds of families were rated by counsellors as having multiple and high levels of complex problems. Parents and adolescents were not in agreement on this issue with almost all parents (92 per cent), but only 48 per cent of adolescents rating the problems as very important.

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Nevertheless, perceptions of family relationships were viewed less positively by young people in this sample compared with young people in more general population samples (Weston and Millward 1992; Scott 1990). For example, girls were significantly less satisfied than boys with their relationship with their mother. Over a half of boys (54 per cent) compared with a quarter of girls (27 per cent) indicated they were fairly to very happy with the way they got along with their mother. Both boys and girls had more mixed feelings about relationships with their fathers. Communication within the family and the extent to which family members understood their problems and feelings ranked amongst the lowest in satisfaction for both parents and children.

The majority of adolescents in families who came to the centres could be considered to be at risk of homelessness, but not yet enmeshed in the homeless youth culture. Overall, 70 per cent of all families were estimated by caseworkers to be at risk of homelessness at the time of first attendance. However, only one-third of parents in the study sample believed it was likely that the young person would decide they could no

longer live at home. Similarly, one-third of the young people indicated that they were likely to make a decision they could no longer remain at home. Around 20 per cent of parents thought they might ask the young person to leave home and 19 per cent of young people agreed that one of their parents would ask them to leave home.

Counsellors also reported that approximately 70 per cent of young people had spent some time out of the family home during the past three years due to family conflict.

### Impact of Mediation and Family Therapy Interventions

Controversy surrounds the distinctions made between mediation and family therapy in working with young people and their fam-



ilies (Campbell 1991). Discussion centres around the focus on emotional issues and internal family dynamics in contrast to an emphasis on reaching agreement on immediate and specific issues with or without psychological change in relationships (Shaw and Phear 1987; Roberts 1990). Few, if any, of the centres in the study followed strict demarcations between these two approaches.

### Resolution of problems

Improvement in the problems that were of concern is one measure of the effectiveness of an intervention. The majority of parents (69 per cent) and young people (81 per cent) stated that the problems discussed had mostly improved at least a little, with around one-third of both parents and adolescents saying they had improved a lot since coming to the centres. While few respondents indicated that any problems had become worse, around a quarter of both parents and young people thought things had stayed the same.

Approximately 80 per cent of both parents and young people believed that counselling/mediation had contributed at least a little to the resolution of the problems that

had brought them to the centres, with 40 per cent of both groups saying it had contributed a lot.

Respondents' comments to open-ended questions illustrated the ways in which things had improved. Parents most often mentioned positive changes in the young person's attitude and behaviour. Young people also acknowledged that their own behaviour had changed:

'The child is less angry and more willing to accept rules.' (mother)  
'I'm not stirring teachers and swearing at them.' (boy)

Changes in parental behaviour were also recognised, particularly in relation to issues of control and independence:



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

'I have stopped being over-protective and given more freedom of choice in her behaviour.' (mother)  
'There's more freedom, and they listen and talk.' (boy)

Less fighting and arguments and improved communication and understanding were frequently mentioned by both parents and young people:

'We're both making efforts to understand each other's point of view.' (mother)  
'We have stopped yelling, and the family works as a team now.' (girl)

The few parents and adolescents who commented on problems that had worsened tended to mention continuing arguments and conflicts, lack of communication or that the young person had left home.

### Family relationships

Parents and young people showed a trend towards increased satisfaction with family relationships and improved family dynamics moving closer to the norm for the general population. Although both boys and girls appeared significantly more content with how well they got along with their mothers at the follow-up stage, boys remained more satisfied than girls with this relationship. Boys also felt better

**The majority of families who attended the youth mediation and family therapy programs felt they had made some progress in resolving their problems and improving family relationships.**

about their fathers, but there was little difference in the girls' appraisal of this relationship over the two time periods. Fathers' and mothers' satisfaction with their relationship to the young person at the centre of conflict increased.

Overall, three-quarters of both parents and adolescents indicated that the way their family got along had improved at least 'somewhat' since attending the centre. Around a half of both parents and young people agreed it was easier to talk about thoughts and feelings and to enjoy each other's company.

### Handling conflict

Assisting families to resolve conflicts that could lead to youth homelessness was the major aim of the programs. A scale based on principal components analysis was developed to measure changes in how conflict was handled. The scale measured dysfunctional family behaviour and contained items concerning: yelling or screaming at each other; hitting or throwing things; refusing to talk to each other; parent threatening to leave; parent threatening to send the young person away from home; and the young person being sent away from home; together with two items whose ratings were reversed: talking things through, and letting things cool down.

Figure 1 shows that between Time 1 and Time 2, all groups indicated a significant decline in dysfunctional approach to conflict ( $p < .05$  for fathers, and  $p < .001$  for the other groups). There were no significant sex differences in average scores at either time.

The major changes occurred in the fall in the incidence of negative behaviour such as yelling or screaming at each other rather than a rise in the incidence of the constructive behaviours (talking things through and letting things cool down).

### Risk of homelessness

A central aim of the intervention was to reduce the risk of homelessness. Indicators of actual change in risk of homelessness consisted of questions regarding management of family conflict, together with ratings of chances that the adolescent will leave home or be asked to leave by a parent. Most of the indicators suggested that there was a lower risk of homelessness since coming to the centres.

Risk of homelessness (chances of leaving home or being sent away) was also assessed by ratings on five-point scales ranging from 1 'very unlikely' to 5 'very likely'. Figure 2 presents the average ratings for these items at Time 1 and Time 2. There were no sex differences at Time 1, but at Time 2 boys estimated the chances of their deciding to leave home to be lower compared with girls.

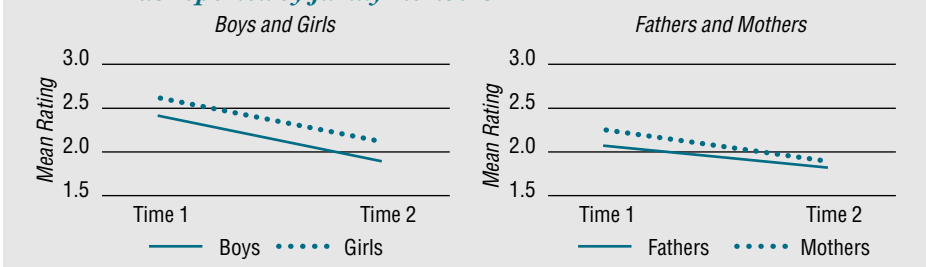
For young people and parents, the perceived chances of the young person being sent away from home were significantly lower at Time 2. The perceived chances of the young person deciding that they could no longer live at home were significantly lower at Time 2 than Time 1 for boys and fathers, and approached significance for mothers but not girls.

### Satisfaction with Outcome and Service

The majority of parents and adolescents were clearly satisfied with the counselling/mediation received (71 per cent parents; 69 per cent young people), and with how they got along with their counsellor/mediator (88 per cent parents; adolescents).

However, only around a half of both parents and young people were clearly satisfied with the outcome of the intervention. In general this was because the results did not coincide with their desired expectations regarding solution of problems. There were

Figure 1 **Dysfunctional management of family conflict at Time 1 and Time 2 as reported by family members**



no significant differences between mothers and fathers or boys and girls.

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words what had been helpful or not helpful about their experience. The two most common responses were: being able to talk things through with a neutral person; and being able to express views and confront problems in a safe environment. Assistance with listening to and understanding the other person's perspective was another theme mentioned (more often by parents). Other comments referred to the relief obtained from just having a place to go where someone offered a sympathetic ear, along with affirmation that they were not alone in the situation they were confronting.

Negative comments were mainly associated with things not having changed. Parents referred to the intransigence on the part of their adolescent and to counsellor bias.

While the majority of parents and young people reported generally successful outcomes, some respondents benefited more than others. For young people, perceptions of more positive outcomes were associated with being male, not being in a one-parent family, coming to the Centre with difficulties concerning daily routines and tasks, and lower levels of destructive approaches to family conflict.

For parents, more favourable outcomes were associated with the young person having lived in few places out of home, low levels of destructive approaches to conflict, satisfaction with parental friendships, wanting the young person to leave home and lower levels of verbal/emotional abuse directed towards parents.

## Conclusion

Overall, the majority of families who attended the youth mediation and family therapy programs felt they had made some progress in resolving their problems and improving family relationships. Indicators of risk of homelessness were lower at the time of follow-up for most young people.

While not all families achieved successful outcomes, with young people from one-parent families having less favourable results, the interventions appear to be beneficial to families presenting problems at varying levels of seriousness.

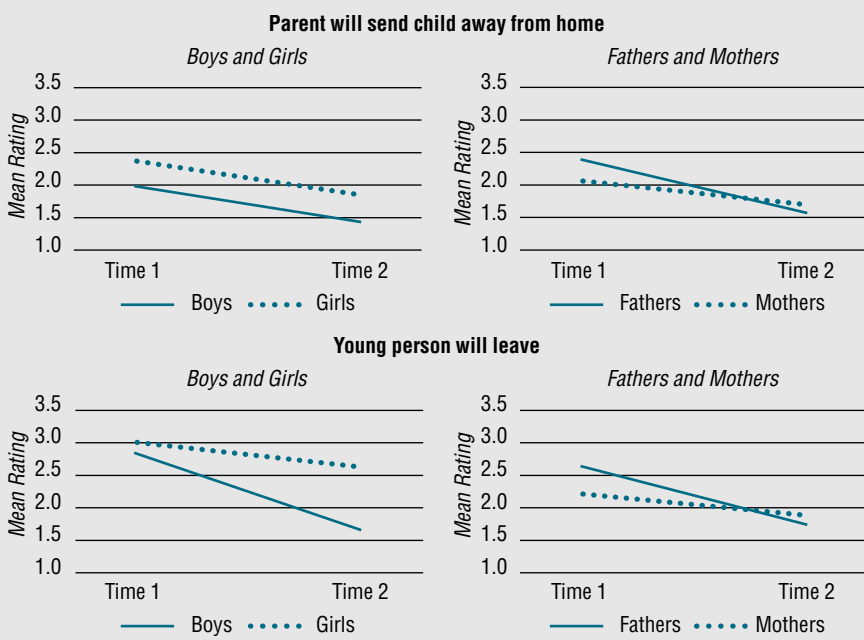
Findings support the view that interventions incorporating strategies from both family therapy and mediation may be effective with families where there is an adolescent at risk of homelessness.

The study confirms that parental and adolescent assumptions about dependence and independence can generate family tension and conflict. Opportunities to negotiate new rules and roles, communicate expectations and feelings and learn conflict management skills can, in certain circumstances, ameliorate these tensions and conflicts and prevent them from escalating into family breakdown.

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Figure 2 *Risk of homelessness at Time 1 and Time 2 as perceived by family members*



**Mediation and family therapy are thought to assist family members to renegotiate roles and rules, explore values and expectations and enhance communication and conflict resolution skills that will foster independence, promote self-esteem and maintain family connections.**

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