

Turning to



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

Father

The Role of Fathers Relative to Mothers and Friends as Confidants for Adolescents

Fathers have traditionally been portrayed as the breadwinners of the family, as authority figures, providers of the family's social status, and as role models for achievement and employment (Amato 1996; Lamb 1997). However with the increasing participation of mothers in the work force, many fathers in two parent families have lost these exclusive contributions to family life and pressures have mounted on fathers to take a more active part in their children's lives.

There has been growing appreciation that, whatever the roles they adopt, fathers may have a profound positive or negative impact on their children's development. While most research prior to the 1970s on the impact of parents on child development restricted attention to mothers, research interest in fathers' involvement with, and effects on, the children has subsequently increased.

Research into the contribution fathers make to children's wellbeing includes not only studies of families in which fathers are present, but also studies of families with absent fathers, especially after marriage breakdown.

Some studies of families after marital separation have suggested that the children's wellbeing and life chances are influenced not only by the level of financial support provided by non-resident fathers, but also by the amount and quality of contact between fathers and children, and cooperation or conflict between parents (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1997). However, Funder (1986) found that, five to eight years after separation, the most important of the family relationship factors for children's wellbeing was the quality of their relationship with their resident parent (all of whom were mothers). Further, conflicting results have

There is a growing public awareness that fathers, like mothers, provide advice, friendship and emotional support for their children.

RUTH WESTON discusses the extent to which teenagers confide in their fathers, mothers and friends, and whether confiding in fathers is independently linked with the wellbeing of teenagers.



Adolescence is a critical period when the decisions young people make about study, friendships and leisure activities can have a profound impact on the course their life takes.

emerged from studies which examine whether children fare better if they live with the parent of the same gender – that is, boys with fathers and girls with mothers (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1997).

In relation to intact families, previous research suggests that young people who remain attached to their parents are better adjusted than those with only loose, if any, attachments to parents (Ambert 1997). However, most of the research focuses on relationships between mothers and their children and, as Amato (1994) points out, most investigations of the contribution that fathers make to children's wellbeing have failed to control for the contribution of mothers. Furthermore, most of the research into fathering focuses on the characteristics of fathers' relationships with infants and young children rather than with adolescents (Hosley and Montemayor 1997).

Adolescence is a critical period when the decisions young people make about study, friendships and leisure activities can have a profound impact on the course their life takes. Teenagers spend less time at home than when younger and tend to rely increasingly on their friends. Parents tend to worry about the impact of peer pressure on their children, with some parents perceiving the influence of their child's peers as both negative and more powerful than their own influence (Ambert 1997; Tonge 1986).

Teenagers also tend to argue more frequently with their parents than when they were younger, usually over matters that researchers describe as mundane, but that

teenagers (and parents) may well feel strongly about. Typical arguments include issues surrounding the teenagers' desire for greater freedom. This process of conflict and negotiation during adolescence appears to be important in the development of new and quite different parent-child relationships (Noller and Callan 1991).

Given this growing independence and greater reliance on friends, how likely are teenagers to confide in their parents? In particular, how important are fathers as confidants, and to what extent is confiding in father, mother and/or friends connected to adolescent wellbeing?

Data Source

The following analysis is based on the 1991–92 Australian Institute of Family Studies *Australian Living Standards Study* which focused on families with at least one child under the age of 20 years.

This analysis focuses on the responses of 2016 young people who lived with both natural parents, about three-quarters of the total sample of young people, and on information provided by their parents.

The two youngest age groups examined, 11–13 years and 14–15 years, each comprised 28 per cent of the sample, while those aged 16–17 years and 18–19 years comprised 24 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. The number of young people in each age group ranged from 395 (for the oldest group) to 571 (for the youngest group). The gender split at each of these age levels was almost even.

The precise question asked of the teenagers was: 'If you needed advice or emotional support, how likely would you be to ask . . .?'. This was followed by a list of family members, relatives, friends. Ratings were labelled as follows: 1 'very unlikely', 2 'unlikely', 3 'maybe/maybe not', 4 'likely', and 5 'very likely'.

Preferred Confidants

Figure 1 shows how likely teenagers were to confide in fathers, mothers and friends, as reported by boys and girls in the four different age groups.

- Boys and girls at each age level – especially girls – were more prone to confide in their mothers than their fathers.
- Boys in all age groups were less likely than girls to confide in their mothers.
- Up to the age of 15 years (and especially when 11 to 13 years) boys were more likely than girls to confide in their fathers
- In general, the likelihood of confiding in fathers and mothers seemed to decrease by age 14–15 years and then increase (except for boys in relation to mothers).
- The tendency to confide in friends increased with age and gradually surpassed the tendency to confide in either parent, although mothers remained important sources of advice or emotional support.
- The 'preference' for friends over parents occurred at an earlier age for girls than boys, and at each age level, girls were more likely than boys to confide in friends.

These averages mask the variability that occurs, especially in relation to fathers. Table 1 shows that, across the four age groups, 37–54 per cent of boys and 23–45 per cent of girls indicated that they were likely to approach their fathers, while 19–27 per cent of boys and 23–33 per cent of girls said that they were unlikely to do so.

The greatest 'consensus' occurred for girls aged 14 or more years in relation to friends: at least 80 per cent indicated that

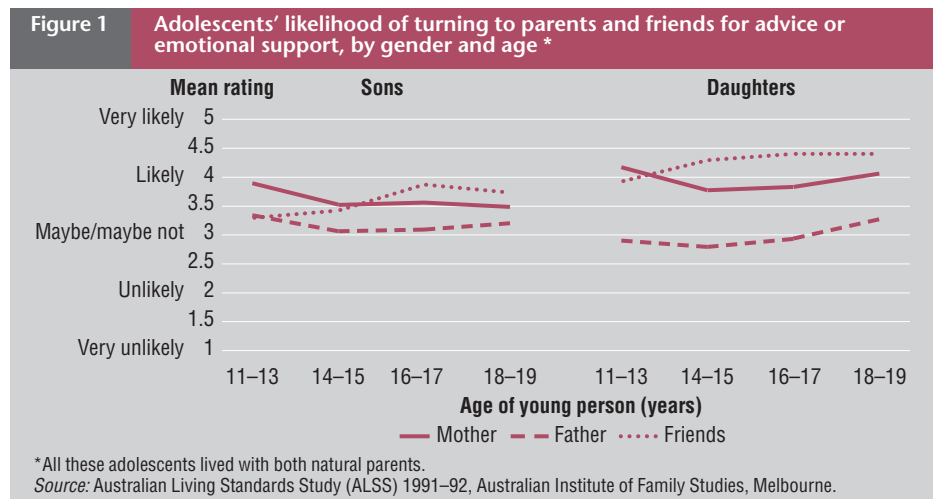


Table 1 Adolescents' likelihood of turning to parents and friends for advice or emotional support, by gender and age *

	Sons: age (years)				Daughters: age (years)			
	11-13 %	14-15 %	16-17 %	18-19 %	11-13 %	14-15 %	16-17 %	18-19 %
Approach fathers								
Unlikely, very unlikely	19	25	27	27	32	33	31	23
Maybe / maybe not	27	38	34	29	38	44	37	32
Likely, very likely	54	37	39	43	29	23	31	45
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Approach mothers								
Unlikely, very unlikely	11	17	15	22	6	13	10	8
Maybe / maybe not	20	26	32	24	17	25	29	18
Likely, very likely	69	57	53	54	77	62	60	74
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Approach friends								
Unlikely, very unlikely	20	21	9	13	9	4	3	4
Maybe / maybe not	37	27	29	25	22	16	13	10
Likely, very likely	3	52	62	62	69	80	84	86
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

* All these adolescents lived with both natural parents.

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991-92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

they were likely to approach their friends, and less than 5 per cent reported that they were unlikely to do so. This greater tendency for girls than boys to confide in friends is consistent with previous research which suggests that 'close friendships' for boys tend to involve the sharing of activities, while those for girls tend to involve the sharing of feelings (Larson and Richards 1994).

The results are also consistent with previous research which suggests that young people who live with both natural parents are less attached to their fathers than their mothers, talk less openly with fathers than mothers (especially girls), and see their fathers as less inclined than their mothers to listen to problems and help clarify feelings (see review by Hosley and Montemayor 1997).

One or Several Confidants?

Despite the fact that mothers appeared to be preferred over fathers as confidants, those who seemed most likely to confide in their mothers were also more likely than other young people to confide in their fathers. Likewise, those who were hesitant about confiding in mothers were even more hesitant than other young people about confiding in their fathers. The strength of this relationship tended to increase with age (Pearson correlations for boys ranged from .56 for the youngest group to .78 for the oldest group, while those for girls ranged from .45 for the youngest group to .61 for the oldest group).

On the other hand, there seemed to be a low overall relationship between the tendency to confide in parents and friends. That is, those who were prone to confide in their peers seemed no more or less likely than others to confide in their parents. Twenty-two per cent of young people said they were likely to confide in both

Table 2 Proportion of young people likely to confide in father, mother or friends *

Likely confidants	Per cent
Father, mother and friends	22
Father and mother only	12
Father and friends only	1
Mother and friends only	20
Father only	1
Mother only	8
Friends only	22
Neither parents nor friends	13
Total	100

* All these adolescents lived with both natural parents.

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991-92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

parents as well as friends. Previous research would suggest that these young people tended to discuss quite different issues with each party (Hosley and Montemayor 1997; Sebald and White 1980; Wilks and Orth 1991).

Various other patterns of behaviour were reported, each of which would reflect different relationships between adolescents and their parents and friends. For example, Table 2 shows that 20 per cent indicated that they were likely to approach their friends along with their mother; another 20 per cent said they were likely to approach mother only or both parents, but were either unsure about or unlikely to confide in their friends; 22 per cent said they were likely to confide in friends only; and 13 per cent reported that they were either unlikely or unsure about approaching parents or friends. (In fact, 3 per cent (n = 52) indicated that they were *unlikely* to confide in parents or friends.)

Implications for Adolescent Wellbeing

Several indicators of adolescent wellbeing, based on the young person's reports, were examined. These included: sense of

mastery, warmth/sociability, arguments with parents, satisfaction with life and various domains of life, and self-fulfilment – the latter being a measure based on satisfaction with freedom or independence, the self, what the young person was accomplishing in life, and respect or recognition received.

When the relationship between these indicators of wellbeing and tendency to confide in one party (for example, fathers) was examined, tendencies to confide in the other two parties (for example, mothers and friends) were controlled.

In addition, the effects of the following factors were controlled in the assessment of links between confiding behaviour and adolescent wellbeing: the young person's gender and age; the family's occupational status background (measured in terms of the father's and mother's current or most recent job); current employment status of each parent; and language used at home (English or other) coupled with the parents' command of English.

Role of fathers and mothers

Compared with other young people, those who saw their fathers as likely confidants indicated higher wellbeing on a range of measures. This trend continued to hold when the effects of the other above-mentioned factors were controlled, including their views about their mothers as likely confidants.

Similarly, those who saw their mothers as likely confidants indicated higher wellbeing than other young people, when the effects of these other factors (including perceptions about fathers as likely confidants) were controlled. In other words, the tendencies to confide in mothers and fathers were independently linked with the wellbeing of these teenagers.

Compared with other young people, teenagers who expressed relatively high likelihood of approaching their mothers and fathers (taken separately) for advice or emotional support indicated a higher sense of mastery, greater warmth/sociability, and greater satisfaction with personal health, living standards, personal/emotional life, and life as a whole. These young people also indicated a greater sense of 'self-fulfilment'. Indeed, they indicated greater satisfaction with each of these components of the 'self-fulfilment' measure (as outlined above).

These results are consistent with those of Amato (1994) who examined the relationship between the wellbeing of young adults (aged 19 or more years) and their perceptions of closeness to their fathers, while controlling for the effects of their perceptions of closeness to their mothers. It appears that the importance of relationships with fathers to their children's wellbeing extends beyond adolescence.



Compared with other young people, those who saw their fathers as likely confidants indicated higher wellbeing on a range of measures.

Young people also indicated how satisfied they felt with their relationships with their 'parents' (not mother and father taken separately) and how frequently they argued with their parents about a range of issues covering appearance and general behaviour around the home, and peers and social life. Not surprisingly, the tendencies to confide in fathers and mothers were independently linked with satisfaction with relationships with parents, as well as with siblings. That is, compared with other young people, those who were happier with these relationships were more likely to confide in each parent.

However, those who reported relatively frequent arguments with parents regarding appearance and general behaviour around the home were less likely than other young people to confide in their mothers, but no such relationship was apparent for confiding in fathers. The same applied to frequency of arguments regarding peers and social life. As might be expected, previous research suggests that it is the mother rather than father who tends to monitor such behaviours, set limits and enforce rules (Hosley and Montemayor 1997). When such maternal roles create friction, mothers' opportunities to act as confidantes seem to diminish.

Role of friends

Interestingly, the tendency to confide in friends was related to fewer indices of wellbeing for young people, and not all these links were positive. (However, it must be remembered that most girls aged

14 or more years confided in their friends regardless of their wellbeing.) As would be expected, those who were more likely to confide in friends indicated higher warmth/sociability and expressed greater satisfaction with the number of close friends they had, compared with other boys and girls.

Role of parents and friends

In general, adolescents who were more peer-oriented argued more frequently with their parents and were the least satisfied with their relationships with their parents. However, adolescents who were happier with their relationships with their parents reported that they confided in both their parents and peers, and those who were relatively dissatisfied with their relationships with their parents indicated that they turned exclusively to friends.

Indeed, young people who turned exclusively to friends indicated low wellbeing on a range of measures (sense of mastery, satisfaction with relationships with siblings, with pressures experienced, and sense of fulfilment). Likewise, those who were unlikely to confide in either parents or friends indicated low wellbeing.

It seems that close friends with whom one can confide do not compensate for difficulties in approaching parents. Such trends highlight the continuing importance of trusting and supportive relationships with parents during adolescence.

In short, although young people were less likely to confide in their fathers than their mothers, the *potential* of fathers as confidants remained important to wellbeing. That is, those who were more prone than others to ask their fathers for advice or emotional support tended to be happier and better adjusted.

Furthermore, the link between confiding in fathers (and mothers) and wellbeing seemed more pervasive than that between confiding in peers and wellbeing. Indeed, while confiding in peers was more likely for the more 'sociable' adolescents, those who turned exclusively to friends reported greater friction with their parents, and lower wellbeing.

Conclusion

These trends can be interpreted in different ways. First, the 'approachability' of both fathers and mothers may independently contribute to the wellbeing of adolescents; second, high wellbeing may predispose young people to approach their parents for advice or emotional support. Most probably, both processes apply, although it must be pointed out that a third alternative – that the links observed are not causal – remains a possibility, despite attempts to control for various extraneous factors.

The link between tendency to confide in fathers and adolescents' wellbeing is consistent with arguments advanced by proponents of the 'men's movement' that fathers can play an important role in their children's lives, not only as providers of financial and material support, but also as confidants, nurturers and role models, and as providers of emotional and practical support for mothers (Biddulph 1994; Burgess 1997; Lamb 1997).

Despite these potentials, the majority of young people – with the exception of boys in their early teens – felt hesitant about, or unlikely to, approach their fathers for advice or emotional support.

References

- Amato, P. (1994), 'Father-child relations, mother-child relations, and offspring psychological wellbeing in early adulthood', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 56, pp.1031-1042.
- Amato, P. (1996), 'Fathers' contributions to their children's lives: human, financial, and social capital', Paper presented at the AIFS Fifth Australian Family Research Conference, November, Brisbane Qld.
- Ambert, A.M. (1997), *Parents, Children, and Adolescents: Interactive Relationships and Development in Context*, Haworth Press, New York.
- Biddulph, S. (1994), *Manhood: A Book About Setting Men Free*, Finch Publishing, Sydney.
- Burgess, A. (1997), *Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father*, Vermilion, London.
- Funder, K. (1996), *Remaking Families: Adaptation of Parents and Children to Divorce*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Hetherington, E.M., and Stanley-Hagan, M.M. (1997), 'The effects of divorce on fathers and their children', in M.E. Lamb (ed.) *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 3rd edn, Wiley New York, pp.191-211.
- Hosley, C.A. & Montemayor, R. (1997), 'Fathers and adolescents', in M.E. Lamb (ed.) *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 3rd edn, Wiley New York, pp.162-178.
- Lamb, M.E. (1997), 'Fathers and child development: an introductory overview and guide', in M.E. Lamb (ed.) *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 3rd edn, Wiley, New York, pp.1-18.
- Larson, R. & Richards, M.H. (1994), *Divergent Realities: The Emotional Lives of Mothers, Fathers, and Adolescents*, Basic Books, New York.
- Noller, P. & Callan, V. (1991), *The Adolescent in the Family*, Routledge, London.
- Sebald, H. & White, B. (1980), 'Teenagers' divided reference groups: uneven alignment with parents and peers', *Adolescence*, vol. 15, pp.979-984.
- Tonge, B.J. (1986), 'Mental health, or I'm OK and so are my parents', *Family Physician*, vol. 15, no.9, pp.1181-1184.
- Wilks, J. & Orth, M.A. (1991), 'Who knows what? Parent and peer orientations in adolescent decision making', *Youth Studies*, vol. 10, pp.36-40.

Ruth Weston is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.