

Adolescents' experiences of familial involvement in their peer relations and school attendance

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This study investigated adolescent experiences of familial involvement in adolescent peer relations and school attendance. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Finnish adolescents ($n = 19$; aged 12–16 years). The data were analysed by qualitative content analysis. Positive familial involvement was described as enablement, continual conversations about adolescent activities, actual support and taking an active role in adolescent activities. Negative involvement included negligence, criticism, restrictiveness or coercion. The findings are discussed with reference to previous research, and implications for adolescent and family health promotion are noted.

Key words: adolescence; family; peer relations; qualitative research; school attendance

Introduction

Parents, peers and school play a crucial role in the psychological and social development of adolescents (Sroufe *et al.*, 1996). The focus of adolescent studies has mostly been on solely one or two dimensions of these factors, as well as on youth problems (e.g., Hanson, 1999; Seguire and Chalmers, 2000). Although nursing science has focused since the 1960s on the familial factors related to the individual's health, there is still only little scientific evidence in nursing of adolescent subjective well-being and family (Åstedt-Kurki *et al.*, 1999; Pietilä, 1999; Whall and Fawcett, 1991). Previous studies (Barber *et al.*, 1998; Beam *et al.*, 2002; Engels and Bogt, 2001) reveal a complex relationship between social factors, such as family context and social bonding, and adolescent problem behaviour, such as substance abuse. According to Jones and Heaven (1998), adolescent alcohol use can be predicted by peer models, low levels of family support, and parental approval. Previous studies have

also found a positive association between school distress and psychosomatic symptoms (Natvig *et al.*, 1999), and school defiance and problem drinking (Treiman and Beck, 1996). Furthermore, Konu *et al.*, (2002) found in association between general subjective well-being and social relationships in school and outside the school, and social cohesion in the family.

Familial factors in adolescence

Adolescents perceive parents, especially mothers, and peers as the most significant individuals in their lives (Tatar, 1998). Results reported by Meeus *et al.*, (2002) indicated that parents are more likely to influence an adolescent's future, whereas peers impact on the current life situations of adolescents. Familial factors related to adolescent psychological development are quite well known in psychology. It is acknowledged that low family support may operate as a risk factor for behaviour problems (Buysee, 1997) and psychological disorders (Ohannessian and Lerner, 1994), whereas a cohesive family (Baldwin and Hoffmann, 2002) and positive family relations (Peiser and

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Heaven, 1996) provide increased self-esteem for adolescents. Poikolainen and Kanerva (1995) found that prolonged absence of a parent from home was related to somatic symptoms, especially among male adolescents. Tynjälä's (1999) study even revealed that a good family atmosphere plays an important contributing role in the sleep quality of adolescents.

Baumrind (1978, 1991) and Maccoby and Martin (1983) described a fourfold classification of parenting styles. This classification includes authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles. Baumrind (1978) suggested that an authoritative parenting style, including both control and attachment, is the ideal child-rearing pattern contributing to self-reliance and self-control. Baumrind (1991) found later that authoritative parents who are highly demanding and highly responsive were successful in protecting their adolescents from problem substance use. Baumrind (1991) emphasized the socioecological view of adolescent development and argued that the expression of parenting styles is dependent on social circumstances.

Peers in adolescence

Adolescence involves at least temporary distancing from parents, while peer relations increase in importance and intensity (Giordano *et al.*, 1993). Several authors (e.g., Ohannessian and Lerner, 1994; Sroufe *et al.*, 1996) emphasize the importance of peer relations for the developmental tasks of adolescence. Laible and colleagues (2000) indicated that parent and peer attachment served similar functions in terms of adolescent adjustment, such as increasing sympathy and absence of depression. They suggested on the basis of their study that peer attachment may be more influential on teen adjustment than parental attachment. However, Dekovic and Meeus (1997) emphasized the balance between evolving an active pattern of interactions with peers and remaining close to parents. Maxwell (2002) and Buysse (1997) also showed that peers have a strong effect on adolescent behaviour and may offer protection from some risk behaviour, such as alcohol use. According to Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997), females tend to be more attached to their friends, less open to negative influence by them, and less likely to be rejected by their classmates.

The effects of the family on peer relations are contradictory. Recent studies (e.g., Field and Lang,

1995; Dekovic and Meeus, 1997; Madden-Derdich *et al.*, 2002) indicated that warm family relations predict adolescent intimate same-sex peer relations. Yet research evidence indicated that peer support protects against the harmful developmental effects of maladaptive family functioning (Ohannessian and Lerner, 1994). In addition, the study by Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) showed that at-risk students had more dropout friends, more working friends, fewer school friends and fewer same-sex friends.

School attendance in adolescence

Shek (1997) and Aunola (2001) found an association between negative family environment and school adjustment problems among teenagers. Sanders (1998) further indicated that positive parental involvement influences students' academic self-concepts, and that school behaviour indirectly influences students' achievement.

Additionally, adolescents expecting to graduate from high school indicated greater intimacy with their parents than did adolescents reporting that they would quit school as soon as possible (Field and Lang, 1995). Recent data also showed links between negative daily life events, such as pressure from parents, and school dissatisfaction (Huebner and McCullough, 2000).

Support from teachers and peers has been indicated to be important for adolescents' well-being and health (Samdal, 1998; Natvig *et al.*, 1999). Teenagers, especially females, identified peers as the most significant reason for their school satisfaction (Pölkki, 2001). Furthermore, Kracke (2002) emphasized the role of peers in adolescent career exploration. The research evidence of Pietilä *et al.* (1994) indicated that poor school performance was connected with weak life control, including life satisfaction, among young men.

To summarize, the quality of family environment, parenting styles and parental relations has been linked to both adolescent peer relations and school attendance. As shown by previous studies, a complex association also exists between adolescents' social context outside the family and their well-being and ill-being. Few studies have focused on familial, including siblings', attitudes and quality of involvement in adolescent peer relations and school attendance from the adolescent point of view.

Purpose of the study

This study is part of a more comprehensive research project on adolescents' subjective well-being related to their social contexts (see Rask *et al.*, 2002a; 2002b; 2003). The intention of the present study was to investigate adolescent experiences of familial involvement in adolescent peer relations and school attendance. The research questions were:

- 1) How is family involvement in adolescent peer relations experienced by adolescents?
- 2) How is family involvement in adolescent school attendance experienced by adolescents?

Data and methods

Subjects

A qualitative approach was used, because the aim of the present study was to describe the teenagers' experiences of familial involvement, and the focus of interest has received little attention from the adolescents' perspective. The sample consisted of 19 adolescents (12 females, seven males) in grades seven ($n = 10$; 12–14 year olds) and nine ($n = 9$; 15–17 year olds) from nine different schools in southern Finland. The sample was selected from among 245 pupils in 13 secondary schools participating in a survey concerning adolescent subjective well-being (see for a more complete description Rask *et al.*, 2002a). All teenagers who volunteered to participate in interviews by giving written informed consent and written parental permission were interviewed. The parental consent was obtained by mail.

Interviews were conducted at a location of the adolescent's choice. Fifteen interviews took place in a quiet restaurant and four in adolescents' homes. The first author interviewed all participants in Finnish. Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to one and a half hours (mean length one hour) and were tape-recorded. A summary of each interview was written including documenting the interviewer's personal impressions, the atmosphere of the interview and other reflections.

Participants lived in a nuclear family ($n = 10$), stepfamily ($n = 3$) and single-parent family ($n = 6$), one with the father. Two teenagers had lost a family member by death. Two participants had no siblings, whereas eight participants had one sibling

and eight had two or more. All participants were white and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the mainstream religion in Finland. As reported by adolescents, the socio-economic status of parents was as follows: five of the mothers and six of the fathers were senior white collar workers; five of the mothers and four of the fathers were junior white collar workers; six of the mothers and fathers were manual workers. Three participants did not report the occupation of their parents.

Method

The data were collected by semi-structured focused interview. The interview themes reported in the present study were (1) familial involvement in adolescent peer relations and (2) familial involvement in adolescent school attendance. An example of the interview questions concerning peer relations was: 'What does your family know about your peers?' An example of the interview questions concerning school attendance was: 'How is your family involved in your school activities?'

Data analysis

The data were analysed by the first author using qualitative content analysis recommended by Dey (1993) and Kyngäs and Vanhanen (1999). Phrases and sentences were thematic units of analysis. First, 17 verbatim transcripts and the notes of two interviews, in all 234 single-spaced pages, were organized by research questions by writing the original expressions in two tables. Each original expression was coded for easy identification. Then the original expressions were compressed into briefer statements. Next, these statements were compared with each other and categorized so that expressions with similar content were classified into the same subcategory and named according to its content. Next, the subcategories were abstracted into main categories, separately according to the research questions. Finally, the main categories of two subquestions were abstracted into the core categories concerning both peer relations and school attendance.

Findings

Adolescent experiences of familial involvement

Eight main categories of quality of familial involvement in adolescent peer relations and

school attendance emerged from the interview data. The first four categories were named positive and the last four negative involvement. However, adolescents did not perceive positive or negative involvement in terms of good or bad, but found negative aspects useful or even necessary for them. Additionally, the families in this study could not be classified solely as negative or positive (types); rather, each family displayed both negative and positive aspects of familial involvement. Figure 1 provides a summary of key findings.

Positive familial involvement

Enablement

Adolescents felt that family enabled their peer relations and school attendance by providing optimal circumstances and by trusting the teenager. In terms of peer relations, the family provided a place (home) to meet friends and trusted the adolescent's choice of friends. The teenage interviewees identified home as a natural place for meeting friends. Most of the adolescents felt that their parents allowed them to choose their friends on their own.

Yeah, ever since my childhood we've always had lots of kids over visiting.

(Girl, 15 years)

In terms of school, family provided safety and a home learning environment and trusted the adolescent to handle school independently. Adolescents also mentioned that the close proximity of the school or familial assistance in school transport in critical situations facilitated their school attendance. They were gratified by the family's effort to provide optimal circumstances for doing homework, for instance by designating a space where they could complete study tasks. Most adolescents also reported that their parents trusted how they handled their schoolwork.

I receive support for my school attendance from my family when I'm studying for a test, they try not to make too much noise. They do have it in them to be quiet.

(Boy, 16 years)

Continual conversations about adolescent activities

Peers and school were common topics of familial everyday communication. Adolescents reported having frequent discussions about peers and school with family members. Teenagers reported the family's interest in their peer relations: family members asked about the peers and their families. Some parents did not conceal their positive or negative attitudes towards the adolescent's peers.

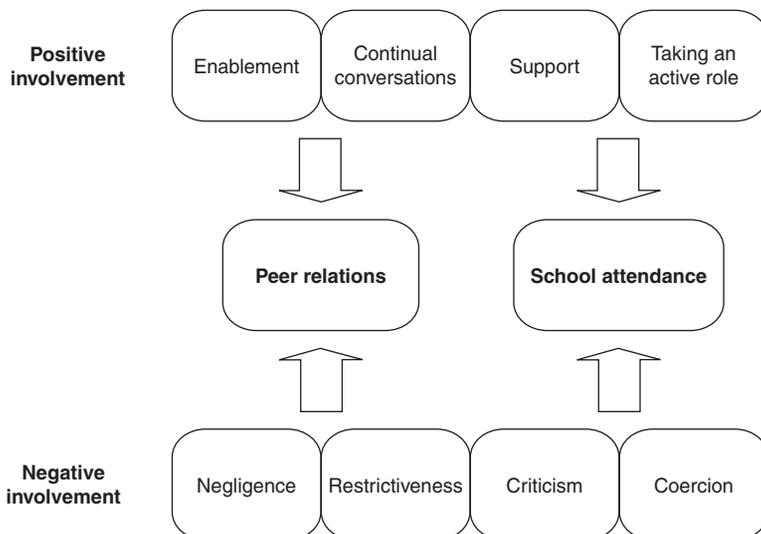


Figure 1 Adolescent experiences of familial involvement in peer relations and school attendance ($n = 19$)

Same aged siblings especially were constantly asking about the news after the school day.

Well my mother is very plain spoken if she doesn't like my friends ... she would say 'I'm really not that thrilled with him/her as it seems to me that he/she is not honest, and is holding something back ...'

(Girl, 14 years)

My older little sister is always asking me, 'How was school today?'

(Girl, 15 years)

Actual support

The family's role in supporting adolescent peer relations and school attendance was discussed in most detail. Support in peer relations included knowing the adolescent's peers, interest in them, trust in them and attachment to them. Adolescents reported that family members knew most of their friends and peers and some of their friends' parents, which was perceived as supportive. Furthermore, familial support was characterized as familial trust in peers and as attachment to them.

Take my little brother, he likes my boyfriend a lot. He's terribly fond of him and is always saying to him, 'You are part of our family.'

(Girl, 16 years)

Support in school attendance was identified by adolescents as encouragement, help and reward. Teenagers perceived the family as encouraging if it urged them to concentrate on school and better achievement. Encouragement also meant that adolescents had a family comforting them if they did poorly in school. The concrete help of family members, such as helping to study for a test by asking questions about the test material or packing the schoolbag, were perceived as positive. Some teenagers mentioned that parents rewarded them for good school achievement with providing something pleasurable, such as more leisure time.

They [family members] help if I have a test coming by asking questions. And as my big sister is in a higher grade she can also help me ...

(Boy, 13 years)

Taking an active role in adolescent activities

Family also had an active role in adolescent peer relations and school attendance. Family was

identified as taking an active role in peer relations by making an effort to please friends and by interacting with friends. On the one hand, interviewees characterized the active role by their parents' effort to 'be nice' when they met adolescent peers. On the other hand, family members spent time with peers chatting with them. It was also not unusual for parents to invite a friend to travel with the family.

When my friends come over my dad always comes to my room to have a chat.

(Boy, 13 years)

If I have had a boyfriend my mother has always wanted to meet them and tried to behave. She would ask if she had 'behaved properly' ...

(Girl, 16 years)

Taking an active role in school-related matters meant, e.g., negotiations with teachers. Some teenagers mentioned that parents kept in touch with teachers, especially when there were problems at school.

Sometimes I have been unjustly accused by a teacher and she has contacted my parents. Then my mother has requested a meeting with her.

(Girl, 15 years)

Negative familial involvement

Negligence

Familial negligence was characterized as lack of discussion about, or interest in, adolescent peer relationships. Some adolescents reported that not all family members knew their peers or showed any interest in them. Lack of discussions about the peers within the family was also interpreted as a sign of negligence.

My sister is not at all interested in my friends ...

(Girl, 16 years)

Families of all the adolescents interviewed considered school to be important. However, if the parents perceived that the adolescent's school achievement good enough they did not interfere.

If I get bad grades they [parents] would make me study, but my school achievement is good and that's why they don't take an interest in it.

(Girl, 15 years)

I'm criticized if I'm caught playing truant ... or if I ask my mother to sign an excuse note. She would then rage about that ...

(Girl, 16 years)

Restrictiveness

Family controlled the social life of adolescents by restricting their autonomy. Interviewees experienced restrictiveness as restrictions on peer visits to the house or as restrictions on seeing a peer disliked by parents. Adolescents reported that parents did not give permission to invite too many peers in the house at the same time. Additionally, many parents of the interviewees did not allow their adolescent to organize a party at home. Parents might also restrict the adolescent's activities with a certain disliked peer by making outspoken remarks on the peer's undesirable characteristics or habits, such as smoking or yelling.

I'm not allowed to have too many friends in the house and I am forbidden to play football in the living room.

(Boy, 13 years)

In terms of school attendance, restrictions referred to leisure time. If school achievement did not meet the parents' wishes, they might restrict the adolescent's free time after school.

My mother takes an interest [in my school attendance] only if I go out too often and the school receives less attention.

(Girl, 15 years)

Criticism

Family involvement was critical if adolescent school attendance was unsatisfactory. Some adolescents reported that their parents or siblings did not approve of the peers and therefore criticized them.

My parents don't like my friends, saying they are 'sleazy'.

(Girl, 16 years)

Adolescents reported that parents could criticize low school achievement by telling the adolescent to 'follow' the example of a more successful sibling. Some parents did not tolerate truancy and found fault with it.

Coercion

The most extreme style of parental control of adolescent peer relations and school attendance was coercion. A number of adolescents reported that parents forbade them to meet the 'wrong friends', i.e., someone with undesirable health behaviour.

Well of course my mother had something against one of my mates because he smoked, and she did not want me to spend time with him.

(Boy, 13 years)

Some adolescents reported that their parents had made future decisions against the adolescent's wishes concerning elective subjects or applying for high school. Parents might also make the adolescent study and forbid him/her to go out. The difference between restrictiveness and coercion was that coercion did not involve a choice, whereas the use of restrictions left room for options. Some teenagers reported needing 'coercive measures' in order to cope with school performance, and did not perceive parental restrictions or coercion as too unpleasant.

They [parents] do sometimes make me study for a test and won't allow me to go out.

(Boy, 13 years)

When it was time to choose the elective subjects my father decided that apart from arts subjects I must also pick theoretical subjects. And there was never a doubt in his mind that I'm to continue to high school.

(Girl, 15 years)

Discussion

In the present study we devised a classification for familial involvement in adolescent school attendance and peer relations. Eight qualitative types of familial involvement were identified: enablement, continual conversations about adolescent activities, actual support, taking an active role in adolescent activities, negligence, restrictiveness, criticism and

coercion. The economy of the classification system helps identify the diverse roles of family in adolescent contexts outside the family. In addition, it indicates that the styles of familial involvement do not differ greatly whether in relation to peer relations or school attendance of adolescents. The findings accord well with a recent finding suggesting that parents tend to behave consistently across different situations with adolescents (Metsäpelto *et al.*, 2001). The only gender difference was found in the extent of the utterances in the interviews: male interviewees used shorter sentences and fewer words for describing the interview themes.

The present findings partly support the fourfold classification of parenting styles described by Baumrind (1978) and Maccoby and Martin (1983). The classification of the present study includes characteristics of all these styles. First, familial involvement as enablement, continual conversations about adolescent activities, support, taking an active role in adolescent activities, and restrictiveness refer to an authoritative parenting style. Secondly, restrictiveness, criticism and coercion refer to authoritarian parenting. Thirdly, familial involvement as enablement, continual conversations about adolescent activities, support and taking an active role in adolescent activities is included in a permissive parenting style. Finally, negligence refers to an uninvolved parenting style. In addition, in this study the siblings were also included in familial involvement.

The present classification of familial involvement also shows that families are complex and diverse rather than simple in terms of parenting and 'sibling' styles in adolescent multiple environments. The classification thus exposes some of the weaknesses and inaccuracies of family typologies in the sense that in many families classified as, e.g., permissive (see e.g., Baumrind, 1978; 1991), parents may still control or even coerce adolescents in certain circumstances.

On the basis of this study we conclude that adolescents perceived both positive and negative familial involvement as a natural part of their daily lives. Although the aspects of control were expressed in a rather sketchy manner, they were nevertheless perceived as necessary and as a sign of interest and attachment. An interesting finding is the fact that none of the adolescents interviewed mentioned punitive means of familial involvement. A possible explanation is that the Finnish legal system has penalized corporal punishment for 20 years.

The findings of the present study indicate three conclusions: 1) preventive health promotion and intervention at school should pay more attention to the multiple relationships of the adolescent's social context; 2) both quality and quantity of familial behaviour need to be observed and recognized in family health care and family nursing; 3) adolescents' perception of family impact on their social life and well-being should be explored more frequently in school health care and other adolescent services instead of only collecting facts about family structure and relationships (see e.g., Wright *et al.*, 1996).

Validity of the interviews and limitations of the study

The interviews were conducted either in a 'neutral' restaurant setting or in the adolescents' homes, which no doubt contributed to the interviewees' sense of security, and made it easier for them to discuss freely. Because the interviews were conducted only once and the analysis was performed by a single researcher two interviewees (one female, one male) reviewed the preliminary research findings (Burns and Grove, 1997). On the basis of these evaluations of face validity, the description of the category 'negligence' was expanded.

Other research methods, such as family interview (see Åstedt-Kurki and Hopia, 1996), and longitudinal studies could be used to more comprehensively determine and understand the nature of familial involvement in the adolescent social context outside the family. Because Finnish society is quite homogenous, the findings may therefore be transferable only to other societies with white middle class families.

Acknowledgements

The study was financially supported by the Juho Vainio Foundation and the University of Tampere to which we are most grateful. We moreover express our appreciation to all the adolescents who shared their experiences with us.

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