

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Disclosure and Secrecy in Adolescent-Parent Relationships

Smetana, J. G., Metzger, A., Gettman, D. C., & Campione-Barr, N. (2006). Disclosure and secrecy in adolescent-parent relationships. *Child Development*, 77(1), 201-217. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00865.x

SUMMARY: Adolescents and one of their parents were surveyed regarding adolescent secrecy and disclosure to parents. The findings suggest that beliefs about obligations to disclose issues to parents were associated with actual disclosure. In addition expectations about disclosure and actual disclosure vary across domains and with age. Healthy parent-child relationships engender more disclosure.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Adolescents' and parents' beliefs pertaining to obligations to disclose to parents were related to beliefs about parents' authority to regulate certain domains as well as with actual disclosure. Parents believed that adolescents were more obligated to disclose to parents than adolescents did.
- Both parents and adolescents reported that adolescents were more obligated to report on some domains (e.g., health, safety) than others (e.g., how adolescents spend money or free time); however, those expectations changed with age.
- Adolescents disclosed more to mothers than to fathers, but less than mothers perceived.
- Greater trust, beliefs about obligations to disclose, and parental acceptance were the most robust predictors of disclosure across domains.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Participate in trainings to learn how to help military parents improve their parent-child relationships, especially during adolescence
- Create programs and activities that focus on strengthening parent-child relationships during post-deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide classes about healthy parent-child communication, including opportunities to learn new skills and role play effective communication
- Educate parents about normative disclosure in order to balance adolescent autonomy with expectations about disclosure

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support the development of family programs aimed at enhancing parent-child relationships
- Recommend that military families are offered training in positive parenting strategies

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Adolescents from a suburban school district and one of their parents completed surveys that were sent home with students.
- Participants rated beliefs about parental authority and obligations to disclose to parents as well as actual disclosure and secrecy regarding personal, peer, and schoolwork issues. Parenting behavior, adolescent-parent conflict, trust, and self-esteem were also evaluated.
- Statistical analyses were used to evaluate differences in beliefs and actual disclosure across various topics, ages, and gender as well as which factors contribute to disclosure.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 275 adolescents, which included 154 9th graders (53 males) and 122 12th graders (42 males) and their parents (n = 249; 210 mothers).
- Most adolescents were White (70%), living in two-parent households with biological parents (72%).
- The average age for mothers and fathers was 44 years and 46 years, respectively. Most parents had completed some college, and they were primarily lower middle-class.

LIMITATIONS

- Generalizability of the results is limited by several factors including the relatively small number of adolescent boys and fathers who participated, reliance on a single suburban school district, limited racial/ethnic diversity, and evaluation of disclosure of a narrow list of activities.
- The one-third of invited 9th graders and one-quarter of invited 12th graders who participated may have differed from those who did not participate in ways that could have influenced findings.
- Additional unexamined variables likely contributed to adolescent disclosure and secrecy as evidenced by the relatively small amount of influence the main study variables had on the outcomes.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct studies with more male participants to enhance generalizability and to evaluate interactions between parents' and adolescents' gender in disclosure
- Explore beliefs about disclosure and actual disclosure of a broader range of issues, parent-child relationships, and developmental trajectories in a more varied age range of adolescents
- Design longitudinal studies that follow the development of disclosure within parent-child relationships from middle childhood to early adulthood

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