Adolescent Peer Culture: Parents' Role

The pivotal role that parents play in a child's development is undisputed. Researchers have shown that differences in parenting practices can have profound and lasting effects on all aspects of development - cognitive, social, physical, and emotional. Differences in parenting styles translate to differences in a myriad of outcomes, such as academic achievement, self-esteem, deviant behavior, autonomy, emotional maturity, and leadership ability, to name just a few. It would be safe to say that while poor parenting practices can lead to adolescents who are experiencing multiple problems, good parenting practices can lead to well-adjusted and successful adolescents. But what are the mechanisms through which parents can positively impact adolescent development? And what is the degree to which parents can remain influential in the face of the increasing influence of peers in adolescence?

Different Types of Parenting Styles

Due to the well-documented importance of parenting practices on children's development, much research has been conducted in the area. In 1978 Diana Baumrind introduced one of the most influential theories of parenting styles. Baumrind suggested that parenting styles can be classified under four general patterns that differ along two dimensions: parental responsiveness and parental demandingness. Parental responsiveness entails the ability to respond to a child's evolving needs in a warm and flexible manner. Parental demandingness entails the ability to set rules and standards that a child has to respect and follow. Parents who are both demanding and responsive are characterized as authoritative. Parents who are demanding and directive but not responsive are characterized as authoritarian. Parents who are responsive but not demanding are characterized as permissive. Finally, parents who are neither responsive nor demanding are characterized as rejecting/neglecting.

The relationship between parenting styles and developmental outcomes has been well documented by Baumrind and many other researchers. Overall, adolescents whose parents are authoritative have the most positive outcomes - namely, higher levels of autonomy, confidence, maturity, social skills, and academic achievement. They are also more
able to successfully adapt to life’s challenges. Children of authoritarian parents tend to become more timid, less socially competent, and more dependent as they grow up. However, under certain circumstances, such as those of African-American families living in poor, high-crime areas, the authoritarian parenting style seems to be most beneficial. Children of permissive parents tend to become adolescents that are lacking in maturity, self-discipline, leadership skills, and in the ability to stand up to bad peer influences. Finally, children of rejecting-neglecting parents seem to suffer the most serious problems - namely, poor academic skills, more deviant behavior (including drug and alcohol abuse), and an inability to control impulsive behavior.

Differences in parenting styles translate to different family environments with different family dynamics. Families in which there is an ongoing dialogue, good conflict-resolution practices, mutual respect, and flexibility are families in which adolescents seem to have more positive outcomes. Beyond parenting styles, the modeling of parental behavior inside and outside the family and the type of relationship between the parents is another factor that can influence adolescent development.

Peer Influence and Parents

During adolescence, peers become increasingly important - adolescents spend more time with their peers then with any other group. Given the important role that peer culture plays in adolescents’ lives (primarily in the form of groups and cliques), the degree to which parents can remain influential during this period is, and has been, an issue of scientific inquiry and debate.

Patricia Noller suggests that adolescents who are able to talk to their parents about issues that are important to them and who get emotional support from their parents are less likely to rely on peers for advice on important issues. They are less likely to succumb to peer pressure as it relates to using alcohol and drugs as means of coping with the pressure of adolescence. This leads to the conclusion that adolescents who already have, and can maintain, an open, positive, honest, flexible, and emotionally supportive relationship with their parents are more likely to take their parents’ advice under serious consideration, and to better withstand pressure to participate in undesirable behaviors. On the other hand, adolescents that already have problematic relationships with their parents - characterized by lack of communication - are likely to become more dependent on their peers for advice and for emotional support.
Bradford Brown and colleagues suggest that rather than assuming that parental influence will be reduced during adolescence due to the increasing influence of peer groups and cliques, the specific environmental conditions that might facilitate and/or hamper parental influence should be examined. They report that specific parenting practices are significantly related to specific adolescent behaviors, and that they are also associated with specific patterns of group or clique membership. However, this relationship is mediated (in most cases) by adolescent behavior. Brown and colleagues suggest that it is unlikely that peer groups and cliques are going to counteract parental norms. Adolescents tend to select peer groups that have goals, behavioral patterns, and value norms that are similar to their own (and which parental behavior has helped shape). Parents directly influence adolescents' behaviors and value systems, and thus are able to exercise a significant but indirect effect on peer group and clique influence and membership.

The selection of an appropriate environment (schools and neighborhood) is another way that parents can exert an indirect influence on adolescents' peer affiliations. The composition of cliques and groups, as well as their relative influence, can vary greatly from school to school and from neighborhood to neighborhood. In some high schools, students who aspire academic excellence are ridiculed and isolated from the predominant peer culture in the school, which may value truancy, alcohol and drug use, early sexual activity, and a lack of academic engagement. Conversely, there are schools in which academic excellence is valued by the peer culture.

Parents should try to place their children in schools in which positive peer groups and cliques are influential in the community culture of the school, while avoiding schools in which negative peer groups that advocate deviant behaviors are predominant. The degree to which an adolescent will continue to be influenced by parents is directly related to the type of group or clique he or she belongs to. If the adolescent is a member of groups in which parents and their advice are considered valuable resources, then a parent will continue to be very influential during adolescence. If, however, the adolescent becomes a member of a group that promotes deviant behavior, then the ability of the parents to exert influence on the adolescent's behavior is greatly diminished.

This information was compiled by: