



Building Strong Families

Insights from Research

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The Influence of Parents on Children's Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors

Highlights:

Parents play a central, but not exclusive, role in shaping the lives of their children and teenagers. Extensive research shows that parents are more influential in their children's lives than anyone else, shaping their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Yet parents are neither the only influences nor the only ones with responsibility. Peers, other adults, genetics, the media, and various other sources also play important roles. Ideally, all these influences can work together with parents to promote young people's healthy development.

Parents, Peers, and Other Role Models

A recent poll showed that about 85% of adults think that a major cause for rude behavior in our society is that parents are not teaching respect to their children.¹ People seem to intuitively "know" that parents have an impact on children. For the most part, research supports what people already know: parents are, indeed, the largest influence on how children think, feel, and act.

But people also seem to "know" that peers, the media, and other role models affect children. In that same poll, about 60% of people say that, even when parents try to raise their children right, negative role models in society teach children to be disrespectful. Parents also acknowledge that peers have an influence on their kids, as many try to guide their children to avoid associating with the "wrong crowd." Again, studies mirror public belief, showing that peers and other role models also affect children's behavior, particularly during adolescence.^{2,3}

While all of these "socializing forces" (parents, friends, peers, teachers, religious leaders, the media, etc.) affect the development of children and youth, parents remain the single most important factor in helping children and adolescents grow up healthy.

Parents Affect Children's Thoughts and Feelings

Research and common sense tell us that emotional and cognitive development are fostered through relationships with parents.⁸ The effects of parents on children begin at (or before) birth and last a lifetime. For example, parents' responsiveness to their infant children has long-lasting effects on emotional adjustment and cognitive development. While it used to be a commonly held belief that responding to an infant's cries would "spoil" her or him, research now shows us the importance of creating a sense of security through comforting the baby on later emotional and cognitive development.⁹

Some Ways Parents Affect Children and Adolescents:

- Parental relationships and monitoring demonstrate to young people that parents are sources of support and security, which help adolescents as they form their individual identities.⁴
- Supportive, yet challenging, parental relationships are important for adolescents to find school more interesting.⁵
- High-quality family interactions have an effect on the quality of adolescent friendships. Parental warmth toward children helps children develop socially, and it helps kids be more well-liked by their peers.^{6,7}

As infants turn into children and children become adolescents, they begin to spend more unsupervised time with their friends and have increased exposure to sources of influence and information outside of their family, such as media and school—influences that parents often view as harmful to their children.¹⁰ However, the importance of parents does not diminish as children age. While adolescents may go to their peers more often than their parents for advice, for example, they still choose to go to their parents in time of real need or while making serious decisions.¹¹ *The Handbook of Child Psychology*¹² concludes, “Despite all of the above influences [peers, media, school], however, a great deal of research suggests that parental qualities like love and discipline . . . are still important for adolescent development.”

Parents’ Influence During Adolescence

Discussions about adolescent behavior often focus on negative actions, such as delinquency or early sexual behavior. One researcher said that this focus “treats successful adolescents and young adults as escape artists who manage to dodge the hazards of growing up, rather than focusing on the ways that young people acquire and master skills, construct positive identities, and learn how to negotiate social roles simultaneously in the youth culture and adult world.”¹³

There are several ways that parents and parenting affect adolescents’ positive *and* negative behaviors.¹⁴ For example, family cohesion and having strong attachments to parents helps kids make better decisions about which friends they choose.^{15,16} On the flip side, higher levels of supervision are associated with less delinquency,^{17,18,19} and adolescents who feel close to their parents are more likely to delay having sex.^{20,21} Even among kids with deviant peers, those with closer relationships to parents tended to get in less trouble than those with less close relationships.²²

Ways Parents Can Help Encourage Good Decision-Making:

- Monitor their behavior—It helps children and youth make appropriate decisions.
- Spend time together—When kids are with parents, they are likely to be participating in positive behaviors.
- Pay attention to their friends—It helps children make good choices about with whom to spend time.
- Communicate and be involved—It helps foster closer relationships with children and youth, which help them make good decisions.

What Do You Think?

- What kind of support do parents need to help them with their important role? How much support do they actually get?
- What kind of actions can parents do to promote positive behaviors?

*The YMCA of the USA and Search Institute are exploring these kinds of questions in their Building Strong Families initiative, which is made possible by a generous grant from the Kimberly-Clark Corporation. For more information, watch for future **Building Strong Families: Insights from Research** newsletters and, on November 20, 2002, the results of **Building Strong Families: A Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed**. This newsletter is available at www.search-institute.org/families.*

This electronic newsletter, *Building Strong Families: Insights from Research*, is prepared by Stacey P. Rude, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota for the Abundant Assets Alliance. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults.

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