

**Attachment to Parents and Adjustment in Adolescence:
Literature Review and Policy Implications**

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Executive Summary

This paper presents a critical review of the research literature on the relation between attachment to parents during adolescence and psychological and social adjustment. Recommendations for healthy parenting practices, government programming and research are summarised.

Findings

- **Research Question 1:** Does attachment to parents during adolescence impact psychological and social adjustment?

Secure attachment during adolescence is related to fewer mental health problems, including lower levels of depression, anxiety and feelings of personal inadequacy¹⁻⁵. Securely attached adolescents are less likely to engage in substance abuse, antisocial and aggressive behaviour, and risky sexual activity^{2,6-9}. Securely attached adolescents also manage the transition to high school more successfully, and enjoy more positive relationships with family and peers^{10,11}. They demonstrate less concern about loneliness and social rejection than do insecurely attached adolescents and they display more adaptive coping strategies^{1,12}.

- **Research Question 2:** What role, if any, do parents play in ensuring secure attachment during adolescence?

Parent-child relationships undergo important transitions during adolescence, including a decrease in time spent with parents and a shift from dependency to mutual reciprocity^{13,14}. Parents play a significant role in supporting secure attachment during these transitions¹⁵. Adolescents benefit from parental support that encourages autonomy development yet ensures continued monitoring and emotional connectedness. Specific parenting skills that promote attachment security and autonomy development include psychological availability, warmth, active listening, behaviour monitoring, limit setting, acceptance of individuality, and negotiation of rules and responsibilities¹⁶⁻¹⁸. Parental support during stressful periods of transition (e.g., entry to high school) predicts positive adolescent adjustment¹¹.

RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ **Implications for Effective Parenting**

- Parents need to recognize the continued importance of their relationship with their adolescence. They should be careful not to confuse adolescents' development of autonomy with rejection of the parental relationship.
- Parents need to be available to their adolescents, supportive and actively engaged in negotiation of increased autonomy and self-reliance.
- Parents need to anticipate that their adolescent will require increased availability and support during periods of transition, such as entry into high school. Parents should support their adolescent in effective planning and management of this transition.

- Parents need to support adolescents in their exploration of social norms by listening to concerns about social approval and peer pressure, discussing values and reasons for limit setting, and negotiating rules when appropriate. Parents need to monitor involvement in potentially dangerous situations and work with their adolescent to ensure safety.
- Parents must be careful not to disregard adolescents' real emotional difficulties by assuming that these are due to physical or hormonal changes associated with this period.
- Parents need to be careful not to dismiss problems in the adolescent-parent relationship as simply due to age, temperament or other child characteristics. Both they and their adolescent contribute to the quality of the relationship.
- Parents need to recognize the continued importance of their relationship with their adolescent for adjustment, despite their child's increased interest in and time spent with peers. Parents need to be aware of and monitor their adolescent's involvement with various peer groups and their activities at school.
- Parents need to understand that as adolescents move into romantic relationships they can benefit from parents' emotional support and guidance. Parents need to be available to adolescents to discuss their feelings, values and decision making regarding issues of intimacy and sexual involvement in romantic relationships.
- It is advisable that parents of children who have experienced extreme difficulty in early child-parent relationships anticipate the challenges of adolescence and assess the need for mental health support.
- Parents who recognize risk factors in themselves that may place their adolescent at risk for insecure attachment may benefit from counseling or therapy for their own difficulties, and/or to reduce the transmission of risk within the family.

➤ **Implications for Government Programming**

Government should support the following initiatives in mental health programming:

- Public education initiatives that debunk the myth of adolescent detachment from parents and enhance recognition and understanding of the importance of the parent-child relationship. Strategies to achieve this goal include media advertising campaigns and provision of information brochures through government agencies, public health offices and schools. Provision of funds for appropriate speakers, written and video materials, for junior high and high school parent groups, community centres, libraries, etc. would also be effective.
- Development and evaluation of programs to assist parents in developing effective skills in parenting adolescent children, including skills in providing support and guidance during transition periods. This is most expediently achieved through the development of universal programs that target entry into high school and provide education and support regarding transitions in the parent-child relationships and effective parenting skills.
- Development and evaluation of targeted programs that focus on attachment issues and effective parenting strategies for high-risk adolescents and their families.
- Support of educational training to increase the understanding and awareness of adolescent attachment issues by mental health workers and other professionals involved in service delivery.

➤ **Recommendations for Research Initiatives**

- Development and validation of self-report, observational and/or interview based measures of attachment for adolescents.
- Research on the determinants of stability and change in attachment from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood.
 - Investigation of transitions in attachment functions of parents, peers and romantic partners from early adolescence to early adulthood.
 - Documentation of the emergence of generalised versus differentiated attachment representations from early adolescence to early adulthood.
- Investigation of parenting factors related to shifts from secure to insecure attachment versus from insecure to secure attachment during adolescence.
- Identification of mediators and moderators of the relationship between adolescent attachment and functioning in young adulthood (i.e., poverty, parental psychopathology, peer relationships, school success).
- Development and evaluation of both universal and targeted programs that focus on attachment, family relations and adjustment in adolescence.

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