



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

www.techniumscience.com



Vol. 69/2025
A New Decade for Social Changes

PLUS
COMMUNICATION P



International
Communication & PR

Concerns and strategies of parents in relations with teenagers

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Abstract. There is a lack of systematic knowledge regarding parents' concerns and worries about adolescents' experiences. In recent years, cracks have been reported in the construction of the parent-adolescent dialogue (Montemayor, 1983; Runcan, 2020;. Huver et al., 2010; Patterson, Forgatch, 1987), in the sense that parents consistently report facing difficulties in managing their relationship with their adolescent children. Beyond generational differences, parent-adolescent relationships today seem to be more dynamic and complex than ever before (Chalasan, 2007; Iosim et al., 2022). Therefore, in this preliminary study, we aim to explore this topic by examining the opinions of parents of adolescents regarding the areas in which they face difficulties, their concerns about their relationship with their child or adolescent, and the principles they implement in parenting. A total of 80 participants in a qualitative study were grouped into 8 focus groups based on: a) belonging to a two-parent or single-parent family, and b) level of education. Thematic analysis allowed the identification of several recurring themes and particularities in the case of single parents regarding the challenges in their relationship with their adolescent child. Significant differences were observed in the approach to parent-adolescent relationships between single parents and those from two-parent families. The implications of these differences were discussed in shaping parental education programs.

Keywords. parents, single-parent family, two-parent family, adolescents, concerns, difficulties in the parent-child relationship

Introduction

Parents have always been concerned about their children, analyzing their problems and trying to help them. This is natural, given their role as parents. From one historical era to another, parents' concerns have changed. There is no systematic literature on what exactly worries parents regarding their adolescent children; however, the identified studies mainly explore the situation of children with disabilities (Garbutt et al., 2012; Runcan, Nadolu, David, 2023). Currently, the adolescent's relationship with the mobile phone seems to be the greatest concern of adults (Sobring, 2014). The adolescent, completely absorbed by the screen, becomes inaccessible, isolated, and alone, yet content in the virtual space. Whether or not they access pornographic content, the excessive time spent on media distracts them from their obligations, which is a major concern for parents. Phone addiction is associated with a lack of interest in studying, and parents perceive a causal relationship between these two aspects. Adolescents' declining interest in reading and studying (Kasáčová, Babiaková, 2019) is another parental concern for which they have neither explanations nor solutions.

According to Riesch et al. (2000), mothers have reported the highest number of concerns related to substance use, dating, and sex. However, regardless of the subject that generates conflict, it seems that both parents and adolescents struggle with addressing and resolving sensitive conflicts (Riesch, 2003). Regarding the strategies used in relationships with adolescents, Shin & Kang (2016) associate parental effectiveness with an instructive rather than restrictive attitude and emphasize the importance of parental self-disclosure in fostering adolescent responsibility. Most studies that include parents' concerns regarding their children focus on medical aspects, such as the lack of medical services for children with autism (Lee, 2008), approaches to caring for children with genetic conditions (Gallo et al., 2008), or other health conditions (Day, Whitten, Bohane, 2005).

In the area of parent-adolescent relationships, the identified interests focus on examining parenting styles and parental education programs (Henricson, Roker, 2000), as well as transgenerational conflicts (Iurea, 2017; Duncan, 2005). As for parenting strategies, the literature is extensive and covers various specific contexts, such as parenting in divorce situations (Macie, Stolberg, 2003), substance use prevention (Robertson et al., 2003), and chronic illnesses in children (Pop-Jordanova, 2023), among others

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to explore the concerns and difficulties of parents of adolescents in raising them and building a relationship with them, as well as the principles and strategies they apply in parenting.

Hypothesis

There are differences in the concerns and difficulties faced by parents in raising their adolescent children, depending on whether they are single parents or part of a two-parent family.

Single parents perceive the challenges of raising teenagers as more intense and difficult to manage than parents in two-parent families.

Method

The focus group method allows for the scientific exploration of a group's opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Therefore, eight focus groups were conducted between October 2024 and January 2025 with parents of adolescents.

Three focus groups (FGs) included parents with higher education levels (mostly mothers, but from two-parent families). Two focus groups consisted of parents of adolescents with a medium level of education (high school or vocational school graduates) from single-parent families, with a balanced number of fathers and mothers (18 mothers and 12 fathers). Two focus groups included parents from two-parent families with a medium level of education.

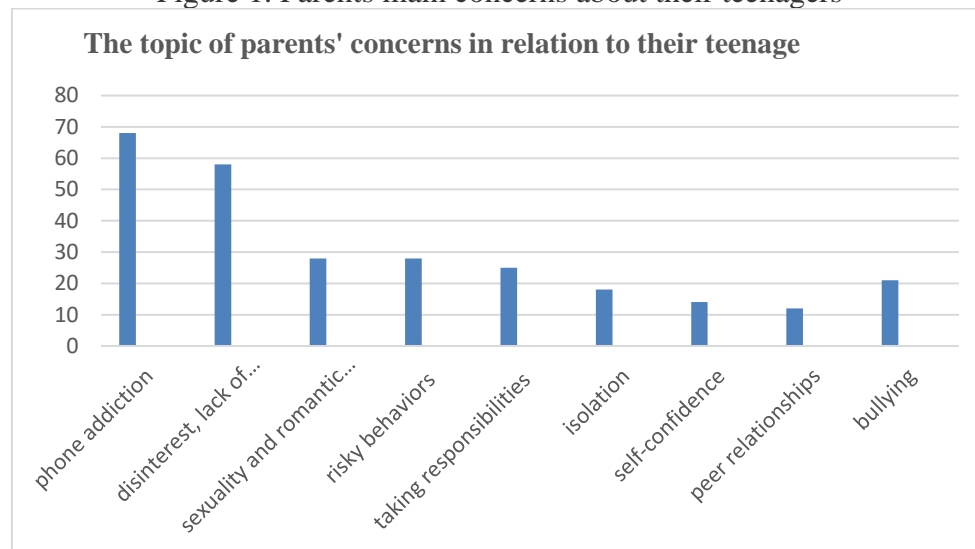
Results

As expected, parents highlighted the following concerns as the most significant. A high incidence was observed for topics such as phone addiction (over 60%), lack of interest in studying and school in general (almost 50%), and risk behaviors or managing adolescents' romantic relationships (20-27%).

Single parents expressed greater strictness regarding phone use compared to other parents. Due to the additional responsibilities they have assigned to their adolescents, single parents perceive time spent on the phone not only as a waste of time but also as a lack of focus

on other tasks. The approach to these issues is more radical in single-parent families, given the increased pressure on the single parent to manage these situations.

Figure 1. Parents main concerns about their teenagers



Participants described the adolescent who spends a lot of time online in the following ways: lost in the online world, totally absent, in another world, distracted, frozen, inaccessible. Time wasted online is associated with boredom, laziness, loss of interest in school or any other activity, social comparison, and lack of motivation. The real issue raised by parents is the helplessness they feel due to their inability to connect with or influence their child.

The strategies they apply include taking away the phone, imposing various restrictions, and limiting the weekly budget. They emphasize that before resorting to these punishments, they ensured that their adolescent was aware of the impact of media consumption on mental health.

Almost unanimously, parents express more concern about the long time spent in front of screens rather than the content itself, whether degrading or disturbing (Swedish Media Council, 2005).

On the list of parents' serious concerns—issues raised in all organized meetings—are the adolescent's isolation, failure to take on responsibilities (household chores, caring for younger siblings, etc.), a state of indolence, apathy, and lack of purpose. Other concerns include self-esteem issues, conflicts with friends, and bullying. Both categories of parents show real worry and concern regarding these issues.

An interesting attitude observed among some single parents is their acknowledgment that they do not have the time to discuss these difficulties with their children (such as problems with friends, tendencies toward isolation, shyness, sarcasm, or hostile attitudes from peers). They categorize these challenges as adversities that must be endured and overcome. Thus, their strategy is minimization, fostering resilience in adolescents, and encouraging them to confront these issues bravely.

Unlike the sample of intact families, the single-parent group revealed the following recurring themes: a) Parental stress caused by managing daily responsibilities; b) Maintaining a high level of communication and emotional closeness

Single parents perceive the challenges of raising adolescents as more intense and difficult to manage compared to parents from two-parent families, due to limited resources and

the lack of direct support from a partner. Their perception of the difficulties in raising and educating adolescents is shaped by the specific structure of their family, namely raising a child alone. This aspect is linked to challenges regarding authority, discipline, balance, and the constant need for the child to mature quickly—being forced to understand complex aspects of life such as the absence of a parent, addictions, conflicts between parents, financial hardships, stigma, and shame.

The following specific difficulties in managing relationships with adolescents have been highlighted in single-parent families, due to their status as sole caregivers: a) Difficulties in asserting authority and implementing discipline, b) Challenges in monitoring and controlling the child’s activities, c) Struggles in creating an atmosphere of trust and open communication, d) These factors significantly influence how single parents approach their relationship with their child.

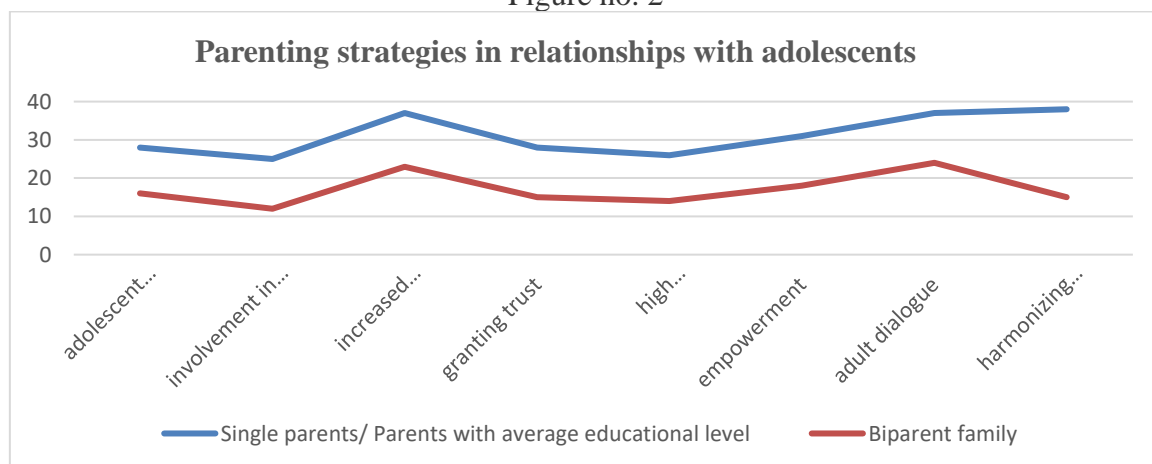
Discussion

In both single-parent families and two-parent families with a medium educational level, the following parenting principles were highlighted: adolescent responsibility, involvement in household activities, focus on developing practical skills, increased monitoring, interest in engaging in income-generating activities, a mature relationship with the child, empowerment, high expectations, and strictness.

Participants expressed firmness in their expectations of their children, adopting a more traditional approach to the parent-child relationship. On the one hand, they hold adolescents accountable for their future, and on the other hand, they involve them in household tasks. Adolescence, as a life stage, is perceived by parents as a period where trust must be balanced with responsibility.

Parents believe that adolescents have very high expectations from them, often demanding a great deal of freedom (such as large allowances or staying out at parties until morning). Given these demands, parents feel that their own expectations of adolescents must also be recalibrated.

Figure no. 2



The study participants largely discussed the same challenges in their relationships with adolescents, regardless of whether they belonged to a single-parent or two-parent family. Additionally, the concerns expressed by parents in our sample are not different from those

reported in the specialized literature (McLanahan & Sandefur, 2009; Robin & Foster, 2002; Noronha & Monteiro, 2016). However, the different family context, the presence or absence of a marital partner, and the parent's available resources influence a specific approach to the relationship with the adolescent. In the studied groups, single parenthood was associated with stricter control and monitoring and a different perspective on adolescence as a developmental stage.

Single parents emphasize the need to balance the freedoms granted to adolescents with their responsibilities, both of which should be legitimized by the adolescent's level of maturity. There are shared views and close perspectives between single parents and those with a medium educational level regarding how they approach their relationship with their children. When discussing their concerns, these parents also express confidence in their children's ability to responsibly handle alcohol consumption, intergroup conflicts, bullying, or issues related to sexuality.

Single fathers express their concern through stricter control and monitoring, while also showing greater confidence in their adolescent's ability to make the right decisions. Single mothers, on the other hand, tend to focus on strengthening the relationship through emotional connection and empowerment, with less emphasis on monitoring.

In two-parent families, somewhat unexpectedly, participating mothers reported engaging in more serious monitoring than fathers. Fathers expressed confidence that the joint efforts of the parental dyad were effective, ensuring that the adolescent would follow the right path. The more relaxed parenting style of the father is balanced by the mother's heightened concern, creating a dynamic where their combined efforts yield positive results.

Regarding empowerment, this strategy takes on different meanings: while the single parent empowers the adolescent in relation to their role in life, parents in two-parent families tend to overlook certain responsibilities of the adolescent, focusing instead on learning and academic performance. They believe that independent life skills exist and are important, but they are given secondary importance in favor of dedicating more time to studying.

Parents from intact families tend to engage more in discussions about their adolescent's problems, offering advice and debates on various topics. The family context also allows for an extension of childhood, as the adolescent's primary task is seen as preparing for their professional future and achieving high academic performance. These adolescents are less required to take on supportive roles within the family, a key difference from those in single-parent households.

Discussions also revealed differences in parental expectations regarding adolescents, the meaning of education and learning, commitment to personal development, and perspectives on life. These differences existed within two-parent families as well but took a different form. In these families, life is viewed through the lens of academic achievements, and responsibility is taught more through intellectualization, whereas in single-parent families, it is learned through action, engagement, and assuming responsibilities. However, there is no available data on how adolescents from the two types of families perceive and experience these parenting strategies, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness.

In conclusion, while single parents focus on ensuring that their adolescent faces adversities with courage, parents in intact families are more concerned with removing obstacles or guiding their child's approach to them. Single parents report a constant concern about the effectiveness of their parenting strategies, recognizing the limitations of their parental role. They also express worries about how to balance authority with emotional support and forgiveness.

Parents with higher education levels have refined their concerns regarding the risk of empowerment overlapping with parentification, especially in families with multiple children. Across the board, parents agree that maintaining a strong relationship with their child is the primary form of protection against risk behaviors.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study can provide the necessary data for new research directions or be expanded by applying questionnaires to a larger sample. Its value lies in the intention to establish a framework for future interventions. However, its results cannot be extrapolated to the broader population of parents of adolescents due to the complexity of the psychosocial factors involved in the parenting process.

Conclusions

As discovered by Glascoe et al. (1991, 1999), parents are capable of raising significant concerns about their children, regardless of differences in education and parenting experience. The hypotheses have been confirmed, and the results reflect the real and genuine concerns of parents of adolescents. For the development of intervention and psychoeducation plans, we suggest conducting mirror studies that assess adolescents' perceptions of the same topics and verify the hypothesis of result congruence.

A final conclusion regarding parental concerns ultimately comes down to finding ways to connect with their adolescent children so that they feel competent in addressing the challenges specific to their age.

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