Rearing Adolescents in Contemporary Society: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Responsibilities and Needs of Parents*

Stephen A. Small and Gay Eastman**

This article examines the parental responsibilities of rearing adolescent children as well as the factors that can support or undermine a parent's ability to perform them. Current research and theory on child rearing, adolescent and adult development, and parent-adolescent relations are integrated to present a conceptual framework for parenting adolescents. Implications for developing programs for families with adolescents are discussed.

Adolescence is a time of major developmental changes in children and parents and of significant transformations and realignment in family relations. Raising adolescents, especially early adolescents, can be stressful and difficult for parents. During this period parents are likely to feel less adequate and more anxious and stressed than when their children were younger (Ballenski & Cook, 1982; Hoffman & Manis, 1978; Montemayor, 1983; Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988; Veroff & Feld, 1970). Although this period may not be as antagonistic and tense as popular and clinical literature have suggested (Steinberg, 1990), adolescence can be a challenging time for families. Parents often struggle to adjust to their adolescent's development as well as to their own midlife developmental changes. These changes are affected by variations in intrafamilial and extrafamilial factors, such as the marital relationship, economic and social resources, and family structure.

Changes in American society and in the nature of adolescence have also contributed to the challenge of raising adolescents today. Extrapolating from the conditions identified by Hamburg and Takanishi (1989) as creating difficulties for adolescents in contemporary society, it is quite likely that the same conditions affect the parenting of teenagers:

- The lengthening of the period of adolescence has led to a protracted period of responsibility for parents and a greater uncertainty regarding how to raise adolescents.
- Parents have become confused about how best to prepare adolescents for future adult roles as a result of rapid sociocultural change and the multiple and often competing sources of information and values that our multicultural society presents.
- Parents may be more worried as a result of the greater number of potentially dangerous activities, substances, and influences to which contemporary adolescents are exposed.
- The erosion of family and social support networks has led to greater isolation of parents from one another and to fewer friends and relatives who can be sought as sources of support and information on parenting.

In addition, the proliferation of media reports on adolescent behavior and parenting and the emergence of parenting "experts" has led to confusion regarding what is normal or best for parenting children and what information and sources are valid and reliable (Hamner & Turner, 1985).

Clearly, raising adolescents in American society today is a unique and sometimes difficult task. This article examines the responsibilities associated with parenting adolescents as well as the factors that can support or undermine a parent's ability to perform them. More specifically, the following three questions are addressed: (a) What are the primary functions of parents in parenting adolescents? (b) What factors support and undermine these functions? (c) What types of supportive programs do families with adolescents need?

It should be noted that this article is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the literature related to parenting adolescents. Rather, it attempts to integrate current research and theory related to parenting and adolescent development and to present a conceptual scheme that can help guide those who develop or implement programs for families with adolescents.

Functions of Families With Adolescents

Alvy (1987a, 1987b, 1989) has proposed five interrelated functions and responsibilities of parenting: (a) providing basic resources, (b) caring for the home, (c) protecting children, (d) guiding and supporting children's physical and psychological development, and (e) advocating with the wider community on the behalf of children. Alvy's categories are used as a basis for the present discussion; however, two categories (providing basic resources and caring for the home) have been combined into one because they are viewed as essentially addressing slightly different aspects of the same parental function, that of meeting children's basic needs.

Because families are organized differently, the ways that these parenting functions are executed also differ. The functions may be shared equally by two parents or each parent may have primary responsibility for a particular set of functions. In some families (e.g., single-parent families), one parent may carry out all the functions; in others (e.g., stepfamilies), the functions may be shared by multiple sets of parents. Individuals other than parents (e.g., relatives such as grandparents or older children, friends, or people hired by parents) may fulfill some of these functions. However, whether or not parents or guardians actually perform these functions, in most cases it is still their responsibility to see that they are adequately provided for their children.

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Meeting Basic Needs

This parental function includes acquiring and caring for the array of resources that are necessary to meet the basic needs of survival such as a safe and secure place to live, adequate food and nutrition, clothing, and the ability to access medical, dental, and mental health services (Alvy, 1987a). A parent's ability to provide these resources is closely related to his/her education, occupation, and income. An important aspect of resource provision is the consumption priorities of parents; for example, whether parents choose to use available financial resources to purchase alcohol and cigarettes or to feed their family adequately.

The survival of most infants and young children depends on a parent's ability to provide basic resources. The greater physical maturity of adolescents and their growing ability to fend for themselves mean that the absence of these resources may not be life threatening to them. However, this function remains a crucial one for parents of adolescents. Parents who have fewer resources may be hindered in their ability to carry out their other parental functions.

Protecting Adolescents

Parents are usually responsible for protecting the physical, psychological, spiritual, ethnic, and cultural integrity of their children from threats from the natural environment and other persons, groups, and institutions (Alvy, 1987a). By adolescence, because of children's greater general capabilities and their acquisition of many of the skills necessary for survival and self-protection, a number of the basic protection functions once handled by parents are now assumed by the adolescent. For example, parents no longer have to supervise adolescents as they walk to school. However, parents may still need to oversee some basic areas of adolescent behavior such as nutrition and health care. In addition, parents endeavor to protect adolescents as they assume new responsibilities (e.g., driving, employment) and are exposed to an expanding range of influences and dangers (e.g., drinking, drugs, peer pressure, sexual activity). The protective function of parents in adolescence is generally met through monitoring by parents and by the teaching of self-protection skills.

Parental monitoring. Parental monitoring involves a parent's supervision and awareness of a child's behavior and whereabouts. Although not as well documented in the research literature as other parental responsibilities, parental monitoring has recently been found to be an important factor in preventing adolescent problem behavior (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Steinberg, 1986). Higher levels of parental monitoring have been found to be related to lower rates of sexual activity, drug and alcohol use (Small & Silverberg, 1991), truancy, running away, and delinquency (Dornbusch et al., 1985).

Effective parental monitoring of adolescents does not mean that parents must always be present or that parents should be overly intrusive in their children's lives. Rather, it implies that parents show an active interest in the lives of their children and a willingness to enforce family rules and raise issues that concern them.

Parental monitoring has become a more difficult task in contemporary society. The increased number of mothers in the work force and the large number of single parents mean there are fewer parents at home before and after school leading to a greater number of unsupervised children (Lipsitz, 1983). It also means that there may be fewer adult neighbors at home to supervise children in general, as well as less time for parents to establish and maintain networks with other parents. Coupled with the fact that 20% of the American population moves every year (Pooley & Littell, 1986), there is a greater likelihood that parental networks in the neighborhood or community will be less cohesive, leading to a lower rate of monitoring by other parents and adults in the community. Finally, because adults and adolescents are more segregated from one another than they were in the past, there are fewer situations where adolescents and adults interact (Coleman, 1961; Garbarino, Burston, Raber, Russel, & Crouter, 1978).

Teaching self-protection skills. A second way that parents of adolescents attempt to protect their children is by teaching them skills that will increase their physical safety and psychological well-being. For adolescent children such skills might include knowing what to do in an emergency if home alone, and how to deal with peer pressure to have sexual intercourse or use drugs. The self-protection skills that are most adaptive may vary from culture to culture and neighborhood to neighborhood. For example, low-income urban families may find it important to teach their children to deal with limited vocational and educational opportunities as well as certain "streetwise" skills such as how to deal with pressures to join a gang.

Guiding and Supporting Development

This function involves the guidance and promotion of all aspects of the child's development including cognitive, social, physical, emotional, moral, sexual, spiritual, cultural, and educational facets (Alvy, 1987a). Parents usually carry out this function by sharing information and setting limits, providing reinforcements and sanctions, communicating (both verbally and nonverbally), and modeling the behaviors and values that are important to them. Guiding and supporting children's development remains an important parental function during adolescence even though other people, such as peers, teachers and other nonfamilial adults, gain in influence.

Research has identified certain parental competencies necessary for executing the function of guiding children during the period of adolescence. Although these competencies are interrelated and thus tend to overlap somewhat, for purposes of discussion they will be delineated as skills that provide or facilitate (a) warmth, (b) demand, (c) balance of power, (d) communication, (e) role modeling, and (f) conflict resolution.

Recognizing the relativistic assumptions built into the definitions of parental competence, it must be noted that the parental tasks identified are primarily derived from studies of white middle-class parents or large samples of the general population of parents. This is not to say that much of what is known about white middle-class parenting is not relevant to families from other socioeconomic classes and cultural-ethnic groups in American society. However, parents in some cultural-ethnic and socioeconomic groups may require different parenting competencies as a result of rearing their children under different physical and social conditions.

There is some research that suggests that the child-rearing style known as authoritative parenting is highly correlated with such factors as high self-esteem, lowered susceptibility to negative peer pressure, and higher school achievement (see Dornbusch, Ritter, Lederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; McCabe & Martin, 1983: Steinberg, 1990). Authoritative parenting is characterized by three primary dimensions of parent behavior (Baumrind, 1978): warmth, balance of power, and demand. Although it is recognized that it is the constellation of these behaviors that typifies the authoritative parenting style, for the purposes of clarification and application, each of the constituent parts will be discussed separately.

Warmth. Also known as cohesion, closeness, attachment, and connectedness, warmth represents the emotional closeness of the parent-child relationship. From the parent's perspective, it implies the need to provide the adolescent child
with emotional support, communicate love and affection, and foster a mutual sense of intimacy and trust. A growing number of studies point to the importance for the adolescent's development of a warm and trusting relationship between parent and child (Baumrind, 1978; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). It is worth noting that this runs counter to the traditional psychoanalytic position (Freud, 1958) that posits that adolescents need to sever their emotional bond to parents in order to successfully become independent from the family and grow into responsible and autonomous adults.

**Demandingness.** This second dimension of authoritative parenting refers to the need for parents to have reasonable standards of expectations that are clearly communicated and consistently enforced. These standards and their enforcement should be developmentally appropriate to the abilities of the child. As Steinberg (1990) notes, "Parents who are demanding expect mature behavior from their adolescent, set and consistently enforce reasonable rules and standards for the adolescent's behavior, and, when necessary, discipline their youngster firmly yet fairly" (p. 27).

**Balance of power.** This denotes the degree to which children are allowed to express their opinions, be involved in family decision making, and assert their individuality. During adolescence a democratic balance of power, where parents are neither too restrictive or permissive, is probably most adaptive. Because democratic parents explain their rules and reasons for discipline, children are more likely to see their legitimacy and abide by parental actions. Knowing how much freedom to give a child is one of the greatest challenges parents of adolescents face; there is a tendency for adolescents to overestimate their abilities whereas parents may underestimate them (Small, 1985). The challenge for parents is to help their child take on increasingly greater responsibility in a way that takes into account the adolescent's growing abilities.

In addition to the competencies related to authoritative parenting, disparate research-based sources cite communication, conflict management, and providing positive role modeling as necessary skills for competent parenting.

**Communication.** Olson has postulated communication as the central factor in healthy family functioning. According to Olson's circumplex model (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983), communication is the primary vehicle through which family members express warmth and affection, indicate their respect for one another, set limits, and make decisions.

Effective communication skills also enable parents to convey their values and beliefs about the issues that are important to them, such as issues of health and safety (e.g., Fox, 1980), and to learn more about their adolescent's interests, values, and worries. In addition, open communication can serve as an important mechanism for monitoring children.

Although good communication between parents and adolescents is important, it may be more difficult than communicating with younger children. Because of changes in their cognitive ability and their tendency toward egocentrism (Elkind, 1967), early adolescents in particular may be overly sensitive to parental criticism and may misinterpret what parents say. Teens may also be more reserved, reclusive, and generally less communicative than when they were younger. For parents who want to maintain open channels of communication, these changes may require becoming especially adept at communicating.

**Conflict resolution.** Even though most research has found that conflict between parents and adolescents is not nearly as frequent and turbulent as popular myth has suggested, it still is a fairly common occurrence in most families (Montemayor, 1983; Montemayor & Hanson, 1985). Disagreements between parents and adolescents are not necessarily detrimental, as long as they take place in the context of close parent-child relations (Cooper, 1988; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Conflict, if dealt with in an effective manner, can even be beneficial. For instance, conflict can serve to bring out important issues of disagreement, provide an opportunity for discussion and resolution of differences, as well as contribute to the adolescent's psychosocial development and interpersonal skills (Cooper, 1988; Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983).

**Positive role modeling.** Scores of studies have demonstrated the power of influential models on the behavior of children. Even during adolescence, when children are more susceptible to the influence of peers, parents still remain an important source of influence (Berndt, 1979; Young & Ferguson, 1979). For example, studies have shown that parents' own drug use behavior can be an important influence on their child's use of alcohol and other drugs (McDermott, 1984; Newcomb, Huba, & Bentler, 1983).

Closely tied to the concept of parental modeling is that of conveying values. Parents are frequently concerned that their children do not hold the same values they do, especially about such issues as alcohol and other drug use and sexuality. What parents often overlook is that a good deal of value transmission is accomplished through the everyday behavior that they model. Adolescents are more likely than younger children to be aware of inconsistencies between parental words and actions. Because of their greater reasoning abilities and growing interest in examining social conventions (Smetana, 1988) and challenging adult authority, adolescents are quick to notice hypocrisy on the part of their parents or other adults.

**Advocacy**

This function refers to parents' roles as advocates and supporters of their children and as coordinators and links to experts, individuals, groups, and institutions who help them raise their children (Alvy, 1987a). Such a role is similar to the "weakened executive" role discussed in the Carnegie Foundation report, All Our Children (Kenniston & the Carnegie Council on Children, 1977). These functions are probably most necessary for younger children who do not possess the capabilities and status to represent themselves. However, they remain important when children become adolescents because of the greater involvement of adolescents in institutions in the larger community, the multitude of choices contemporary teens need to make about academic issues and future vocations, and their precarious legal status.

There are a number of attitudes and skills that parents need in order to carry out this function effectively. Parents may not even try to advocate on behalf of themselves or their children if they do not first possess positive attitudes about themselves and their ability to bring about change. Effectively communicating and relating to others are crucial to advocacy, as are conflict resolution skills. Finally, in order for parents to be effective advocates, they need to understand how political, educational, legal, and medical systems operate.

**Relative Importance of Parental Functions and Competencies**

Parental functions and competencies are probably not of equal importance. Unfortunately, the current state of research on parenting cannot answer questions such as which of the parental functions discussed are most important for optimal parenting or which combination of competencies in which amounts produce the best developed children.

The specific goals of parenting are dependent on the ecological niches that parents and children occupy and the
capacities required to adapt to these niches (Belsky, 1984). However, there probably are a number of parenting goals that are universally shared by all parents. LeVine (1974, 1998) has proposed three such goals: (a) promoting the child’s physical survival and health, including the normal development of his/her reproductive capacity during puberty; (b) promoting the child’s behavioral capacities for economic self-sufficiency in maturity; and (c) the development of the child’s behavioral capacities for maximizing other cultural values (e.g., morality, self-realization, personal happiness, wealth, religious salvation, and so on). According to LeVine (1988), these goals form a hierarchical sequence “since parents might reasonably want to be assured of infant survival before attending seriously to the child’s capacities for socioeconomic participation, and they might well give priority to the child’s future economic security over the development of culturally defined virtues” (p. 4).

Such a hierarchy of parental goals highlights the importance of meeting basic needs of families before other needs are met. It suggests that the functions delineated by Alvy could also be listed hierarchically: The function of providing basic needs precedes the protective function which precedes the guidance and advocacy functions. It further suggests that parents who are preoccupied with basic survival needs may have less time and energy to devote to higher level parental functions such as providing children with appropriate limits or adequate support.

Factors That Support or Undermine Parental Competence

Belsky (1984; Belsky, Robins, & Gamble, 1984) has provided a framework that identifies three classes of factors that can positively or negatively influence parental functioning: (a) the personal and psychological resources of parents, (b) the characteristics of the child, and (c) contextual sources of stress and support. Using Belsky’s model as a guide, some of the factors that can influence parental competence during the years when children are adolescents are described below.

Personal and Psychological Resources of Parents

According to Belsky (1984, Belsky et al., 1984), one of the most influential factors for competent parenting is the personal characteristics of the parent. The parent’s personality and psychological well-being are among the most important of these characteristics; individuals who are sensitive, patient, psychologically mature, and healthy are more apt to meet the needs of their children. As regards parenting adolescents, Small (1988), for example, found that mothers who had lower self-esteem were more controlling of their adolescent offspring, saw them as less independent, and were less likely to provide them with opportunities to take responsibility.

Although Belsky (1984, Belsky et al., 1984) points out that personality and psychological well-being are in part shaped by one’s developmental history, current developmental changes and circumstances can also play a role. There are some data to indicate that raising adolescents may be more difficult for parents who are struggling with their own mid-life developmental concerns (Silverberg, 1989). Chilman (1968) points out that mid-life parents are apt to start a slow descent from the peak of their physical and sexual capacities, and reaching a plateau in terms of their occupational career. They may also be experiencing a crisis as they look back over their life thus far and reflect on unmet goals and expectations (Rapoport, Rapoport, & Strelitz, 1977). These developmental changes may become pronounced and perhaps more difficult to deal with when they are contrasted with the developmental changes of adolescents, who are undergoing marked increases in physical and sexual ability and are beginning to anticipate the many possibilities and opportunities for career.

There are additional types of personal resources that Belsky does not discuss that would also seem to be particularly important to parents of adolescents. The first is financial or material resources, which, as discussed earlier, would be expected to have a significant impact on a number of primary parenting functions. Even for families with adequate incomes, there is often a need to make financial adjustments when children are adolescents. This period of the family lifecycle is one of the most financially demanding (Oppenheimer, 1982). Because adolescents are physically bigger and often growing rapidly, they require greater quantities of food and more expensive clothing than younger children. Adolescents’ expanding interests can lead to increased costs for educational, recreational, and social activities.

Another personal resource that could affect parental competence is experience, knowledge, and skills related to raising teenagers. There is some evidence that parents of firstborn children, who presumably lack experience and expectations about the challenges of raising an adolescent, are more likely than parents of later-born children to experience stress related to raising an adolescent (Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988). A second way parents gain expertise about raising adolescent children is through more formal educational experiences such as attending parent education programs or reading articles and books related to adolescent development and guidance.

Characteristics of the Adolescent

Belsky (1984) proposes that characteristics of children can influence the way parents treat them. He suggests four primary child characteristics that affect child rearing: (a) temperament, (b) physical health, (c) age, and (d) gender.

During adolescence, temperament, physical health, and gender would presumably remain relatively stable, but age, with its accompanying developmental changes, could be stressful for parents. Adolescents are experiencing a range of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes that can lead to periods of personal stress and turmoil (Elkind, 1984). Two aspects of the adolescent’s development that have been found to have an effect on the parents’ well-being are the adolescent’s desire for greater autonomy and the physical changes of puberty. For example, Small, Eastman, and Cornelius (1988) found a relationship between adolescents’ desire for autonomy and the levels of stress their parents experienced. A number of studies have documented the relationship between parental well-being and the physical changes of puberty (e.g., Silverberg & Steinberg, in press; Steinberg, 1987).

Other characteristics of children, while enduring, may take on new significance and require new types of parenting during adolescence. For example, if children have mental or physical handicaps, the changes in their physical size during adolescence may require changes in their care and education. For adopted children, the adolescent task of identity formation in which children attempt to become more independent from parents and seek to further define their sense of self, may be complicated by increased curiosity about birth parents (McRoy, Groevant, & Zurcher, 1988).

Lerner and Lerner (1983) have suggested that the effects of child characteristics on parents must be considered in the context of parent characteristics. In other words, it may not be the child characteristics per se that are important, but rather the “goodness of fit” between parent and child characteristics. For example, parents who enjoy rearing a fairly
dependent younger child may have difficulty coping with the same child when he/she becomes a more autonomous adolescent. Similarly, parents may be more challenged by the development at adolescence of a same-sexed child than with that of an opposite-sexed one (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987).

**Contextual Sources of Stress and Support**

Another set of influences in Belsky's (1984) model of parental competence is the larger context in which parent-child relations take place. Belsky posits four contextual sources of stress and support that can promote or undermine parental competence: (a) the parents' marital relationship, (b) informal social networks, (c) work, and (d) formal social resources.

The marital relationship. For many parents the marital relationship may serve as a principal support system. However, this relationship can also serve as a major source of stress. Marital satisfaction has been found to reach its lowest point during the years when children are in adolescence (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). Some have suggested that this is in part a result of the psychological and financial difficulties of raising teenagers (Kidwell, Fischer, Dunham, & Baranowski, 1983). One might speculate that if marital satisfaction is lower during this period, so might the level of support a person receives from one's spouse. Ironically, at a period in the family lifecycle when support from a spouse is most needed, it may be less available.

The lack of a traditional two-parent marriage may also increase stress among parents of teenagers. Both single-parent families, in which there is no partner to share the responsibilities of parenting and a greater likelihood that the family will be living in poverty, and reconstituted families, in which one's spouse may not be the parent of one's child, could conceivably increase the stress felt by the parent of an adolescent.

Other family relationships, although not addressed in Belsky's model, might have a direct effect on a middle-aged parent's life and indirectly on his/her child-rearing ability. For example, the financial and personal responsibility of caring for aging parents that many mid-life parents have while still primarily responsible for raising teenagers has led some to label them the "sandwiched" generation (Dobson & Dobson, 1985; Miller, 1981).

Another family level factor, the number of children in a family, can also have an effect on the parent's ability to perform his/her parental functions. One can assume that as the number of children in a family increases, the parent will have to divide his/her time and attention among a greater number of individuals, thus potentially leading to less time and energy being directed to any one child. Moreover, the more children there are in the family, the more material and financial resources must be stretched. Consequently, for families with limited resources, increases in family size may affect the amount of financial resources available for any individual child.

**Informal social support.** Research on the value of social support networks for parents has been limited primarily to parents with young children, but there is reason to believe that the benefits are also important for parents of adolescents. Belsky (1984) posits that social support probably exerts its influence on parenting in three general ways: by providing emotional support to parents, by providing instrumental assistance, and by providing shared expectations (cf. Caplan, 1974; Cassell, 1974; Cochran & Brassard, 1979).

Although social support from adults in general can be beneficial, support from other parents of adolescents would seem to be particularly valuable. It is from others who are going through similar experiences that parents can best learn new strategies for communicating and dealing with their children, compare notes on how different or similar their own parenting experiences are, and learn about community standards regarding adolescent behavior and expectations. In addition, parents who have ongoing contact with the parents of their children's friends are better able to monitor their children's whereabouts and behavior and to assess whether the value systems of their children's friends and their families are consistent with their own.

Unfortunately, in contrast to parents of young children, there appear to be fewer opportunities for parents of adolescents to develop supportive networks with other parents. When children are young and parents are involved in their day-to-day activities, there are more opportunities for parents to meet other parents and to provide and receive the types of support that would be most beneficial to their parenting role. During the period when one's children are adolescents, there are often fewer opportunities for parents to meet other parents. Many parents hardly know their children's friends, much less their children's friends' parents. Conse-
Meeting Basic Needs
Provide transportation to programs.
Use a sliding fee scale.
Offer child care for younger children.
Schedule programs at a safe and convenient time and place.
Provide meals along with programs.
Provide referrals to social service and other community agencies.
Use home visitors to provide support and education in participant’s own home.

Protecting Adolescents
Emphasize the importance of parental monitoring of adolescent behavior.
Teach parents how to effectively monitor their adolescents while taking into account their children’s increasing needs for autonomy and privacy.
Show parents how to teach their children necessary survival skills such as dealing with peer pressures and self-care.
Provide parents with information on identifying symptoms of common adolescent problems such as suicide and depression, eating disorders, and drug abuse.
Facilitate the development of parental networks to help parents learn about and establish community standards for adolescent behavior and to enable parents to better monitor their children’s whereabouts and behavior.

Guiding Development
Provide opportunities for parents to learn and practice guidance competencies including warmth, demandingness, balance of power, communication, conflict resolution, and positive role modeling.
Examine existing parenting curricula in terms of their ability to address these competencies and their consistency with the authoritative parenting style.

Advocating
Make parents more aware of their right and responsibility to be advocates for their teens.
Emphasize parent’s potential ability to affect local institutions.
Provide guidance on the processes of organizing and working with other parents on issues of common concern.
Teach parents the skills and knowledge bases necessary for advocacy.
Help parents model advocacy for their children and shift from being the source of all information and resources to helping their children find these resources on their own.

Table 1.
Implications of Parental Functions for Programs for Families with Adolescents

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Formal social supports. The final level of contextual stresses and supports outlined in Belsky’s (1984) model is that of formal social resources such as church, educational programs, and social services. Sometimes these resources indirectly affect a family’s ability to perform child-rearing functions, such as when parents receive guidance and information from a parenting program, which in turn leads to more effective parenting practices. Formal services can also have a more direct effect on a family’s child-rearing role, sometimes serving as a surrogate parent (e.g., when foster care is used or when an adult mentor is paired with an adolescent).

Summary

The conceptual framework just presented is summarized in Figure 1. It is in the form of an ecological map (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) with the parenting functions, arranged hierarchically, at the center. In the inner-most circle surrounding the parenting functions are the most proximal and immediate factors that can affect a parent’s ability to carry out these functions: the parent’s personal characteristics, characteristics of the adolescent, and the presence and quality of the marital relationship.

The second level involves factors outside of the individual and family such as the neighborhood, the parent’s work situation, and informal social networks. The outer ring of Figure 1 represents broader social influences such as cultural values, formal social programs, and factors related to social class. While these “macrosystem” factors may seem far removed from the parenting function, they often help to define the entire context in which parenting takes place. For example, an individual’s social class is likely to be related to the types of job opportunities one has, which in turn can affect the quality and nature of the work environment, which can influence both the parent’s psychological well-being (Small & Riley, 1990) and child-rearing style (Kohn, 1969). Similarly, social class is known to be related to family size and the division of labor in marriage, and it is also likely to affect which parental functions are deemed most important, how they are performed, and by whom (Gordon, 1980; Kohn, 1969).

It should be noted that some factors are more likely to affect a particular parental function than others. For example, living in an unsafe neighborhood or being a member of a minority culture or ethnic group may lead to a greater need for parents to devote more time and energy to the protective parenting function.

Although the discussion thus far has suggested that factors in the outer rings or levels are most likely to have an effect on factors in the inner rings or levels, the influence of the factors in the model are not necessarily unidirectional. For example, parents who are effective advocates may bring about changes in their neighborhood or workplace that may ultimately support their ability to raise their children.

It should be pointed out that any of the ecological factors can both stress and support a parent’s ability to perform a particular function. For example, a parent’s informal social network can serve as a valuable source of information and emotional support (e.g., a neighbor whose advice and friendship are highly valued) as well as a major source of stress (e.g., a neighbor whose views on child rearing greatly differ from those of the parent).

Finally, the present article should be viewed as a first step at conceptualizing the raising of adolescents from an ecological perspective. Many of the factors discussed in this conceptual framework have yet to be studied empirically; even less is known about the interrelationships among these factors. Further research is needed to determine which factors are most important and how they interrelate.

Implications for Practitioners

This conceptual scheme can serve as a filter to examine existing parenting programs as well as a guide to develop new ones. By extrapolating from the scheme, some suggestions can be made about how programs for families with adolescents could address the various par-
ent functions. These implications are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

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<td>Teach coping skills relevant to stressors unique to this period (e.g., the loss of control that accompanies the adolescent's push for freedom).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual Sources of Stress and Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include opportunities to enhance the marital relationship in two-parent families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider possible challenges unique to single-parent and stepparent families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide training on how to relate to and care for aging parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide parents with opportunities to meet, talk with, and develop meaningful ties with other parents of teens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help parents maintain contact after formal programs end (e.g., by providing participants with each other's names and addresses, scheduling a reunion, providing a meeting place for ongoing contact).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider the effects of families' ethnic or cultural heritages on their values and child-rearing methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule programs in ways accessible to employed parents (e.g., evening programs, worksite programs, using alternative delivery methods such as newsletters or radio programs to transmit at least some parenting information).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate programming with other community organizations and programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be recognized that most existing parenting programs, whether aimed at parents of adolescents or younger children, address the guidance function of parenting to the exclusion of other parental functions (Small, 1990). Therefore, most of the suggestions made in Table 1 address the basic needs, protective, and advocacy functions of parenting.

It is important that programs for families with adolescents consider the differing needs of families with different levels of resources. The fact that most programs do not address basic needs is probably of little concern to middle or upper income families. It could, however, be a major obstacle to low-income families. This is not to say that parent programs for families of adolescents must directly provide basic resources; this is a function that has typically been left to other institutions and the most useful role of programs in this regard may be to provide information and referrals to social and other community services. However, programs could also consider whether they can better accommodate to and increase the participation of low-income families by employing strategies such as those listed in Table 1. Programs might also acknowledge that families who are struggling to survive may not yet be ready to receive information that addresses more advanced functions like guidance and discipline.

Further implications can be extrapolated from the parenting scheme regarding the factors that can support or undermine an individual's ability to be an effective parent. These implications are summarized in Table 2.

There is a need to recognize that the role of parents in families with adolescents is multifunctional and generally requires meeting the needs and promoting the well-being of children on a variety of levels. While all programs should take these various levels under consideration in planning, it is not necessary for every program to provide all of the resources, training, opportunities and information needed. Rather, the exact nature of each program and the issues it addresses should depend on the needs of the audience it intends to serve and the resources and expertise available.

Conclusion

Several important themes run through this article and should be kept in mind by those who are involved in the design or implementation of programs for families with adolescent children. First, it should be recognized that raising adolescent children in contemporary society is a complex process. This process is influenced by numerous factors that reside both within individuals and families and outside of them. If parent education programs for parents of adolescents are to be maximally effective, it is important that this complexity be recognized and taken into account in the design of programs.

Second, it is important to recognize that there is a hierarchy of parenting functions and that not all families will view them as equally important. For example, some parents, as a result of economic or other personal circumstances, may have their energies focused more on performing basic parental functions, such as providing a safe environment or adequate food to eat, than on higher level functions such as improving parent-child communication. Moreover, it is naive to believe that by simply addressing higher level parental functions in parenting programs, we will be able to significantly alter the lives of the most impoverished and at-risk families. In other words, those families who are preoccupied with basic survival needs may have less time and energy to devote to higher level parental functions.

Finally, existing programs for parents of adolescents tend to focus on the guidance function to the exclusion of other parental functions. They also tend to ignore many of the factors that can support or undermine an individual's ability to be an effective parent. Consequently, there is an important need to expand the scope of parenting programs so that they are more comprehensive in the parental needs, functions, and issues that they address.

REFERENCES


