

Running Title: Trends in Parent-Adolescent Communication

Trends in Adolescents' Perceived Parental Communication across Europe and North America: 2002 to 2010

Fiona Brooks¹, Apolinaras Zaborskis², Izabela Tabak³, María del Carmen Granado Alcón⁴, Nida Zemaitiene⁵, Simone de Roos⁶, Elene Klemmera⁷

1. Adolescent and Child Health Research Group, CRIPACC, University of Hertfordshire, UK
2. Institute for Health Research, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Kaunas, Lithuania
3. Department of Child and Adolescent Health, Institute of Mother and Child, Warsaw, Poland
4. Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology. University of Huelva, Spain
5. Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Department of Health Psychology, Lithuania
6. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), research sector Care, Emancipation, and Time Use, The Hague, The Netherlands
7. Adolescent and Child Health Research Group, CRIPACC, University of Hertfordshire, UK

Author for Correspondence

Professor Fiona Brooks, CRIPACC, College Lane Campus, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK
+44 1707285990
f.m.brooks@herts.ac.uk

Abstract

Background: The quality of communication with parents is a determinant of health and well-being during adolescence, being predictive of self-esteem, self-rated health and the ability to navigate health risk behaviours.

Methods: This paper describes trends in adolescent's (aged 11, 13, and 15 years) perception of communication with mothers and fathers by gender across 32 European and North American countries from 2002-2010. Analyses were performed on 425,699 records employing a General Linear Model (MANOVA).

Results: In most countries significant increases in the prevalence of ease of communication with both mothers and fathers were observed, with the greatest positive changes over time in Estonia, Denmark and Wales. In some countries the opposite trend was found with the greatest negative changes occurring in France, Slovenia and Poland. Across the pooled dataset, a significant positive trend was observed for ease of communication with father, for both boys and girls, and for ease of communication with mother for boys only.

Conclusions: The temporal trends demonstrated an increase in a positive health asset for many young people, that of family communication. Positive trends may be a feature of the economic boom over the past decade coupled with cultural changes in attitudes to parenting, especially fathering.

Key words: Parenting, Adolescents, HBSC, Trends, Family Communication

Introduction

Adolescence is often conceptualised as a developmental phase, whereby the young person transitions from the guardianship of parents towards independent adulthood. The quality of communication with parents during adolescence remains a strong determinant of health and well-being, being predictive of adolescents' self-esteem, well-being, self-rated health and ability to navigate health risk behaviours. Evidence from predominantly cross-sectional studies indicates that adolescents who report easy communication with their mothers are more likely to report excellent or high-rated health, and are less likely to be current smokers, or frequent alcohol drinkers^{1,2}. Moreover, finding it easy to talk with their mother or father about things that bother them, acts as a protective factor for adolescents' mental well-being and a strong predictor of resilience^{3,4}.

European studies suggest that the quality of parent- adolescent relationships is determined by different factors: individual (such as age and gender) and external (cultural and socio-economic)^{5,6}, including at the national level differing social and family welfare policies⁶. Consideration of international trends in adolescents' communication with their parents offers an opportunity to begin to explore the relationship between changes in family lifestyle and socio-economic contexts and other trends in adolescent health and well-being. An advantage of using the HBSC analyses is that the same instrument is used for measuring the quality of parent communication in all countries over 3 survey rounds.

The aim of the paper is to describe trends in adolescent's perception of communication with mothers and fathers by gender among young people in early to mid-adolescence across 32 European and North American countries for the first decade of the 21st Century.

Methods

Data were drawn from the cross-national Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, collected during the 2001/2002, 2005/2006 and 2009/2010 school-years. A total of 425,699 young people, aged 11, 13, and 15 years, from 32 countries/regions reported on their perceptions of the quality of communication with both father and mother. The survey question explored young people's perceptions of how easy it was to talk to their mother or father about the issues that were of importance to them. Individual outcomes, reported quality of communication with father and mother were dichotomised into two categories: easy and difficult. The analyses were performed separately for boys and girls for the pooled dataset and separately for 32 countries, employing General Linear Model (a procedure MANOVA) from SPSS (version 21, 2012, IBM Corp., NY). Paired Bonferroni test was used to describe changes in quality of communication of Adolescents' with their parents from 2002 to 2010, controlling for age and family affluence. The pooled analyses used country weighting to control for the different size samples.

Results

Significant positive trends in prevalence of ease of communication with both parents were found in the vast majority of countries (fig. 1), these consistent positive trends were identified across all ages (not reported in this paper). However, significant differences in adolescent- parent communication trends were found both between countries and genders. In most countries significant increases in the prevalence of ease of communication with both mothers and fathers were observed, with the greatest positive changes over time in Estonia, Denmark and Wales. However in a minority of countries the opposite trend was found with the greatest negative changes occurring in France, Slovenia and Poland.

Across the pooled dataset, a significant positive trend was observed for ease of communication with father, for both boys and girls, and for ease of communication with mother for boys only. Communication difficulties between boys and their mothers reduced across surveys, but

communication difficulties between girls and their mothers remained almost unchanged (table. 1). In all surveys, the proportion of young people reporting ease of communication with their mother was higher than the proportion reporting ease of communication with their fathers and proportions reporting ease of communication with fathers was higher for boys than for girls.

Insert figure 1 here

Insert table 1 here

Discussion

This study of young people in early to mid-adolescence identified that across the majority of European countries and North America there is a significant positive trend in terms of an increase in prevalence of ease of communication with parents over the past decade.

Positive family communication has been identified as an important protective health asset for young people, related to an increase of thriving behaviours and to a decrease in participation in health risk behaviours⁷. Consequently the trends reported here may indicate an important contributory factor to positive improvements in the health and well-being of young people.

Generally, the identified increase in prevalence of ease of communication can be attributed to young people reporting a distinctive positive shift in the character of fathers' interaction with their adolescent offspring. This is a significant change as ease of communication with fathers has been suggested to have a particularly protective role on the health and well-being of young people in unique ways from mothers, and is associated with positive emotional well-being, less aggressive behaviour in boys and good body image among girls^{8,9,10}.

Accounting for why such changes in reported experiences of communication with fathers has occurred is likely to be a reflection of complex interactions between shifts in domestic gender roles changes in the construction of masculine identities and social policies, including increased recognition of the importance of fathers' role in child development¹¹. There is some evidence to support a shift in patterns of parent and child interaction away from gendered, stereotypical parental roles such as authoritarian decision-making roles for fathers and caregiving roles for mothers, towards shared care giving. Moreover this shift in parenting values appears to foster democratic approaches to communication that develop autonomy and develop mutual respect between the child and parent rather than value obedience.¹²

There are notable differences remaining between countries in terms of the proportion of young people within countries reporting easy communication with their parents. The biggest positive changes were identified in Estonia, Denmark and Wales. The biggest decrease in perceived quality of communication, (with both parents) was reported by young people in Slovenia, France and Poland. The reconciliation of work and family life has been recognised as a key “happiness” factor in determining what families have to say about their quality of their lives^{13,14}. Those countries where individuals are purported to feel they have a good balance between work and family life^{13,14} are also those countries identified in this study as having a more positive perception of parental communication (e.g. Denmark, 24%; Estonia 31%). Moreover those young people perceiving the lowest levels of ease of communication with their parents coincide with countries that have been identified as having a poorer self-reported perception of family life-work balance, for example, France 19% (workers personally satisfied with work life balance) and Slovenia 18%^{13,14}.

In Poland, however citizens do tend to report a more positive perception of “life work-balance” (27%). However one dimension of work–life balance that may relate to family interaction, *strain-based conflict* (proportion of workers having difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities due to the intensity and time allocated to paid work) is in Poland well above the EU average (62% vs. 50%). A situation that has intensified over the past decade with large scale parental economic migration, resulting in the temporary separation of Polish families¹⁵. Overall, understanding the dimensions of work life balance that might be reflected in trends in family communication may aid in conceptualising the impact work-life balance has on family life.

Further work is needed to account for the decline in ease of communication in France over the past decade, especially against trends towards increased ease in communication. There is some evidence to suggest that young people in France experience lower levels of parental supervision and have weaker emotional bonds with their parents than is the norm for young people in other European and North American countries¹⁶. However comparative analysis is required to identify how young

people interpret their parenting experiences and if they have an awareness of cultural differences in family life.

Additional consideration is also needed to explain the gendered character of the trends described in this paper, it is currently unclear why in contrast to the findings for fathers, positive increases in communication prevalence with mothers were found only for boys.

Conclusion

The temporal trends reported on in this paper demonstrated an increase in a positive health asset for many young people, that of family communication. This was especially notable in relation to the quality of communication between adolescents' and their fathers suggesting that a qualitative change in the nature of fathering and interaction with their children during adolescence has occurred over the last decade.

Further work is needed to examine if economic conditions are a barometer for the quality of family communication and how they interact with socioeconomic and cultural changes, such as parental migration or changes in cultural attitudes concerning effective parenting.

Acknowledgements

HBSC teams owe a great debt of thanks to the schools and young people who take part in the survey. We acknowledge and thank the following funders: The Department of Health, England, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), The Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality, Spain. The Lithuanian University of Health Sciences.

Conflicts of interest None Declared

Keypoints

- Over the past decade, across the majority of European countries and North America there is a significant positive trend in terms of an increase in prevalence of ease of communication with parents.
- A distinctive positive shift in the character of fathers' interaction with their adolescent offspring was identified. Suggesting possible changes in the role of fathers in childrearing and potentially an increased understanding of the contribution of fathers to child development.
- The promotion of thriving behaviours is a key issue for public health policy across Europe. This paper highlights the importance of considering the quality of family communication as a health asset that can contribute to thriving among young people.

References

1. Zambon A, Lemma P, Borraccino, A, Dalmaso P, Cavallo F. Socio-economic position and Adolescents' health in Italy: the role of the quality of social relations. *The European Journal of Public Health* 2006;16:627-632.
2. Resnick M, Bearman P, Blum R, et al. Protecting Adolescents' from harm: findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 1997;278:823-832.
3. Levin KA, Currie C. Family structure, mother-child communication, father-child communication, and adolescent life satisfaction. A cross-sectional multilevel analysis. *Health Education* 2010;110:152-168.
4. Kernis MH, Brown AC, Brody GH. Fragile self-esteem in children and its association with perceived patterns of parent-child communication. *Journal of Personality* 2000;68:225-252.
5. Tabak I, Mazur J, Granado MC, Örkényi Á, Zaborskis A, Aasvee K, Moreno C. Examining trends in parent-child communication in Europe over 12 years. *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 2012;32(1):26-54.
6. Kuntsche S, Knibbe RA, Kuntsche E, Gmel G. Housewife or working mum--each to her own? The relevance of societal factors in the association between social roles and alcohol use among mothers in 16 industrialized countries. *Addiction* 2011;106(11):1925-32.
7. Mannes ME, Roehlkepartain EC, Benson P. Unleashing the Power of Community to Strengthen the Well-Being of Children, Youth, and Families: An Asset-Building Approach. *Child Welfare* 2005;84(2):223-250.
8. Lambert S, Cashwell C. Preteens Talking to Parents: Perceived Communication and School-Based Aggression. *The Family Journal* 2004;12(2):22-128
9. Sheeber LB, Davis B, Leve C, Hops H, Tildesley E. Adolescents' relationships with their mothers and fathers: associations with depressive disorder and subdiagnostic

- symptomatology. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 2007;116(1):144-154.
10. Fenton C, Brooks F, Spencer N, Morgan A. Sustaining a positive body image in adolescence: an assets-based analysis. *Health and Social Care in the Community* 2010;18(2):189-198.
 11. Marsiglio W, Amato P, Day RD, Lamb ME. Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 2000; 62:1173-1191.
 12. Trifan TA, Stattin H, Tilton-Weaver L. Have Authoritarian Parenting Practices and Roles Changed in the Last 50 years? *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 2014; 76:4:744-761.
 13. Kotowska IE, Matysiak A, Styrz M, Pailhe A, Solaz A, Vignoli D. Family Life and Work. Second European Quality of Life Survey: 2010, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2010 Luxembourg.
 14. OECD. Work and life balance, in *How's Life ?: Measuring Well-Being*. 2011. OECD Publishing, Paris.
 15. Okolski M, Topinska I. Social impact of emigration and rural-urban migration in central and eastern Europe; Final country report: European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Poland. 2012 Apr.
 16. Claes M, Lacourse E, Bouchard C, Perruchini P. Parental practices in late adolescence, a comparison of three countries: Canada, France and Italy. *Journal of Adolescence* 2006;26;4:387-399

Table 1. Proportions and changes over time (% and CI) in quality of communication with parents for boys and girls.

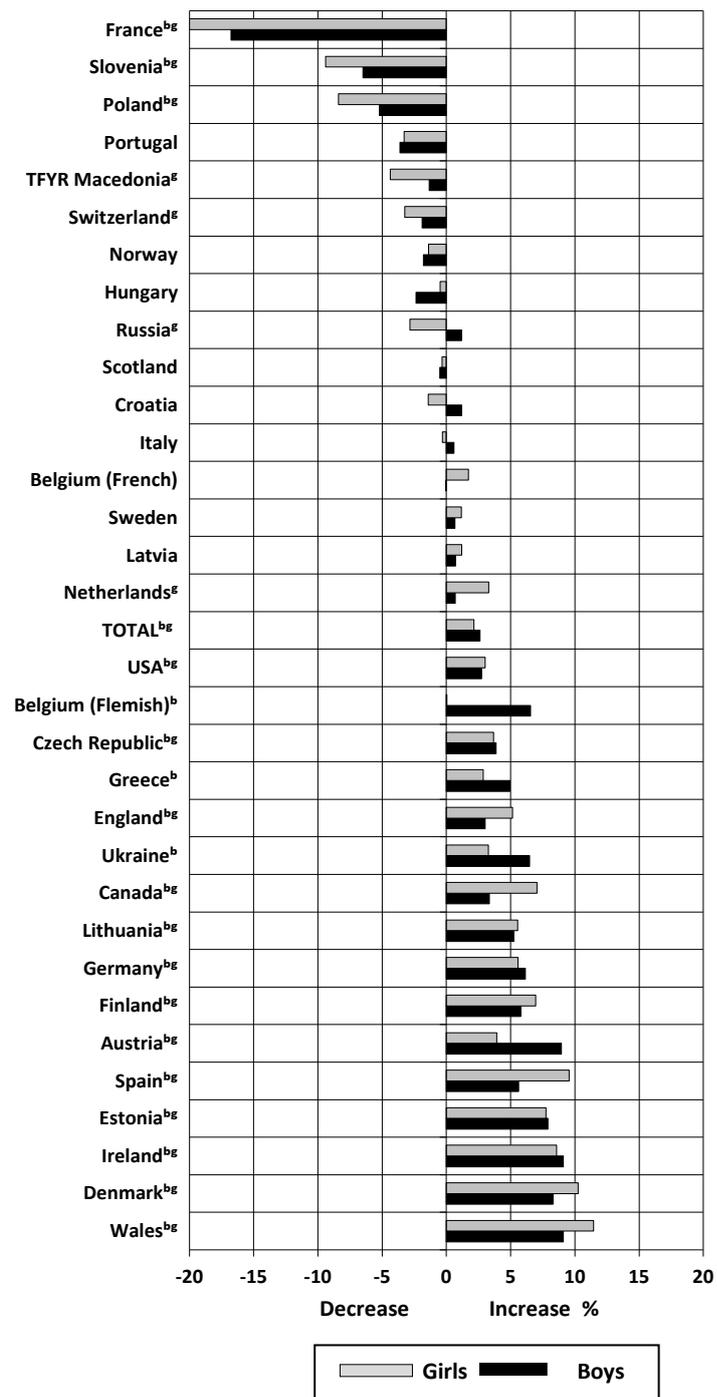
	2001/2002	2005/2006	2009/2010	Absolute change over study period ^b
	(95% CI)	(95% CI)	(95% CI)	(95% CI)
Boys:				p-value
Easy to talk to father	72.10 (71.76 to 72.44)	73.82 (73.48 to 74.16)	74.71 (74.36 to 75.06)	2.61 (2.03 to 3.19) p<0.001
Easy to talk to mother	82.77 (82.49 to 83.06)	83.62 (83.34 to 83.91)	83.73 (83.43 to 84.03)	0.96 (0.47 to 1.45) p<0.001
Easy to talk to both parents	66.56 (66.20 to 66.91)	68.44 (68.08 to 68.79)	69.40 (69.03 to 69.77)	2.84 (2.23 to 3.46) p<0.001
Difficult to talk to mother only	5.54 (5.37 to 5.72)	5.38 (5.21 to 5.55)	5.31 (5.12 to 5.49)	-0.23 (-0.54 to 0.06) p=0.176
Difficult to talk to father only	16.21 (15.94 to 16.49)	15.18 (14.91 to 15.46)	14.33 (14.04 to 14.62)	-1.88 (-2.36 to -1.41) p<0.001
Difficult to talk to both parents	11.69 (11.44 to 11.93)	11.00 (10.75 to 11.24)	10.96 (10.71 to 11.22)	-0.73 (-1.14 to -0.31) p<0.001
Girls:				
Easy to talk to father	55.44 (55.07 to 55.80)	56.93 (56.57 to 57.30)	57.58 (57.20 to 57.96)	2.15 (1.51 to 2.78) p<0.001
Easy to talk to mother	83.07 (82.79 to 83.34)	83.02 (82.74 to 83.30)	83.04 (82.75 to 83.33)	-0.03 (-0.52 to 0.46) p=0.998
Easy to talk to both parents	52.08 (51.71 to 52.45)	53.42 (53.05 to 53.79)	54.03 (53.65 to 54.41)	1.95 (1.31 to 2.59) p<0.001
Difficult to talk to mother only	3.36 (3.22 to 3.49)	3.51 (3.37 to 3.65)	3.55 (3.41 to 3.70)	0.19 (-0.04 to 0.44) p=0.149
Difficult to talk to father only	30.99 (30.65 to 31.33)	29.60 (29.26 to 29.94)	29.01 (28.65 to 29.36)	-1.98 (-2.57 to -1.39) p<0.001
Difficult to talk to both parents	13.58 (13.32 to 13.83)	13.46 (13.21 to 13.72)	13.41 (13.14 to 13.68)	-0.17 (-0.61 to 0.28) p=0.998

^a Estimated marginal means using MANOVA procedure (adjusted by age and family affluence), pooled data of 32 countries, data weighted by countries; ^b Based on estimated marginal means using Bonferroni test.

Figure 1. Change in the ease of communication between 2001/2002 and 2009/2010, by country.

Communication with fathers

(Bar for France (girls) is truncated (real value is 22.3)).



Communication with mothers

