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Associations among solicitation, relationship quality, and adolescents' disclosure and secrecy with mothers and best friends



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ABSTRACT

Disclosure and secrecy with mothers and best friends about personal, bad behavior, and multifaceted (e.g., staying out late) activities were examined using daily diaries among 102 ethnically diverse, urban middle adolescents ($M = 15.18$ years, $SD = .89$). Adolescents disclosed more and kept fewer secrets from best friends than from mothers and more frequently disclosed and kept secrets about their personal than their bad behavior and multifaceted activities. Better daily relationship quality was associated with more disclosure about personal and multifaceted activities and less secrecy about bad behaviors for both mothers and best friends. Overall, when mothers solicited information, adolescents disclosed more but also kept more secrets from them, whereas best friends' solicitation was mostly associated with more disclosure.

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Research has shown that adolescents from diverse ethnic backgrounds actively manage how much parents know about their daily activities by disclosing or sometimes keeping secrets (Smetana, Villalobos, Rogge, & Tasopoulos-Chan, 2010; Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009). Within this line of research, adolescent disclosure involves voluntarily telling parents about their daily activities, including where they go, who they are with, and what they do when they are away from home (Tilton-Weaver, Marshall, & Darling, 2014), whereas secrecy involves actively withholding information from parents about these same types of activities. Studies show that, in general, greater adolescent disclosure and less secrecy with parents are associated with better psychosocial adjustment and family relationships (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Laird, Marrero, Melching, & Kuhn, 2013; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010), with some variation in results for disclosure versus secrecy. Therefore, researchers are examining ways to facilitate adolescent disclosure and discourage secrecy, including having parents ask adolescents for information and having positive adolescent–parent relationships (e.g. Tilton-Weaver, 2014).

Research also has shown that with age, adolescents disclose less to parents (Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). At the same time, friendships become more central, and intimate disclosure to friends increases (Demir & Urberg, 2004). However,

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adolescents' disclosure and secrecy about daily activities with best friends have received little attention. Two exceptions are Laird, Bridges, and Marsee (2013) and Frijns, Finkenauer, and Keijsers (2013), who both showed that keeping secrets from best friends versus parents is associated with different adolescent outcomes. In addition, most studies have not examined within-person processes. The present study extends our knowledge of these issues by employing daily diary methods to examine adolescents' disclosure and secrecy with mothers versus best friends and their associations with relationship quality and parental solicitation of information.

Disclosure and secrecy with mothers versus best friends

Disclosure and secrecy are not simply at opposite ends of the same dimension (Tilton-Weaver, 2014) but are conceptually and empirically distinct, and as this suggests, only moderately negatively associated (Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Thus, they should be studied separately. Disclosing does not necessarily mean that nothing is concealed. As Frijns et al. (2010) noted, disclosure and secrecy can occur simultaneously, such as when an adolescent tells a parent about a new friend at school while concealing that the friend is a poor student.

Furthermore, studies grounded in social domain theory (Turiel, 1983) have shown that mean levels of adolescent disclosure and secrecy to parents vary by the type of issue considered. Adolescents disclose more to parents about personal issues (defined as acts pertaining to privacy and personal preferences) than about peer or multifaceted issues, which involve overlapping personal and prudential concerns (pertaining to health, comfort, and harm to self). Mirroring these results, adolescents keep more secrets about peers than about personal issues (Smetana et al., 2006; Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009). Further, adolescents' reasons for not disclosing or keeping secrets from parents also vary by type of issue. Adolescents generally do not tell parents about their risky prudential activities (such as drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs) because they fear that parents will disapprove of these activities or punish them (Smetana et al., 2006, 2009). On the other hand, adolescents do not disclose or believe they are obligated to tell parents about personal issues because they are private and not harmful. Adolescents appeal to both privacy and fear of parental reactions to justify not disclosing to parents about multifaceted peer issues (like hanging out with disapproved friends; Smetana et al., 2009; Yau et al., 2009). These reasons suggest that disclosure and secrecy with parents are influenced by the hierarchical nature of the adolescent–parent relationship (Bakken & Brown, 2010; Smetana et al., 2009), where concerns with power, punishment, and parental autonomy granting may predominate.

In contrast, relationships with best friends are egalitarian, and adolescents do not need to fear punishment or loss of autonomy. Indeed, studies demonstrate that in hypothetical situations, adolescents believe it is permissible to lie to parents to avoid parental control over personal matters, whereas they do not endorse lying to friends, even when friends are trying to restrict their autonomy (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). This is in part because youth view trust and disclosure as essential features of friendships that may be destroyed by lying. Therefore, they may disclose more about their daily activities to their best friends than to parents, as different issues may be salient with each (Adams & Laursen, 2001). For example, adolescents may disclose their risky activities to best friends because they are likely to engage in similar behaviors (Hamm, 2000) while keeping those activities secret from parents to avoid disapproval.

The role of relationship quality and solicitation in disclosure and secrecy

Researchers have sought to understand the conditions that facilitate disclosure and prevent secrecy. Studies consistently show that greater disclosure is associated with better quality adolescent–parent relationships, including greater parental acceptance, responsiveness, and trust (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Smetana et al., 2006). Furthermore, these associations are stronger for personal than for other types of activities (Smetana et al., 2006; Yau et al., 2009). Adolescents who have more warm, supporting, and trusting relationships with parents may disclose more to parents because they feel secure in their parents' love and support. In contrast, adolescents who have more hostile or detached relationship with parents may be less inclined to tell them about their lives because they feel parents do not care or may negatively judge them.

Likewise, better relationships with parents are linked with less secrecy overall (e.g. Keijsers et al., 2010) but not when types of issues are distinguished. Parental trust and acceptance were linked with more disclosure but not less secrecy about school issues. Also, conflicts with parents were associated with more secrecy about peer activities, but disclosure was not (Smetana et al., 2006). Thus, this study revealed differences between disclosure and secrecy. In addition, previous studies show that better best-friend relationships are associated with more disclosure about intimate issues (Buhrmester, 1990) and greater sharing of secrets (Frijns et al., 2013), suggesting that relationship quality also may be an important correlate of disclosure and secrecy about activities with best friends.

Researchers also have studied the effects of parental solicitation (where parents directly ask adolescents about their activities) on disclosure and secrecy, but the findings have been conflicting. Parents frequently ask adolescents about their lives, but adolescents may not always fully disclose in response. Instead, they may omit important details, avoid the issue, or lie to manage information from their parents. Several studies have shown that parental solicitation is concurrently correlated with more adolescent disclosure (e.g., Bumpus & Rodgers, 2009; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Tilton-Weaver, 2014), but longitudinal studies have yielded more mixed results. Although some studies have found bidirectional, longitudinal positive associations

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