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Mother–adolescent monitoring dynamics and the legitimacy of parental authority



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ABSTRACT

This multi-informant longitudinal study aimed to understand whether the family dynamics that underlie adolescent voluntary disclosure regarding their leisure time behavior differs when adolescents strongly or weakly endorse the legitimacy of parental authority. Longitudinal linkages between parental monitoring behaviors and adolescents' secrecy and disclosure were tested among youths with strong and weak legitimacy beliefs. The sample included 197 adolescents (51% female, *M* age 12 years) and their mothers. Mothers reported on several of their own monitoring efforts (i.e., solicitation, active involvement, observing and listening, and obtaining information from spouses, siblings, and others). Adolescents reported their disclosure, secrecy, and legitimacy beliefs. Only among youths reporting strong legitimacy beliefs, more mother engagement and supervision (indexed by mother-reported active involvement and observing and listening) predicted more adolescent disclosure and less secrecy over time, and more mother solicitation predicted less secrecy.

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With adolescents spending an increasing amount of time outside the direct supervision and presence of their parents (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996), keeping track of and monitoring adolescents' leisure time activities is a challenge for parents. Although the knowledge-acquisition process may begin with parents asking questions (Crouter & Head, 2002; Dishion & McMahon, 1998), it is the adolescents' decision to reveal or conceal information that is the most proximal determinant of whether or not parents know what is happening when children are away from home and when their children are unsupervised at home (e.g., Keijsers, Branje, Van der Valk, & Meeus, 2010; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Adolescents' perceptions of the legitimacy of parents' monitoring behaviors may alter these parent-child dynamics. Adolescents' who more strongly endorse the legitimacy of parents' monitoring attempts may be more likely to reveal information when asked. The current multi-informant longitudinal study aims to understand the mother-child dynamics linking parents' monitoring efforts with adolescents' information management strategies in families in which adolescents, in general, more or less strongly endorse the legitimacy of parents' authority to impose rules regulating the adolescents' free time activities.

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Conceptualization of parental monitoring and adolescent information management

The monitoring literature has long been plagued by conceptual confusion (review: [Racz & McMahon, 2011](#)). Parental monitoring is defined as behaviors of parents aimed at both structuring the child's home, school, and community environments and tracking the child's behavior in those environments ([Dishion & McMahon, 1998](#)). One example of the conceptual confusion in the literature is the inconsistent distinction between knowledge versus active monitoring strategies in empirical attempts to operationalize parental monitoring. [Stattin and Kerr \(2000\)](#) argued that many studies had operationalized monitoring using measures of parents' knowledge rather than parents' monitoring behavior, and they encouraged researchers to measure monitoring behavior more directly. [Stattin and Kerr \(2000\)](#) offered measures of parental solicitation (i.e., parents directly asking adolescents for information) and control through rules (i.e., parents imposing rules requiring adolescents to keep parents informed) as more direct monitoring behaviors. Although solicitation and control through rules are consistent with previous conceptualization of monitoring ([Dishion & McMahon, 1998](#)), the two behaviors do not capture the full range of parents' monitoring activities, because both are attempts to find out about the child's leisure activities that take place elsewhere, typically outside of parental supervision and often in presence of peers (e.g., going out, a Saturday night, a day at school).

In [Dishion and McMahon's \(1998\)](#) conceptual formulation, parental monitoring activities are not limited to setting rules or solicitation, but encompasses a wide variety of strategies aiming at acquiring information regarding the activities of a child from early childhood to late adolescence. In this framework, parents potentially monitor all behaviors and activities and thus parents' supervision of adolescents' activities is also considered to be a monitoring strategy. Following this line of conceptual reasoning, [Waizenhofer, Buchanan, and Jackson-Newsom \(2004\)](#) and [Crouter, Bumpus, Davis, and McHale \(2005\)](#) assess a broader range of methods of obtaining knowledge. Parents may also obtain information by observing and listening to their children. These two forms of active involvement involve direct supervision but are consistent with [Dishion and McMahon's \(1998\)](#) broad conceptualization of monitoring. Additionally, the social worlds of adolescents extend beyond the parent-child dyad, and involve other members of the family system as well as broader social contexts such as schools ([Bronfenbrenner, 1986](#)). Some of the information parents obtain about the adolescents' activities in the broader social context may come from knowledgeable others (e.g., sibling or teacher). It may be more difficult to keep a secret or only disclose partially, when adolescents know their parents have access to additional sources of information. Adolescents report more disclosure when parents frequently obtain information from knowledgeable others ([Waizenhofer et al., 2004](#)). Therefore, this full range of monitoring activities, including supervision and receiving information through others, were assessed in the current study.

As adolescents become more autonomous and independent, they make their own decisions whether to share or restrict information about daily activities, whereabouts and friendships ([Keijsers & Poulin, 2013](#); [Marshall et al., 2005](#)). Although adolescents may employ a range of different strategies ([Cumsille, Darling, & Martinez, 2010](#); [Marshall et al., 2005](#)), previous work suggests that information management strategies can be classified efficiently as concealing strategies or revealing strategies (e.g., [Frijns, Keijsers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010](#); [Laird & Marrero, 2010](#)). Concealing and revealing are not two opposite ends of the same continuum ([Frijns et al., 2010](#); [Larson & Chastain, 1990](#)), but represent distinct types of strategies, with their own outcomes and precursors ([Cumsille et al., 2010](#); [Laird & Marrero, 2010](#); [Marshall et al., 2005](#); [Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010](#)). Therefore, both disclosure (a revealing strategy) and secrecy (a concealing strategy) were assessed in the current study.

Bidirectional links between parental monitoring and adolescent information management

Monitoring is not a unidirectional phenomenon, but is theorized to be a reciprocal, dynamic process involving parents' monitoring behaviors and adolescents' efforts to manage the information provided to their parents ([Hayes, Hudson, & Matthews, 2004](#)). The theoretical model describes both how parents may influence adolescents and how adolescents' behaviors may trigger parents to adjust their monitoring.

As part of the theorized process ([Hayes et al., 2004](#)), parents' monitoring behaviors should promote disclosure and minimize secrecy. Recent longitudinal research provides evidence of an effect in this direction. Specifically, some (e.g., [Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010](#); [Willoughby & Hamza, 2010](#)), but not all ([Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010](#)) studies have found that parents' solicitation predicts more subsequent disclosure by adolescents. Additionally, shared family activities and parental active involvement in adolescent activities also have been found to precede more subsequent disclosure ([Willoughby & Hamza, 2010](#)). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have directly assessed the links between monitoring through others and adolescents' disclosure. Likewise, no prior study has examined associations across a broad range of monitoring behaviors in a single sample.

As part of the theorized reciprocal and dynamic monitoring process, adolescents' information management should also influence parents' subsequent monitoring behaviors ([Hayes et al., 2004](#)). For instance, greater use of revealing strategies such as disclosure is hypothesized to increase subsequent monitoring activities ([Hayes et al., 2004](#)). In general, parents' involvement in monitoring activities is higher in families characterized by higher quality parent-child relationships (e.g., [Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009](#)) and empirical findings link more disclosure with more parental emotional involvement, and understanding, and with higher quality parent-adolescent relationships ([Finkenauer, Engels, & Kubacka, 2008](#); [Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006](#)). Also, adolescent disclosure is strongly tied to parents' perceptions that they can trust their child, and greater trust is linked to a more positive parenting climate ([Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999](#)), of which parental monitoring may be one aspect. In contrast, greater use of concealing strategies such as secrecy may reduce parents'

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