

Early and middle adolescents' disclosure to parents about activities in different domains

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Abstract

Disclosure, disclosure strategies, and justifications for nondisclosure for prudential, peer, multifaceted, and personal acts were assessed using a sorting task with 118 lower-middle class early and middle adolescents ($M_s = 12.77$ and 15.68 years). Adolescents were less involved in prudential than other behaviors, although prudential behavior was greater among middle than early adolescents; adolescents disclosed more about prudential and personal than multifaceted and peer behaviors. Nondisclosure was primarily due to concerns about parental disapproval (for prudential acts), claims that acts were personal or not harmful (for personal acts), and their mixture (for peer and multifaceted acts). When concerned about parental disapproval, older adolescents fully disclosed less (and lied somewhat more) than younger adolescents, whereas adolescents primarily avoided discussing the issue when they viewed acts as personal. Full disclosure was associated with better relationships with parents and less depressed mood; lying was associated with more parental behavioral control over personal issues and poorer relationships with fathers. © 2008 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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A longstanding conclusion is that parents obtain knowledge of their adolescents' activities, whereabouts, and associations with peers through their active monitoring and surveillance. Recent research has shown, however, that parents acquire this knowledge primarily through adolescents' willingness to disclose to parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and that adolescents who disclose more to their parents view their parents as more trusting of them (Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999). Using a person-centered approach, Crouter, Bumpus, Davis, and McHale (2005) found that for both mothers and fathers, a relational style that entailed high levels of teen disclosure, as well as parental listening and observation, predicted greater parental knowledge, which in turn was associated with lower levels of risky behavior.

These findings have led researchers to examine the parental antecedents and psychosocial consequences of adolescents' willingness to disclose to parents about their activities. Previous research with European youth has indicated that adolescents' disclosure to parents is only moderately (and inversely) correlated with secrecy (Engels, Finkenauer, & van Kooten, 2006; Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002). Further, secrecy (but not disclosure) has been associated with poorer parent–child relationships and adjustment (see also Finkenauer, Frijns, Engels, & Kerkhof, 2005). In contrast, disclosure is associated with parents' greater trust in the adolescent (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Kerr et al., 1999; Stattin & Kerr, 2000), greater parental responsiveness and behavioral control (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006), more authoritative parenting, and less adolescent involvement in disapproved leisure (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006).

Although these studies have increased our understanding of the conditions associated with adolescents' greater disclosure to their parents, Kerr and Stattin's (2000; Kerr et al., 1999; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) path-breaking research (and most of the research that has followed) has not systematically considered the types of activities that adolescents disclose or keep secret from their parents. Indeed, Kerr and Stattin's (2000) frequently used measure mixes questions pertaining to disclosure and secrecy (asking whether adolescents spontaneously tell, like to tell, keep secret, or hide their behavior) and pairs these stems with different behaviors (how teens are doing in school, what they do with their free time, where they go at night).

Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, and Campione-Barr (2006) used the framework of social domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 2006) to distinguish among the types of behaviors that adolescents disclose to or keep secret from parents. Social domain theory has distinguished among *prudential issues* (pertaining to adolescents' health, safety, comfort, or harm to the self, including behaviors like smoking cigarettes and illicit drug and alcohol use), *moral and conventional issues* (pertaining to others' welfare, fairness, or rights, and to arbitrary, contextually relative behavioral norms, respectively), *personal issues* (pertaining to control over one's body, privacy, and preferences and choices about appearances, activities, and friendship choices), and *multifaceted issues* (which overlap the personal and either the conventional or prudential domains, such as watching R-rated movies). Previous research has indicated that adolescents and parents of different ethnicities view parents as having the legitimate authority to regulate moral, conventional, and prudential issues, but they disagree about whether parents legitimately can control personal, and to some extent, multifaceted activities (Cumsille, Darling, Flaherty, & Martinez, 2006; Fuligni, 1998; Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). The research shows that across ages, adolescents desire more personal jurisdiction than parents are willing to grant, leading to conflict in adolescent–parent relationships.

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