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Adolescent-Parent Companionship: An Examination of Time, Activities, and Quality

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated adolescent-parent companionship; a dimension of supportive parenting that contributes to adolescent individuation. Using Experience Sampling Method (ESM), 191 eighth grade students reported their activities during the after school hours for one week. Students reported on their activities and companions, and also rated their experiences and feelings. This study examined the amount of time adolescents spent with parents, the types of activities adolescents and parents do when together, and the quality of the adolescents' subjective experiences while with parents. Findings indicate that although adolescents spend relatively little out of school time with parents, there is variation in the types of activities that adolescents and parents engage in. We also found that adolescents' subjective experiences vary by activity type.

Background

Individuation, establishing independence within the family and in other social realms, is a critical task during adolescence (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Steinberg, 1987). As adolescents work towards shifting from dependence on parents and family to independence from parents, parents can act to support or undermine this critical shift. Research suggests that supportive parenting is conducive to the adolescent individuation process (Peterson & Hann, 1999). Companionship is one dimension of supportive parenting, and has been found to predict self-esteem, autonomy and achievement in adolescents (Aquilino & Supple, 2001). This study investigates three aspects of adolescent-parent companionship: 1) amount of time adolescents and parents spend together, 2) types of activities adolescents and parents engage in, and 3) quality of subjective experiences of adolescents when with parents.

Method

Participants

- Data were collected in three ethnically diverse sites in three midwestern states. See Table 1.
- Participants were 191 eighth grade students.

Measures

We utilized the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which allows researchers to collect systematic data about what a person does, thinks and feels during daily life (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). This method measures participants' location, activity, affective, and cognitive experiences at random moments. It is particularly valuable for eliciting the subjective experiences of persons interacting in their natural environments. We employed ESM to examine middle school students' experiences with their parents.

Student participants wore a watch programmed to signal at random times during the after-school hours and on weekends over a 7-day period in fall 2001 and spring 2002. When signaled, the students reported their location, activity, and companions (See Logbook, Figure 1).

Participants also provided 4-point ratings of their activities and feelings on several dimensions: choice, importance and enjoyment of activity, level of concentration, and affective states.

Measures of activity type. Thirty-six categories of activity type were created based on the participants' report of activity when signaled. The categories were then combined to create five activity types parallel to those used in other ESM studies (e.g. Asmussen & Larson, 1991). The five categories of activity type are:

1. Instrumental (e.g., transportation, homework, chores, and shopping)

2. Passive leisure (e.g., playing games, computer, reading, and watching TV, movies or videos)
3. Active leisure (e.g., sports and dancing)
4. Prosocial (e.g., community service, church services or religious education)
5. Expressive (e.g., socializing and eating)

Measures of engagement and affect. As part of a larger study, individual items from the Experience Sampling logbook were combined to create composite measures of engagement and affect. A factor analysis using Promax rotation was performed on the 8 logbook items relating to the nature of the activity being performed (items 7a – 7h, Figure 1). Two factors emerged:

1. Effort, or the experience of heightened concentration when using a high degree of skills in a challenging activity.
2. Motivation, or the perception of enjoyment, interest, and intrinsic desire, during activities involving high degrees of choice.

In addition, there was one stand-alone item that did not load highly onto a factor, importance (i.e., “How important was this activity to you?”).

A second factor analysis was performed on the 11 items relating to the participant’s emotions when signaled (items 8a – 8k, Figure 1). Three factors emerged:

1. Positive Affect, or a positive emotional disposition,
2. Negative Affect, or a negative emotional disposition,
3. Apathy, or feelings of being both lonely and bored.

Results

Because the ESM signaled students at random moments, the proportion of beeps that occurred with various companions and in various activities may be used as an estimate of time

use in daily life (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). To estimate time use we calculated the number of beeps reported with a companion compared to the total number of beeps (See Figure 2).

- Results indicate that students spend approximately 15% of their out-of-school time with mothers, 9% with fathers and less than 20% with both parents.
- By contrast, adolescents spend 46.9 % of their out of school time with friends or peers.

When students spend time with parents, they are engaged in a variety of activities. We calculated the percentage of time adolescents reported being with mothers only, fathers only, and both parents in each of five activity types: instrumental, passive leisure, active leisure, prosocial, and expressive (See Table 2).

- When adolescents reported being with mothers only, adolescent-parent companionship centered around expressive activities such as eating and socializing (35.1%).
- Time with fathers was spent engaged in expressive activities (33.4%) as well as passive leisure activities such as playing games or watching TV/movies (28.3%).
- When with both parents, adolescents reported participating in expressive activities 44.2% of the time.

Hierarchical linear modeling was employed to examine the subjective experiences of students while engaged in activities with their parents. HLM in its two level application is the appropriate analytic tool when there are both individual level data and repeated measures (i.e. beeps) nested within each individual (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). For each outcome, we considered only those beeps that occurred with one or both parents. The effect of being engaged

in one of the activity types was modeled as a within-student effect. We examined the within-student effect of a specific activity versus all other activities on adolescents' subjective experiences (See Table 3). Four key findings are highlighted.

- Relative to other activity types, when adolescents were engaged in passive leisure activities with their parents, they reported being more motivated ($t = 6.10^{***}$), rated the activity as less important ($t = -4.66^{***}$), and reported higher positive affect ($t = 4.79^{***}$).
- Relative to other activity types, when adolescents were engaged in active leisure activities with their parents, they reported higher effort ($t = 2.15^*$), reported the activity as less important ($t = -3.31^{**}$), and reported higher positive affect ($t = 3.12^{**}$).
- When engaged in prosocial activities with their parents, adolescents report the activity as high in effort ($t = 3.80^{***}$), reported higher motivation ($t = 2.91^{**}$) and importance ($t = 3.26^{**}$) relative to other activities done with parents.
- Not surprisingly, when engaged in expressive activities with parents, adolescents rated effort as low ($t = -2.53^*$) and positive affect as high ($t = 2.78^{**}$).

Conclusions

Our examination of adolescent-parent companionship illustrates that as adolescents are moving towards independence, they continue to engage in a variety of activities with their parents. Although adolescents spend less time with parents than with friends and peers, the time spent with parents centers around activities that might take place in the home (eating, talking, watching television or movies). These findings suggest that, relative to other activities, adolescents report being happier, more relaxed, excited and proud while engaged in leisure

activities and expressive activities with parents. These types of activities make up over 60% of the time adolescents spend with parents. It also is important to highlight that prosocial activities are rated highest in effort, motivation, and importance. This suggests that while participating in prosocial activities with parents, adolescents are more engaged and interested, they enjoy the activity and find it challenging.

These findings indicate that the overall quality of experiences adolescents have while with their parents is positive, suggesting the beneficial role of companionship for adolescent development. Future research is needed to examine whether peer and parent companionship have differing influences on adolescents' subjective states and how differences in the quality and type of activities that adolescents' engage in may influence their well-being.

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Figure 1. Experience Sample Logbook

Time signaled: _____ Time filled out: _____

1. **Where** were you?

2a. Were you at an **after-school program**? Yes No

2b. Name of the program:

3. **What** was the **main** thing you were doing?

4. **What** else were you doing?

5. **Who** was **doing** this activity with you? Circle **all** that apply.

No one	Other adults I know
Mom/stepmom	1 friend
Dad/stepdad	2 or more friends
Brother/sister Age _____	Other kids
Adult relative	Boyfriend/girlfriend
Child relative Age _____	Anyone else? Who?
Teacher(s)	_____
Program staff	_____

6. **Who else** was around but doing something else?

No one	Other adults I know
Mom/stepmom	1 friend
Dad/stepdad	2 or more friends
Brother/sister Age _____	Other kids
Adult relative	Boyfriend/girlfriend
Child relative Age _____	Adults I don't know
Teacher(s)	Anyone else? Who?
Program staff	_____

7. **Circle** an answer for **each** question about what you were doing.

	Not at all	Some what	Pretty much	Very much
a. How much choice did you have about this activity?	1	2	3	4
b. How important was this activity to you?	1	2	3	4
c. Was it interesting?	1	2	3	4
d. Was it challenging?	1	2	3	4
e. Did you enjoy what you were doing?	1	2	3	4
f. How hard were you concentrating?	1	2	3	4
g. Were you using your skills?	1	2	3	4
h. Did you wish you were doing something else?	1	2	3	4

8. How were you feeling when you were signaled?
Circle an answer for **each** feeling.

	Not at all	A little	Some what	Very much
Lonely	1	2	3	4
Happy	1	2	3	4
Angry	1	2	3	4
Stressed	1	2	3	4
Excited	1	2	3	4
Bored	1	2	3	4
Scared	1	2	3	4
Sad	1	2	3	4
Relaxed	1	2	3	4
Proud	1	2	3	4
Worried	1	2	3	4

Figure 2.

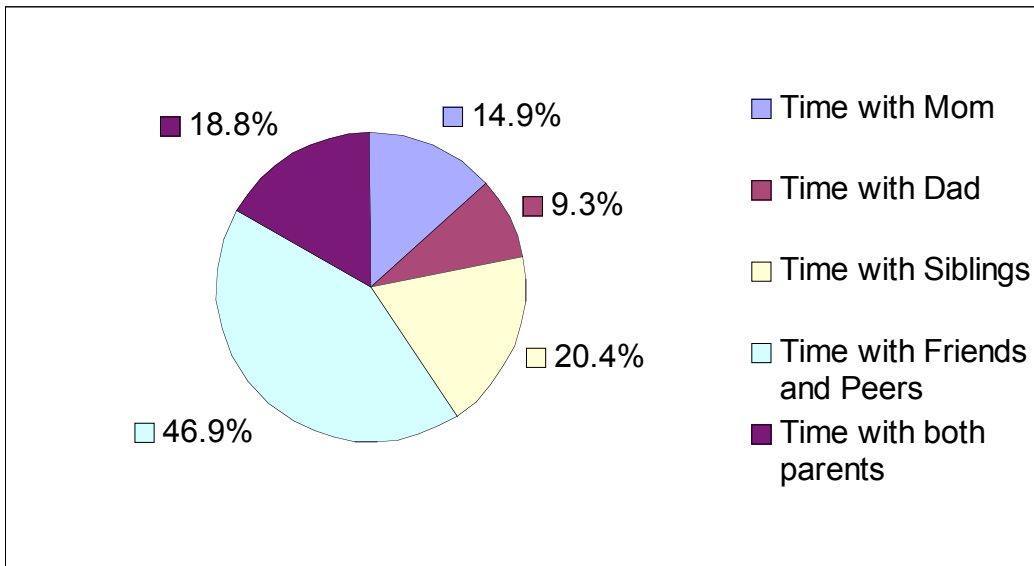


Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Site		
Site 1		31.1 %
Site 2		33.7 %
Site 3		35.2 %
Gender		
Male		52.0 %
Female		48.0 %
Ethnicity		
African-American		33.2 %
Asian		3.1 %
Hispanic		15.3 %
White		37.2 %
Family Structure		
One-parent		34.0 %
Two-parent		63.1 %
Family Income		
\$0 - \$4,999		7.7 %
\$5,000 - \$10,999		7.1 %
\$11,000 - \$19,999		13.6 %
\$20,000 - \$29,000		19.6 %
\$30,000 - \$49,999		19.0 %
\$50,000 or higher		33.2 %
Parent Education		
	Mother	Father
Some High School or GED	23.0 %	23.6 %
High School Graduate	22.0 %	17.8 %
Some College/Vocational or Technical School	33.0 %	18.3 %
College Graduate/Advanced Degree	22.6 %	19.4 %

Table 2. Percentage of Time Adolescents Spend with Parents in Varying Activities

	Instrumental	Passive leisure	Active leisure	Prosocial	Expressive
Time with Mom only	22.5%	25.7%	4.4%	2.9%	35.1%
Time with Dad only	18.7%	28.3%	11.4%	3.7%	33.4%
Time with both parents	15.4%	26.5%	2.1%	5.0%	44.2%

Note. Not all reported activities are included, therefore percents do not add to 100%.