



Discrepancies in the Perception of Conflicts between Parents and Adolescents

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Abstract

This article presents a study that consists of evaluating how adolescents understand and perceive conflicts with their parents, as well as their discrepancies in the perception of these conflicts. The study was carried out with a small sample of 74 school-aged adolescents, of both sexes, in the specific period of adolescence from 13 to 15 years old, students at a private school in the city of Santos-SP-Brazil. A questionnaire was created for this study due to the scarcity of research instruments on the subject in published literature. Research on conflicts between parents and adolescents by Bosma, Laursen, Coy and Noller is the basis of this study. This study suggests that the relationship between parents and children clearly changes in the pubertal phase of the children, although there is evidence of the strength or importance that these changes have for each of the members of the relationship.

Keywords: Adolescents; Parents; Conflicts

Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional stage in which important physical, cognitive and emotional changes generally take place that affect adolescents' relationships with their parents and peers. It is a period when human development researchers usually say that events occur that necessarily cause problems in all individuals, and the number and nature of the changes that occur simultaneously during this period of life, require the adolescent to develop coping strategies to act effectively, because otherwise it can develop different types of problems [1]. These changes do not originate suddenly and quickly, but in a progressive and continuous way, which allows both parents and children to adapt to the new situation. In this sense, it seems more appropriate to talk about changes in family relationships during adolescence, even though numerous studies and research [2-6] have pointed out that

changes can cause conflicts in family relationships.

In this perspective, it is worth pointing out that the analysis of conflicts that occur between parents and children during adolescence, as well as deepening the reasons that give rise to them, their incidence, their evolution and their resolution, is not intended to polemicize the family relationships, but rather trying to understand the existence of conflicts as something that occurs in any type of more intimate human relationship [7]. If before, the existence of conflicts between parents and children was considered as an indication of family dysfunction, we want to bring in this study a different conception: from Moral Psychology, it is proven that these manifestations play an adaptive role in adolescent development and general family functioning, as they help family members learn to better tolerate differences of opinion and learn socio-moral skills to resolve their own

conflicts, maintaining stronger relationships in the process [8-10].

The functional significance of conflicts during adolescence depends, in part, on the quality of parent-child relationships. The degree of intimacy, affection and communication must be taken into account, and according to Collins [11], conflicts between parents and children are characteristic of the evolutionary process of transformation of relationships that arises in adolescence, in which, at the same time that young people negotiate with their parents the transition to new levels of autonomy and interdependence, according to their age, maintain the affective bonds that exist with them. Therefore, a level of normative conflict - placing norms of conduct - in families, does not harm the quality of attachment relationships between parents and adolescents, when they occur in a context of relational continuity [12,13].

The main sources of conflict between parents and adolescents, according to a brief literature review on the subject [14-16] refer to the following categories:

- Social options and customs, such as choosing friendships, spending the night away from home, type of leisure activities, time to return home, right age to date;
- Responsibility, such as carrying out family tasks, using money, taking care of personal things and your room, using the telephone or car, working outside the home;
- Studies, such as qualifications and school performance, study habits and routine, attitude of respect for colleagues and teachers, attitudes at school;
- Family relationships, which refer to parents, fights with siblings, interaction with grandparents, autonomy in relation to the family;
- And moral values, such as conduct harmful to health, the type of language used, honesty, sexual conduct, compliance with rules and social norms.

Laursen, et al. [17] carried out an assessment of the interpersonal conflicts that occur during adolescence and defined the conflict as follows: this would be an interpersonal event that includes a state that comprises incompatible behaviors, disagreement and oppositions. There is often a tendency to confuse conflict with anger, disputes, and arguments. This definition is still confirmed today, since the central characteristic of the conflict is the conduct of opposition or disagreement between people and we will adopt this explanation throughout this study.

A review of the literature indicates that there are molecular aspects in the interaction between parents and adolescent children, and cognitive processes, motivational development and learning, as well as factors of the environment and family structure, which influence the generation and maintenance of conflict. Thus, the research

problem is to assess how adolescents understand and perceive conflicts with their parents. In addition, as this investigation was carried out before the context of the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19), in the year of 2019, which could bring new contexts and other problems to interpersonal analyses, we present as the general objective of this study is to analyze the conflicts between parents and children, as well as their discrepancies in the perception of these conflicts in the specific period of adolescence from 13 to 15 years old.

Method

This is an exploratory study of a quantitative-qualitative nature. The quantitative character is explained by the percentage presentation of the sum of the responses and from that, the qualitative character is given in the analysis of the subjects' essay responses. The research problem consists of the question that revolves around, firstly, the finding that there is an incidence of conflicts in the relationship of adolescent children with their parents, that is: How do adolescent children understand the relationship with their parents and what do you understand by conflicts?.

This problem prompts us to consider three hypotheses that are not taken directly from the literature reviewed. As a first hypothesis, there are assumptions that children/adolescents really perceive the incidence of conflicts in their relationships with their parents, but that they attribute different values to the frequency of these conflicts, understanding that they often do not even consider them as conflicts, properly speaking.

The second hypothesis is that adolescents perceive family conflicts differently, with regard to gender and age: boys manifest themselves differently from girls and younger adolescents express that they have a lower incidence of family conflicts. And as a last hypothesis, it is expected that children perceive changes in the conflicts with their parents throughout adolescence, although there is no prediction about the direction of the changes.

The sample had 74 subjects, 31 girls and 43 boys, aged between 13 and 15 years old, from the 9th grade of Elementary School, from a private school in the city of Santos-SP-Brazil. The school is medium-sized and the subjects interviewed are from middle-class families, living close to the school, which is located in a well-located neighborhood in the city. The inclusion criteria for choosing the sample refer to the age group mentioned above and the obligation to be educated young people.

In consultation with research instruments on family and conflicts [18], it was found that there is no variety of

instruments available for use, or variety of more current literature specific to the topic, thus, the instrument proposal was elaborated especially for this study: a Survey Questionnaire for children, in which it was asked what kind of conflicts do adolescent children have with their parents. This was the only question asked and respondents could freely answer the question. The answers were done in

writing, in a form prepared for this purpose and oriented to be written from the first ideas that came to mind. For the analysis of the questionnaires, the categorization of responses was prioritized trying to group them by incidence. The general findings of the questionnaires are summarized in the following categories presented in the Table 1 below:

GIRLS (31)	%	BOYS (43)	%
Homophobic parents	3,22	Studies	11,62
Fights to leave	19,35	Internet usage	6,97
Parents fighting each other	9,67	Discussion between the whole family	23,25
Time to get home	6,45	Parents finding their child irresponsible	6,97
Controlling/protective parents	9,67	Bedtime	4,65
Absent parents	22,58	Do not allow drinking alcohol	2,32
Parents fighting over sibling	6,45	Clean the house	2,32
NO conflicts	16,12	NO conflicts	39,53
Child wants an exclusive room	3,22	Lack of communication	2,32

Table 1: The analysis of the questionnaires.

Discussion

Based on the results obtained, as we pointed out in the first hypothesis, both parents and adolescent children stated that there were conflicts in the relationship, but that the frequency of these family conflicts was not high. Of the 74 subjects interviewed, 16.12% of the girls and 39.53% of the boys said they had no conflicts with their parents. This result agrees with most other studies, when they point out that the relationships between parents and adolescent children are, in most cases, harmonious and satisfactory for both Noller P, et al. [19], Steinberg LD [13] and Palacios J, et al. [20].

Although the subjects perceive a low incidence of conflicts in their relationships with their parents, they present as also significant categories: absent fathers (22.58% in girls), fights to leave (19.35% in girls) and arguments between the family whole (23.25% in boys). Parents and teenagers still argue sometimes because of studies, time to get home at night, internet use (video games) and alcohol. In addition, parents and children agree that many conflicts arise as well, because of household chores and responsibilities and school chores. It is also noteworthy that adolescents point out those constant fights between parents cause conflicts between all of them. They say that *"the parents fight for whatever reason"*, that *"there is a lack of communication"* or that *"the father is absent"* or *"the mother is absent"*.

As a second hypothesis, which consists of finding differences, between age and gender, in the perception of

family conflicts, this is partially confirmed. Girls seem to perceive much more conflict in their relationships with their parents than boys: 39.53% of boys believe they do not have conflicts, with only 16.12% of girls claiming the absence of conflicts. All 13-year-old boys who answered the questionnaire claimed not to have conflicts with their parents. In the list of girls, only 5 of them, for the entire age group, said they had no problems with family life, which suggests that women - mothers or daughters - perceive family conflicts more intensely, such as those that revolve around fathers absent, the use of money, ways of dressing, cigarettes and alcohol, or disagree with opinions [21].

As adolescents are more interested in achieving autonomy in some domains of their private life, discussions can arise from this point. This difference between girls and boys could be explained by the greater concern of mothers for the education of their children. Mothers probably want their children to dedicate more time to studies, unlike adolescents who are more interested in achieving autonomy and personal freedom.

Following the analysis of the data, it is confirmed that there are differences according to the gender of the parents that were verified in the justifications of the respondents. The adolescents interviewed showed the perception that they discuss more with their mothers than with their fathers because mothers are *"overprotective"* and *"controlling"*. This result is consistent with other studies found in research by other authors Steinberg [13] Youniss, et al. [22]. Who

showed that mothers are more involved than fathers in the care and daily supervision of adolescents. Mothers tend to be more attentive than fathers to the personal and family life of adolescents, at least that is what the literature has shown to date, while fathers are more concerned with social relationships and their children's academic performance.

Regarding the gender variable, it was found in this study that girls have more conflicts with their fathers, fathers and mothers than boys. Discussions are about various issues as already mentioned above, however, boys only discuss with both parents, because of studies and about the future. This result may respond to the greater demand that both fathers and mothers have with their sons, considering that they may be related to the stereotypes currently prevailing in society: fathers and mothers continue to have different expectations and treat their sons and daughters differently.

And finally, in relation to the third hypothesis, that conflicts between parents and children increase during early adolescence – the age group of this study – and continue during middle adolescence, the data collected partially confirm this statement. It would be necessary to increase the ages in the investigation, but with the results mentioned above, it is confirmed that adolescents do not report having many relationship conflicts, which has already been mentioned in relation to the first hypothesis, and the reasons for the conflicts are related to their ages. This is because some researches Smetana, et al. [23] show that the differences in the reasons for conflicts are related to the concerns of the adolescent period in which the young person is, that is, problems with affective relationships between peers, going out late with friends and questions about the future and career. It means a change in the moment when conflicts between parents and children appear, which may or may not delay their appearance.

The Importance of the Family as a Context of Socialization and Influence

The family has been defined as the primary context due to its central role in the socialization of children and adolescents [24]. It is assumed that the patterns of interaction, confrontation and identity formation that are acquired through experience in the family environment are fundamental for interacting with other socializing influences and serve to prepare children and adolescents to overcome the obstacles and tasks of development and social life. It is as if at the beginning of human development, parents would be the protagonists and the family the primary arena of socialization [25].

According to other studies, already mentioned above, the behaviors of parents, for example, their support and

control, are significantly related to the development of self-esteem [26] and to the adolescent's academic performance [27] and in turn, these two variables are consistently related to socialization [28]. On the other hand, parental coercive and punitive behaviors are related to the development of antisocial behavior in children and adolescents [28,29] and negligence and indifference in parenting practices are associated with a certain type of behaviors internalized in adolescents, such as social isolation [30]. They are also related to parenting practices, group affiliation in adolescence [31] and associations are found between relationships with friends, antisocial behavior, academic deficit and family ecology [32].

Family members establish certain relationships among themselves that allow them to satisfy different needs which implies that the family maintains a balance in its functioning over the years. The goals or tasks of the family system are the preservation, maturation, development and nutrition of its members and before reaching the adolescence stage of the children, families have developed interaction patterns to fulfill these goals.

This is because adolescence is still characterized by numerous biological, cognitive and social changes, such as the expansion of responsibilities, access to some adult rights and transitions in school life [33], in addition to the multiple changes that occur during this period of transition, which may be associated with certain psychological states, usually negative, that influence the relationship with parents [34]. These changes are characterized by going from the renegotiation of unilateral authority to maturity and the redefinition of family ties. The relationship changes from being primarily vertical to being a more horizontal one, which indicates that the interaction with parents in late adolescence or early adulthood turns to the relationship of friends and partners.

Interpersonal Conflict during Adolescence

The definition of conflict in terms of oppositional conduct offers many possibilities. Among them, it is possible to examine these behaviors independently of the negative effect, which may or may not be present in the conflict, which generally tend to be confused with expressions of anger, fights or arguments [35]. A similar situation occurs when asked about family conflicts.

The conflicts that occur when there are outbursts of anger and displeasure are more salient and it is possible for the subjects to remember more accurately, therefore, definitions that carry an affective component may underestimate the occurrence of the conflict in relation to the memory of it [17].

A second possibility refers to the distinction made between conflict and levels of competition and aggression. Competitive behavior does not always lead to conflict, and the same can be said about aggression, which is an important distinction for defining conflict in terms of oppositional conduct.

The structure of the conflict for some authors Garvey [36] supposes only an instance of opposition or disagreement in which "A" provokes an objection in "B" and another alternative point of view conceptualizes the conflict as a state of mutual opposition or disagreement that comprises a minimum of three events, ie, A responds to B's initial opposition or objection by persisting in the original conduct or counterattacking. Within this framework, Shanz [37] proposes several related components:

- incidence and intensity - defined as the frequency and affective climate of a conflict;
- subjects or topics of the conflict;
- initiation and opposition - which contain the behaviors that initiate the conflict;
- resolution - defined as the conduct that ends the conflict;
- result - what happens after the conflict ends.

The components described follow a regular sequence that represents distinct but interrelated components.

Final Considerations

Pubertal development is clearly associated with changes in parent-child relationships as can be inferred from the surveyed studies and research data collection. This study suggests that the relationship changes at this stage, although there is evidence of the strength or importance that these changes have for each of the members of the relationship. The literature reviewed suggests that puberty has a consistent but probably weak effect on parent-adolescent relationships. But it is important to note that this study brings only a small cut of the huge number of variables that comprise the conditions of families and adolescents, such as cultural, economic and racial conditions. In addition to the issue of variability between families, as a consequence of the changes that occur at puberty, we did not explore families with less conflictive characteristics that may respond differently from families with a high level of conflict, remembering that this study was applied before 2020/ 2021, when the world pandemic occurred.

Finally, it is difficult to understand conflicts between parents and adolescent children without taking into account a temporal perspective and relational reciprocity. Furthermore, according to Palacios [24], the perceptions and attributions that both elaborate on others also affect their

relationships. Conflicts between parents and children arise within the framework of family relationships and these are dynamic and bidirectional, in such a way that the actions of parents have consequences on their children, but they also have a decisive influence on their parents.

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