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Adolescent Depression and Anxiety: Is Parental Psychological Control a Factor?

by Liz Erickson

Many see adolescence as a time of “finding yourself,” becoming more independent, and relying less and less on parents. This can be incredibly exciting; however, many in this age group are experiencing increasing levels of depression and symptoms of anxiety. Recent research suggests that an imbalance in parental psychological control in these teens’ lives may negatively contribute.

In a recent study, family life researchers followed adolescents from ages 12 to 19, assessing how much they experienced or perceived parent psychological control. Psychological control refers to a set of subtle and manipulative parenting strategies (e.g., guilt, love withdrawal, dismissiveness) that essentially attempt to coerce adolescents into thinking and feeling similarly to their parents. Some parents, on occasion, may use these subtle control strategies as adolescents become more independent and overt rules and punishments—which are part of behavioral control—no longer work as well.

“Theory and research indicate considerable changes in parental control across adolescence (e.g., declining behavioral control), but the developmental course and significance of psychological control remains largely unknown,” said the study’s lead author, Adam Rogers, of Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life.

To gather data, 500 families (adolescents and parents) from Brigham Young University’s Flourishing Families Project responded to a variety

of assessments each year. Adolescents reported both mothers and fathers’ levels of psychological control and their own depressive and anxiety symptoms. Parents reported on their adolescents’ externalizing behaviors (e.g., violence or emotional outburst), as well as on their own depressive symptoms.

The key outcome of this study was the finding that most adolescents experienced low yet increasing levels of psychological control by parents, which was associated with some teens experiencing depressive and anxiety-related symptoms, possibly because their parents’ manipulative messages was limiting their emerging independence. Mothers with depressive symptoms during their children’s early adolescence showed higher levels of exhibiting psychological control, indicating that a parent’s own emotional state can influence how the child perceives their parenting and how independent the parent is willing to let them be.

According to the study, about 90% of adolescents experienced what can be considered a normative trajectory of psychological control, which is characterized by low levels early in adolescents that slightly increase over time, but not to any extreme. A child’s perception of some psychological control may be part of parent-teen relationships as parents communicate their own preferences and beliefs, often hoping their children will adopt the same. The remaining 10% of teens in the study showed differences between mothers and fathers, with mothers showing moderate levels of psychological control that remained

stable throughout adolescence, and fathers starting with moderate levels of psychological control in early adolescence, which then lowered across time.

Adolescents who reported this somewhat higher level of control were more likely to have a parent (particularly mothers) with depressive symptoms, and adolescents themselves showed higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms than adolescents reporting lower psychological control. These findings may be the result of parents not adjusting their control adequately for the age of their children, as well as depressed parents tending to have a harder time controlling in appropriate ways when they are experiencing depressive symptoms.

Ultimately, these findings seem to indicate that the psychological control that started high and stayed high correlated with the most symptoms. “This study offers greater insight into the changing dynamics of parental control across adolescence. While more direct forms of parental control (e.g., monitoring, knowledge) are declining across the adolescent years, adolescents may actually experience steady increases in parents’ psychological control, and this trend appears to hold developmental significance for the adolescent,” says lead author Rogers.

This potential negative impact for development if parental control is not appropriate can be significant for teens’ mental health outcomes. Certain levels of behavioral control

by parents can help adolescents make better decisions, but psychological control can potentially lend itself to symptoms of depression or anxiety. Talking with children about how they are experiencing control and helping them express their independence in healthy ways may be protective during adolescence.

***Liz Erickson** is a family studies major at Brigham Young University, will graduate as a Family Life Educator in April 2021, and has great desires to be a mother soon. She and her husband, Jake, love to play basketball, chat with people in the street, sing John Denver songs, and keep the Christmas tree up year round.*

References

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