Ideal Qualities in Future Relationships: Do Adolescents Prefer Parental or Peer Qualities?
Elizabeth A. Dahlke and Elizabeth M. Henckel

Abstract

This descriptive study explored the relationship between the qualities adolescents perceive in their peers or parents related to the qualities they seek in new relationships. The researchers hypothesized that adolescents would view peer qualities as more desirable for future relationships than parental qualities. The researchers convenience sampled 24 students (6 male, 18 female, M = 14.75) from a private high school in the Midwestern United States. Participants completed a survey created by the researchers. Results revealed a significant difference in ratings of parental qualities, indicating that adolescents view those qualities found in peers as more desirable characteristics that they hope to find in future relationships than those found in parents. Future research may examine the quality of the relationship between parents and/or teachers and ideal qualities in future relationships.

The development of relationships in adolescence impacts identity development and the advancement of social skills. Personal qualities of both parents and peers shape adolescents’ future relationship expectations. A conflict appears to exist, however, between the qualities adolescents perceive in their parents and those of their peers. For example, perceived peer qualities including non-conformity and a good sense of humor often occur in contradistinction to perceived parental qualities such as trustworthiness, concern, and a conservative or traditional way of thinking. Though ideal qualities found in peers appear to conflict with those of parents, Dworkin and Lee (2005) found that those adolescents reporting close relationships with their parents also report high adolescent autonomy.

Researchers have also found that attachment and parenting styles relate to the quality of adolescents’ peer relationships (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993; Engels, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2002; Matza, Kupersmidt, & Glenn, 2001). Studies examining parenting styles and adolescent group membership found that warm, positive parenting styles correlate with adolescent popularity and high academic achievement (Brown et al., 1993; Matza et al., 2001). In comparison, adolescent boys who report observing parental conflict justify aggression in their own romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Engels et al. (2002, p. 3) found that parental attachment relates to such qualities as “the degree of peer activity, the attachment to peers, and perceived social support from peers.”

Research examining adolescent views of parental discipline found that girls perceived discipline as protective in nature while boys interpreted discipline as threatening to their developing autonomy (Marshal & Chassin, 2000). According to Fuligni and Eccles (1993, p. 622), adolescents who perceived their parents as more restrictive scored “higher in an extreme form of peer orientation,” while adolescents involved with decision-making scored “higher in both extreme orientation and peer advice seeking.” As adolescents’ development continues, they become less attached to their parents and in turn become more attached to their peers (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

Despite this apparent separation from parents and movement toward peers, Dworkin and Lee (2005, p. 2) suggest that “adolescents’ increase in autonomy is accompanied by and even facilitated by maintaining close relations with parents.” Meeus (2003) found that though peer support continues to increase as adolescents grow older, it generally does not surpass or override parental support. In fact, parental support predicts adolescent psychological well-being better than quality of peer relationships (Meeus, 2003).

As adolescents grow older, they begin to negotiate the power they possess in relationships, particularly in parent-adolescent relationships. Noack and Buhl (2004) found that low absolute levels
Parental or Peer Qualities

of conflict accompany power shifts in parent-adolescent relationships and that adolescents generally
do not achieve equal power with parents before their 13th year. Studies have also shown that
mothers’ positive or negative reactions to changes in the parent-adolescent relationship may
respectively influence acceptance and conflict in parent-adolescent relationships (Shearer, Crouter, &
McHale, 2005).

Research demonstrates that adolescent-peer relationships illustrate a better, more positive socio-
emotional quality than do parent-adolescent relationships (Noack & Buhl, 2004). As adolescents
seek greater autonomy, they begin to push away from their parents and seek to establish a unique
identity with their peers. As a result, conformity to parents becomes less prevalent than with peers
(Berndt, 1979; Kaplan, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (1967) also found that peer pressure may cause
American adolescents to deviate from adult expectations.

Peer relationships are reflected in adolescent behavior. Shulman and Scharf (2000) found that the
qualities adolescents seek in romantic relationships reflect the qualities observed in their own peer
relationships. Similarly, research examining the difference between the effects of parental and peer
violence on adolescent dating has shown that only peer violence consistently predicts adolescent
dating violence (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004).

To examine the development of autonomy in adolescence, the researchers used a descriptive design
to measure the difference between perceived parental and peer qualities and the qualities adolescents
seek in new relationships. Based on previous research by Meeus (2003), which showed that peer
support increases during adolescence, the researchers hypothesized that adolescents would view peer
qualities as more desirable for future relationships than parental qualities. The results of this study
help describe how adolescents influence one another as well as those qualities teens value in others.

Method

Participants

The researchers conveniently sampled 24 students (6 male, 18 female), ranging in age from 14 to 15
(M = 14.75, SD = .44), from the student body of a private high school in the Midwestern United
States. Of the 24 participants, 79.2% identified themselves as Caucasian, while the remaining 20.8%
identified themselves as another race. The majority of participants (70.8%) acknowledged that they
spent more time with peers than parents, and 54.2% felt they had a better relationship with their
peers than their parents.

Instruments

The researchers created the Perceived Qualities Inventory, a paper and pencil survey assessing the
qualities adolescents perceive in their parents and peers and the qualities they look for in new
relationships. Participants responded to three identical lists of characteristics designed to assess the
qualities adolescents perceived in each of the three groups: parents, peers, and those qualities viewed
as desirable in new relationships. Each list contained 21 qualities including such characteristics as
"Accepting," "Traditional," and "Care-free" (please see the Appendix for complete list of qualities).
Participants completed the inventory by placing a checkmark next to the qualities that they perceived
in their parents, their peers, and those they viewed as desirable in future relationships. The
researchers scored each list in the survey by summing the number of items that corresponded
between the parental qualities list and the new relationships list and also the corresponding items on
the peer qualities list and the new relationships list. Scores ranged from 0 to 21 on a ratio scale, with
0 indicating that the participant did not consistently indicate similar qualities between the lists and 21
representing that the participant identified every quality on both lists.
Parental or Peer Qualities

The researchers also created a paper and pencil demographic survey to gather background information about each participant. The demographic survey included forced choice items to assess age, sex, race, and relationship status with parents and peers on a nominal scale. The participants completed both instruments in approximately 5 minutes.

Procedure

The researchers obtained the permission of the principal to conduct the research study at the high school. The principal informed the high school teachers of the research study and agreed upon a date to conduct the study. Participants learned of the study through their teachers. The study took place in a high school classroom during the students' study hall. Upon entering the classroom, participants received a verbal informed consent explaining the purpose and procedures of the study. Each participant received the Perceived Qualities Inventory and a demographic survey. The researchers instructed the participants to respond to the surveys as accurately as possible. After the participants completed the surveys, they received a debriefing statement that thanked them for volunteering, provided them with further information about the nature of the study, and stated how to find the results of the study.

Results

This study examined the relationship between perceived parental and peer qualities and the qualities adolescents seek in new relationships. The researchers hypothesized that adolescents would view peer qualities (compared to parental qualities) as more desirable for future relationships. Of the 24 participants, 19 adolescents indicated a greater preference for peer qualities in future relationships than parental qualities, four preferred parental qualities, and one individual was indifferent. A one-sample t-test compared the number of qualities adolescents view as desirable in their parents and the number of qualities they view as desirable in their peers for future relationships. Results revealed that teens reported fewer parental qualities in future relationships ($M = 10.54$, $SD = 5.2$) than peer qualities ($M = 14.17$, $SD = 3.71$); ($t(23) = 18.67$, $p = 0.00$).

Discussion

Though the sample of students surveyed was small, the results of this study provided significant support for the hypothesis that adolescents would view peer qualities as more desirable for future relationships than parental qualities. Therefore, the researchers concluded that a relationship exists between the qualities adolescents view in their peers and the qualities they look for in new relationships.

According to Kaplan (2004), adolescents begin to establish autonomy and shift away from parental dependency by forming friendships with peers. However, autonomy characterizes the process of individuation, and though "adolescents' increase in autonomy is accompanied by even facilitated by maintaining close relations with parents" (Dworkin & Lee, 2005, p. 2), teens often look to peers, not parents, when defining future relationships. Meeus (2003) found that peer support increases during adolescence and becomes similar to that of parental support; however, it does not take precedence over parental support. In fact, parental support allows adolescents to explore their own interests and develop autonomy. In light of this, it is important to note that though the majority of participants in this study viewed peer qualities as more desirable for future relationships than parental qualities, nearly half (45.8%) of the adolescents surveyed indicated that they experienced a closer relationship with their parents than their peers.
Adolescents' push for autonomy from their parents explains the value that they place on peer relationships; however, this does not replace the importance adolescents place on parent-adolescent relationships.

As adolescents mature, they possess the ability to realistically perceive their parents and begin to view them as human (Kaplan, 2004). Though adolescents do not completely disregard their parents’ values, they begin to pick and choose those that they feel are most important. Therefore, parental support proves vital to the developing adolescent. Though the parent-adolescent relationship redefines itself during adolescence, teens still need parents to provide an example of values and morals, as well as the unconditional love, support, and discipline needed during adolescence. Although adolescents may strive to create an identity apart from their parents and families, they do not suddenly disregard their parents’ support and wisdom, but in some ways, depend on it (Meeus, 2003).

Future research may include a descriptive examination of the role peer relationships play in adolescent identity development. This research would examine how adolescents negotiate between the relationships and resulting sense of self experienced within their families and their peers in order to establish their own unique sense of self and identity. Future research may also include a study of the effect of parent-adolescent relationships on adolescent-peer relationships. This research would seek to identify ways in which the influences of parents and/or teachers affect the adolescents’ choice of friends, reaction to peer pressure, and the values developed in late adolescence. This series of research studies would provide parents and teachers alike with valuable information concerning adolescent-peer relationships and the process of identity formation.

References


Parental or Peer Qualities


# Parental or Peer Qualities

## Appendix

### Perceived Qualities Inventory

Please select the qualities you see in each relationship from the following lists.

**What qualities do you see in your parents?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Accepting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>Concern</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good judgment</td>
<td>Good communicators</td>
<td>Care-free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun to hang out with</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Strict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonconforming</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What qualities do you see in your close friends?**

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**What qualities do you look for in future relationships?**

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