

# Parent – Adolescent Communication

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## I. BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Communication is generally accepted as one of the most crucial facets of interpersonal relationships. Its prominence in theoretical construction of human and family interactions attests to the great importance attributed to the role of communication. Goffman (1959), in developing his ideas on symbolic interaction, viewed communication as central to the symbolic presentations that comprise all human interactions.

Communication is also important from the viewpoint of family development theory (Nunnally, 1971; Miller, 1971; Corrales, 1974) but its importance is perhaps most fully recognized by systems theory (Buckley, 1967; Russell, 1977). Information is exchanged within and between family systems utilizing their established channels of communication.

Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle (1980) have developed a theoretical model of marital and family systems known as the Circumplex Model. Although this systems model focuses on the dimensions of family cohesion and family adaptability, communication is a crucial component of the model. They hypothesized that effective communication facilitates movement to, and maintenance of systems at the desired (balanced) level on the two major dimensions of the model. Further, ineffective communication minimizes and may prevent movement toward balanced levels of adaptability and cohesion.

One of the most detailed elaborations of the role of communication in human interactions is The Pragmatics of Human Communication (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). They defined a family as a rule-governed system whose members are continually in the process of negotiating or defining the nature of their relationship. Lewis and Spanier's theory of marital quality (1979) postulates that effective interspousal communication contributes to the rewards each spouse experiences in their interactions.

Moving to a less abstract level, the significance of effective communication between spouses and within families has been recognized by therapists, researchers and family life educators. Broderick (in Olson, 1976) cited the important diagnostic function of communication and the need to focus upon family communication patterns. In their review of recent trends in marriage therapy and divorce, Paolino and McCrady (1978) recommended communication training as an effective initial intervention for mild to moderate marital problems.

Further evidence of the belief that good communication skills are crucial to satisfaction with family relationships is offered by large numbers of people involved in the marriage and family enrichment movement

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(Mace, 1977; Travis & Travis, 1975; Sherwood & Sherer, 1975; Regula, 1975; Miller et al., 1975; Hinkle & Moore, 1971; Schlein, 1971; D'Angelli et al., 1974; Van Zoost, 1973; Campbell, 1974; Carnes & Laube, 1975; Miller, 1971; Nunnally, 1971) who incorporate communication skill training into their enrichment programs.

Despite the widely acclaimed importance of communication to family relationships found in the writings of theoreticians and family practitioners, research into the nature of family communication presents some challenging difficulties. One of the main difficulties is the complexity of family communication which presents a wide variety of aspects upon which researchers might focus.

Due to this variety of formulations and consequent variety of operationalizations of communication, few studies are directly comparable. Communication has been studied as a general construct (Navran, 1967); as self-disclosure (Levinger & Senn, 1967; Jorgensen & Gaudy, 1980); as a skill-learning process during therapy (Schreiber, 1966); in terms of different styles or patterns of interaction (Corrales, 1974; Miller, 1974; Hawkins et al., 1980), or in terms of specific components such as empathy, congruence, and regard (Schumm, 1980; Epstein & Jackson, 1978; Miller, 1971; Nunnally, 1971; Barrett-Lennard, 1962), or in terms of couples' hesitancy to communicate within the context of a close interpersonal relationship (Powers & Hutchinson, 1979). In addition to the above mentioned, many other researchers have developed scales to measure the particular aspect of communication in which they were interested (Hobart & Klausner, 1959; Vanderveen, 1976; Moos, 1974; Bienvenu, 1970; Olson et al., 1982).

Table I summarizes some of the studies of interspousal and intra-family communication. Most studies of communication have relied exclusively upon self-report data without any attempt to measure or reconcile the differing perceptions of additional family members. Further, most studies have focused on communication in the spousal relationship.

The current study focuses on family communication as reported by each of three different family members. This study will measure these aspects of family communication as experienced by each spouse and one adolescent. They will each describe the amount of openness, the extent of problems or barriers to family communication and the degree to which people are selective in their discussion with other family members.

TABLE I: STUDIES OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION

<u>Researcher</u>	<u>Aspect of Communication</u>	<u>How Measured</u>	<u>Who Measured</u>
Navran (1967)	Communication in general	Self-report	Each spouse
Levinger & Senn (1967)	Self-disclosure	Self-report	Each spouse
Cutler & Dyer (1965)	Selective response to violations of expectations by their spouse	Self-report	Each spouse
Jorgensen & Gandy (1980)	Relationship of self-disclosure to marital satis- faction	Self-report	Each spouse reports of other spouse Couple scores
Hawkins, Weis- berg, & Ray Gandy (1980)	Communication styles	Self-report observation	Each spouse Reports of other spouse Independent observers
Powers & Hitchinson (1979)	Communication apprehension	Self-report	Each spouse

## II. INITIAL DEVELOPMENT OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION

### A. CONCEPTUAL ORGANIZATION

The dynamics of the interpersonal relationships in families change over time as the children grow from totally dependent newborns to autonomous adults. Clearly the nature of these interpersonal relationships vary from family to family as each individual and family group lives out their own interpretation of the dictates of the cultural norms or values and reconciles these with their own desires and needs. Communication is an essential ingredient to the establishment of the type of negotiation process families adopt to meet the developmental changes dictated by the growth of individual members.

Adolescence is often viewed as a particularly turbulent period of challenge and change in the relationship between these emerging adults and their parents. As adolescents grow toward adulthood, parallel changes are needed in their relationship with their parents to facilitate and enable these changes, or at least to remove obstacles to the demands of the developmental tasks faced by adolescents. Although some families experience a great deal of upheaval and difficulty during this period, many others have a much more positive view and experience of these developmentally important years.

Our goal was to be able to describe parent-adolescent communication in a variety of family types and to capture some of the diversity of experiences in different families. In addition, we wanted to be able to compare the views and perspectives of different family members. This scale was intended to assess the views of both adolescents and their parents regarding their perceptions and experience of communication with each other. Of particular interest were issues such as the extent of openness or freedom to exchange ideas, information and concerns between generations; the trust or honesty experienced; and the tone or emotional tenor of the interactions, whether positive or negative.

A review of the literature revealed several variables relevant to parent-adolescent communication. A pool of items designed to measure several different aspects of this parent-teen interaction was generated. In addition to the created items, some items were drawn from a variety of other resources and reworded to pertain to interactions between parents and adolescents.

Thirty-five items from the initial pool were selected for testing in a pilot study. These items were selected for their composite ability to measure different aspects of communication, both process and content. These items were also examined for ease of understanding and clarity of meaning in order to provide a readable scale for youth as young as 12 years of age.

For each of the 35 items, the adolescents in the pilot study were asked to respond first as the item related to their own relationship with their mother and then as it related to their interactions with their father. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Moderately Disagree; 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 4=Moderately Agree; 5=Strongly Agree). For the pilot study only the responses of adolescents were sampled.

The subjects in this pilot study included adolescents from both the college or university and the high school level. Responses were received from 433 subjects, 127 of high school age and 306 from college and university classes. The sample included students from four different institutions in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Although information on respondents ages was not collected, the vast majority fell in the late adolescent (16-20) age range.

#### B. CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (FACTOR ANALYSIS)

The data from the pilot study were analyzed using factor analysis methods of both principal factoring with iterations and varimax rotation. The minimum eigen value was 1.0. As a result of this analysis, three main components or factors emerged. Based on the items in each factor, the factors were given the following names: open family communication (Factor I); problems in family communication (Factor II); and selective family communication (Factor III). Table II summarizes the items on each subscale, and the factor loadings from this pilot study.

TABLE II: FACTORS AND FACTOR LOADINGS OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION SCALE

A. OPEN FAMILY COMMUNICATION (Factor I)

	Factor Loadings	
	Mother	Father
I find it easy to discuss problems with my mother/father.	.71	.72
I am very satisfied with how my mother/father and I talk together.	.65	.70
My mother/father are always good listeners.	.62	.70
I can discuss my beliefs with my mother/father without feeling restrained or embarrassed.	.65	.54
My mother/father tries to understand my point of view.	.64	.72
It is very easy for me to express all my true feelings to my mother/father.	.62	.60
If I were in trouble, I could tell my mother/father.	.59	.65
My mother/father can tell how I'm feeling without asking.	.54	.56
I openly show affection to my mother/father.	.53	.59
When I ask questions, I get honest answers from my mother/father.	.50	.54

B. PROBLEMS IN FAMILY COMMUNICATION (Factor II)

	Factor Loadings	
	Mother	Father
My mother/father insults me when they are angry with me.	.73	.68
My mother/father has a tendency to say things to me which would be better left unsaid.	.60	.53
My mother/father nags me.	.50	.48
Sometimes I have trouble believing everything my mother/father tells me.	.42	.39
When talking with my mother/father, I have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid.	.39	.40
When we are having a problem, I often give my mother/father the silent treatment.	.36	.56

C. SELECTIVE FAMILY COMMUNICATION (Factor III)

	Factor Loadings	
	Mother	Father
There are topics I avoid discussing with my mother/father.	.64	.60
I don't think I can tell my mother/father how I really feel about some things.	.58	.60
I am careful about what I say to my mother/father.	.50	.58
I am sometimes afraid to ask my mother/father for what I want.	.42	.39

On the basis of this factor analysis, the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale was reduced from 35 to 20 items. As Table II indicates there are 10 items on the Open Family Communication subscale, six items on the subscale related to Problems in Family Communication, and four items measuring Selective Family Communication.

### C. RELIABILITY

Using the data from the pilot study, alpha reliabilities were computed for each of the subscales and the total scale. After the 20-item scale was developed, a study was conducted to determine the test-retest reliability of the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale. The scale was administered to various groups of adolescents. There were a total of 124 subjects from 12 different university and high school classes in this study. The mean age of the students was 19.2 years. The interval between the first and second administration of the test was four to five weeks. Table III summarizes the Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis from this analysis.

TABLE III: RELIABILITY ANALYSIS OF THE INITIAL SCALE

<u>Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale</u>	<u>Internal Consistency</u>		<u>Test-Retest</u>	
	Alpha	n	r	n
Open Family Communication	.92	433	.78	114
Problems in Family Communication	.82	433	.77	117
Selective Family Communication	.80	433	.64	110
TOTAL SCALE	.72	433	.60	106

### III. FINAL INSTRUMENT

#### A. CONCEPTUAL ORGANIZATION (DIMENSIONS)

The form of the final scale was dictated by both empirical and theoretical considerations. The intent was to develop a brief scale that measured both positive and negative aspects of communication as well as aspects of the content and process of the parent-adolescent interactions. To accomplish this, the final scale consists of two subscales.

These two subscales each tap both content and process issues. The first subscale, Open Family Communication, measures the more positive aspects of parent-adolescent communication. The focus is on the freedom or free flowing exchange of information, both factual and emotional as well as on the sense of lack of constraint and degree of understanding and satisfaction experienced in their interactions. The second subscale, Problems in Family Communication, focuses on the negative aspects of communication, hesitancy to share, negative styles of interaction, and selectivity and caution in what is shared.

## B. CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (FACTOR ANALYSIS)

The early developmental work on this scale included unrestricted varimax rotated factor analysis which yielded the three factors described above. Further, the early work on this scale was conducted with samples of adolescents. The goal for the final study was to develop a scale applicable to adults as well. It was felt that a scale of 20 items reflecting both positive and negative aspects of communication was preferable. This suggested the use of two subscales rather than three. Given the similar nature of the two latter subscales, both focusing on negative aspects of communication, it was decided that conceptually they fit together.

Once the data from the larger study were available, additional analysis was conducted on this combined parent and adolescent data. While an unrestricted varimax rotation continued to define the three separate factors discussed above, when restricted to two factors the second and third scales collapsed into a single factor while the first scale continued as a separate factor.

Table IV presents the factor loadings for this final version of the scale. In order to allow for replication, the total sample was large enough to accommodate a division into two groups. The factoring reported in Table 4 is based only on the first half of the sample (n=925).

## C. RELIABILITY

Cronbach's Alpha was used to compute the internal consistency reliability of the final factors and scales. Table V indicates the reliabilities when computed on Sample I (n=925), Sample II (n=916) and the Total Sample (n=1,841). The alpha reliability was .87 for Open Family Communication, .78 for Problems in Family Communication and .88 for the Total Scale. The results indicate that the two subscales and the total scale are very reliable.

TABLE V: ALPHA RELIABILITY OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION

	<u>Sample I</u> <u>(n=925)</u>	<u>Sample II</u> <u>(n=916)</u>	<u>Total</u> <u>(n=1,841)</u>
Open Family Communication	.87	.87	.87
Problems in Family Communication	.78	.77	.78
TOTAL SCALE	.87	.88	.88

TABLE IV: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION\*

A. <u>OPEN FAMILY COMMUNICATION (Factor I)</u>		
7.	I am very satisfied with how my (mother/father, or adolescent) and I talk together.	.71
16.	I find it easy to discuss problems with my (mother/father, or child).	.70
14.	My (mother/father or child) tries to understand my point of view.	.66
17.	It is very easy for me to express all my true feelings to my (mother/father or child).	.66
3.	My (mother/father or child) is always a good listener.	.59
8.	If I were in trouble I could tell my (mother/father, child).	.59
9.	I openly show affection to my (mother/father, child).	.55
13.	When I ask questions I get honest answers from my (mother/father, child).	.55
1.	I can discuss my beliefs with my (mother/father, child) without feeling restrained or embarrassed.	.53
6.	My (mother/father, child) can tell how I'm feeling without asking.	.48
B. <u>PROBLEMS IN FAMILY COMMUNICATION (Factor II)</u>		
5.	My (mother/father, child) has a tendency to say things to me which would be better left unsaid.	.60
12.	When talking with my (mother/father, child) I have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid.	.58
20.	I don't think I can tell my (mother/father, child) how I really feel about some things.	.57
10.	When we are having a problem, I often give my (mother/father, child) the silent treatment.	.56
18.	My (mother/father, child) nags/bothers me.	.55
4.	I am sometimes afraid to ask my (mother/father, child) for what I want.	.49
19.	My (mother/father, child) insults me when s/he is angry with me.	.47
15.	There are topics I avoid discussing with my (mother/father, child)	.45
2.	Sometimes I have trouble believing everything my (mother/father, child) tells me.	.29
11.	I am careful about what I say to my (mother/father, child).	.26

\*The only difference between the parent and adolescent forms is the person targeted by the question is either "mother/father" or "child."



#### IV. SCORING

Items from the two subscales are intermingled on the final version of the scale. Although this may complicate the scoring process slightly, it is intended to reduce response bias of respondents. The total score is basically a sum score, but it is necessary to distinguish items from the two subscales as responses to the second subscale. Problems in Family Communication need to be flipped in point value. This can be accomplished in three different ways: change every 5 to a 1 and 4 to a 2 on these 10 items; subtract each response value from 6 and use the resulting difference or add the point value of all the items on this subscale and subtract this total from 60. These items are 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 15, 18, 19 and 20.

Once the values of the responses on the second subscale have been flipped, these new values can be added to the responses on the first subscale for a sum total scale score. Note the items on the first subscale which do not get flipped are 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 16, and 17.

Although this total scale score will generally be used, for some applications it may be preferable to use the scores from each subscale separately. Norms for the total scale score based on the sample from the current study are tabled in the next section.

#### V. NORMS

Table VI lists the norms for total scale scores that have been developed. Although the scale items are common, the responses vary considerably among family members. Although some comparisons were quite similar, such as male and female adolescent responses regarding each parent, some of the intergroup differences were substantial enough to suggest the need for reporting different norms. In order to reflect these differences, Table VI reports norms for four different subdivisions: 1) fathers reporting an interaction with the teens, 2) mothers' reports, 3) adolescents' reports regarding their mothers, and 4) adolescents' reports about interactions with their fathers.

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