Trends in adolescents’ perceived parental communication across 32 countries in Europe and North America from 2002 to 2010

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Introduction

Adolescence is often conceptualized as a developmental phase, whereby the young person transitions from the guardianship of parents towards independent adulthood. The quality of communication with parents during adolescence remains a strong determinant of health and well-being, being predictive of adolescents’ self-esteem, self-rated health and the ability to navigate health risk behaviours. Evidence from predominantly cross-sectional studies indicates that adolescents who report easy communication with their mothers are more likely to report excellent or high-rated health, and are less likely to be current smokers or frequent alcohol drinkers.1,2 Moreover, finding it easy to talk with their mother or father about the issues that were of importance to them. Individual outcomes, reported quality of communication with both father and mother. The survey question explored young people’s perceptions of how easy it was to talk with their mother or father about the issues that were of importance to them.

European studies suggest that the quality of parent–adolescent relationships is determined by different factors: individual (such as age and gender) and external (cultural and socio-economic),3,4 including at the national level differing social and family welfare policies.5,6 Consideration of international trends in adolescents’ communication with their parents offers an opportunity to begin to explore the relationship between changes in family lifestyle and socioeconomic contexts and other trends in adolescent health and well-being. An advantage of using the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) analyses is that the same instrument is used for measuring the quality of parent communication in all countries over three survey rounds.

The aim of the article is to describe trends in adolescent’s perception of communication with mothers and fathers by gender among young people in early-to-mid adolescence across 32 European and North American countries for the first decade of the 21st century.

Methods

Data were drawn from the cross-national HBSC study, collected during the 2001–02, 2005–06 and 2009–10 school-years. A total of 425 699 young people, aged 11, 13 and 15 years, from 32 countries/regions reported on their perceptions of the quality of communication with both father and mother. The survey question explored young people’s perceptions of how easy it was to talk to their mother or father about the issues that were of importance to them. Individual outcomes, reported quality of communication with father and mother were dichotomized into two categories: easy and difficult. The analyses were performed separately for boys and girls for the pooled dataset and separately for 32 countries, employing General Linear Model (a procedure MANOVA) from SPSS (version 21, 2012, IBM Corp., NY). Paired Bonferroni test was used to describe changes in quality of communication of Adolescents’ with their parents from 2002 to 2010, controlling for age and family affluence. The pooled analyses used country weighting to control for the different size samples.

Results

Significant positive trends in prevalence of ease of communication with both parents were found in the vast majority of countries (figure 1), these consistent positive trends were identified across all ages (not reported in this article). However, significant differences...
Figure 1 Change in the ease of communication between 2001–02 and 2009–10, by country

(Bar for France (girls) is truncated (real value is 22.3)).

Communication with fathers

Figure 1 Change in the ease of communication between 2001–02 and 2009–10, by country
Figure 1 Continued
Discussion

This study of young people in early-to-mid adolescence identified that across the majority of European countries and North America, there is a significant positive trend in terms of an increase in prevalence of ease of communication with parents over the past decade.

Positive family communication has been identified as an important protective health asset for young people, related to an increase of thriving behaviours and to a decrease in participation of thriving behaviours and to a decrease in participation of positive improvements in the health and well-being of young people.

Generally, the identified increase in prevalence of ease of communication can be attributed to young people reporting a distinctive positive shift in the character of fathers’ interaction with their adolescent offspring. This is a significant change as ease of communication with fathers has been suggested to have a particularly protective role on the health and well-being of young people in unique ways from mothers, and is associated with positive emotional well-being, less aggressive behaviour in boys and good body image among girls.8–10

Accounting for why such changes in reported experiences of communication with fathers has occurred is likely to be a reflection of complex interactions between shifts in domestic gender roles in adolescent–parent communication trends were found both between countries and genders. In most countries, significant increases in the prevalence of ease of communication with both mothers and fathers were observed, with the greatest positive changes over time in Estonia, Denmark and Wales. However in a minority of countries, the opposite trend was found with the greatest negative changes occurring in France, Slovenia and Poland.

Across the pooled dataset, a significant positive trend was observed for ease of communication with father, for both boys and girls and for ease of communication with mother for boys only. Communication difficulties between boys and their mothers reduced across surveys, but communication difficulties between girls and their mothers remained almost unchanged (table 1). In all surveys, the proportion of young people reporting ease of communication with their mother was higher than the proportion reporting ease of communication with their fathers and proportions reporting ease of communication with fathers was higher for boys than for girls.

Table 1 Proportions and changes over time (% and CI) in quality of communication with parents for boys and girlsa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001–02 (95% CI)</th>
<th>2005–06 (95% CI)</th>
<th>2009–10 (95% CI)</th>
<th>Absolute change over study periodb (95% CI)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boys</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to father</td>
<td>72.10 (71.76 to 72.44)</td>
<td>73.82 (73.48 to 74.16)</td>
<td>74.71 (74.36 to 75.06)</td>
<td>2.61 (2.03 to 3.19)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to mother</td>
<td>82.77 (82.49 to 83.06)</td>
<td>83.62 (83.34 to 83.91)</td>
<td>83.73 (83.43 to 84.03)</td>
<td>0.96 (0.47 to 1.45)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to both parents</td>
<td>66.56 (66.20 to 66.91)</td>
<td>68.44 (68.08 to 68.79)</td>
<td>69.60 (69.03 to 69.77)</td>
<td>2.84 (2.23 to 3.46)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to mother only</td>
<td>5.54 (5.37 to 5.72)</td>
<td>5.38 (5.21 to 5.55)</td>
<td>5.31 (5.12 to 5.49)</td>
<td>-0.23 (-0.54 to 0.06)</td>
<td>0.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to father only</td>
<td>16.21 (15.94 to 16.49)</td>
<td>15.18 (14.91 to 15.46)</td>
<td>14.33 (14.04 to 14.62)</td>
<td>-1.88 (-2.36 to -1.41)</td>
<td>P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to both parents</td>
<td>11.69 (11.44 to 11.93)</td>
<td>11.00 (10.75 to 11.24)</td>
<td>10.96 (10.71 to 11.22)</td>
<td>-0.73 (-1.14 to -0.31)</td>
<td>P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to father</td>
<td>55.44 (55.07 to 55.80)</td>
<td>56.93 (56.57 to 57.30)</td>
<td>57.58 (57.20 to 57.96)</td>
<td>2.15 (1.51 to 2.78)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to mother</td>
<td>83.07 (82.79 to 83.34)</td>
<td>83.02 (82.74 to 83.30)</td>
<td>83.04 (82.75 to 83.33)</td>
<td>-0.03 (-0.52 to 0.46)</td>
<td>0.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to talk to both parents</td>
<td>52.08 (51.71 to 52.45)</td>
<td>53.42 (53.05 to 53.79)</td>
<td>54.03 (53.65 to 54.41)</td>
<td>1.95 (1.31 to 2.59)</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to mother only</td>
<td>3.36 (3.22 to 3.49)</td>
<td>3.51 (3.37 to 3.65)</td>
<td>3.55 (3.41 to 3.70)</td>
<td>0.19 (-0.04 to 0.44)</td>
<td>P = 0.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to father only</td>
<td>30.99 (30.65 to 31.33)</td>
<td>29.60 (29.26 to 29.94)</td>
<td>29.01 (28.65 to 29.36)</td>
<td>-1.98 (-2.57 to -1.39)</td>
<td>P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to talk to both parents</td>
<td>13.58 (13.32 to 13.83)</td>
<td>13.46 (13.21 to 13.72)</td>
<td>13.41 (13.14 to 13.68)</td>
<td>-0.17 (-0.61 to 0.28)</td>
<td>P = 0.998</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aEstimated marginal means using MANOVA procedure (adjusted by age and family affluence), pooled data of 32 countries, data weighted by countries.

bBased on estimated marginal means using Bonferroni test.

Changes in the construction of masculine identities and social policies, including increased recognition of the importance of fathers’ role in child development.11 There is some evidence to support a shift in patterns of parent and child interaction away from gendered, stereotypical parental roles such as authoritarian decision-making roles for fathers and caregiving roles for mothers, towards shared care giving. Moreover, this shift in parenting values appears to foster democratic approaches to communication that develop autonomy and develop mutual respect between the child and parent rather than value obedience.12

There are notable differences remaining between countries in terms of the proportion of young people within countries reporting easy communication with their parents. The biggest positive changes were identified in Estonia, Denmark and Wales. The biggest decrease in perceived quality of communication, (with both parents) was reported by young people in Slovenia, France and Poland. The reconciliation of work and family life has been recognized as a key ‘happiness’ factor in determining what families have to say about their quality of their lives.13,14 Those countries where individuals are purported to feel they have a good balance between work and family life13,14 are also those countries identified in this study as having a more positive perception of parental communication (e.g. Denmark 24%; Estonia 31%). Moreover, those young people perceiving the lowest levels of ease of communication with their parents coincide with countries that have been identified as having a poorer self-reported perception of family life-work balance, for example, France 19% (workers personally satisfied with work life balance) and Slovenia 18%.13,14

In Poland, however citizens do tend to report a more positive perception of ‘life–work balance’ (27%). However one dimension of work–life balance that may relate to family interaction, strain-based conflict (proportion of workers having difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities due to the intensity and time allocated to paid work) is in Poland well above the EU average (62 vs. 50%). A situation that has intensified over the past decade with large scale parental economic migration, resulting in the temporary separation of Polish families. 15 Overall, understanding the dimensions of work–life balance that may relate to family interaction, strain-based conflict may aid in conceptualizing the impact work–life balance has on family life.

Further work is needed to account for the decline in ease of communication in France over the past decade, especially against trends towards increased ease in communication. There is some evidence to suggest that young people in France experience lower levels of
parental supervision and have weaker emotional bonds with their parents than is the norm for young people in other European and North American countries. However, comparative analysis is required to identify how young people interpret their parenting experiences and if they have an awareness of cultural differences in family life.

Additional consideration is also needed to explain the gendered character of the trends described in this article, it is currently unclear why in contrast to the findings for fathers, positive increases in communication prevalence with mothers were found only for boys.

**Conclusion**

The temporal trends reported on in this article demonstrated an increase in a positive health asset for many young people, that of family communication. This was especially notable in relation to the quality of communication between adolescents’ and their fathers suggesting that a qualitative change in the nature of fathering and interaction with their children during adolescence has occurred over the last decade.

Further work is needed to examine if economic conditions are a barometer for the quality of family communication and how they interact with socioeconomic and cultural changes, such as parental migration or changes in cultural attitudes concerning effective parenting.

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**Key points**

- Over the past decade, across the majority of European countries and North America, there is a significant positive trend in terms of an increase in prevalence of ease of communication with parents.
- A distinctive positive shift in the character of fathers’ interaction with their adolescent offspring was identified.

**Suggesting possible changes in the role of fathers in childrearing and potentially an increased understanding of the contribution of fathers to child development.**

- The promotion of thriving behaviours is a key issue for public health policy across Europe. This article highlights the importance of considering the quality of family communication as a health asset that can contribute to thriving among young people.

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