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## Adapting to the Changing Needs of Adolescents: Parenting Practices and Challenges to Sensitive Attunement

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### Abstract

Changes in adolescents' motivations and capabilities pose unique challenges to parents who play a continuing role in ensuring the youth's safety and well-being. We describe sensitively attuned parenting as an optimal response to this challenge and summarize practices of positive engagement, supervision/guidance and open communication that support sensitive attunement and facilitate the continuing development of the adolescent's self-confidence, autonomous decision-making, and communication skills. We then consider factors that require parents to adapt their practices to the particular needs and developmental level of the adolescent. Individual differences that may challenge parent's effectiveness in implementing these practices include: biological vulnerabilities, differential sensitivity to parenting, relationship history and temperament. Clinical interventions that seek to improve parenting offer an opportunity to test sensitive attunement as a mechanism for reducing adolescents' symptoms and problem behaviors.

### Challenges to Parenting

A central challenge for parenting adolescents is the need to continually adapt caregiving practices to adolescents' changing motivations and capabilities. In broad terms, beginning with puberty, adolescents are motivated to experiment with and expand their capacity to make autonomous decisions. The developmental shift toward increased experimentation and autonomy is facilitated by a social reorientation toward peers<sup>1</sup> and romantic partners<sup>2</sup>. As a result, adolescents are more likely to experiment and make decisions in contexts that involve minimal adult supervision. The increased time that adolescents spend without adult supervision creates new opportunities and risks. On one hand, experimentation allows adolescents to test and develop their capacities for making autonomous decisions that take into account the potential benefits and risks of a particular activity. On the other hand, adolescents may be predisposed toward overvaluing the benefits and undervaluing the potential risks of an activity, leaving them vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviors such as unprotected sexual activity, substance abuse, delinquency and risky driving<sup>3,4</sup>. This review will consider practices that facilitate parents' sensitive attunement to adolescents changing needs as well as challenges to maintaining optimal caregiving.

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## 1. Adolescent Brain Development

The dynamic tension between adolescents' movement toward increased autonomy and their vulnerability to engage risky behavior is captured by the "dual systems model" of brain development<sup>5</sup>. The model posits a reward-seeking region and a self-regulating region that become unbalanced as a result of pubertal maturation. The reward-seeking region is very sensitive to the hormones that accompany puberty and which trigger changes in dopamine-rich limbic regions in the brain associated with reward processing. This, in turn, motivates the adolescent toward engaging in more sensation seeking behaviors that foster experimentation. By contrast, the capacity for self-regulation and inhibitory control is located in frontal brain regions that mature more gradually over the course of adolescence and early adulthood<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, the dual systems model hypothesizes an imbalance between adolescents' reward-seeking motivation and inhibitory control that accounts for their potential difficulty in balancing the benefits and potential costs of engaging in risky activities. Although the dual systems model has generally been supported in studies using laboratory tasks and neural measures of brain activity, much remains to be learned about how this model predicts autonomous decision-making and risky behavior in family, peer and school contexts over the course of adolescence<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. The Task of Parenting Adolescents

Adolescents' changing motivational and inhibitory systems shape the task of parenting during this developmental period. Parents must balance protective concerns about the adolescent's safety<sup>7</sup> with support for the adolescent's developing capacity for autonomous decision-making. Ensuring the adolescent's safety is complicated by the amount of time that adolescents spend without direct parental supervision<sup>8</sup>. As a result, monitoring the adolescent's safety becomes increasingly dependent on the adolescent's reports and verbal disclosures. Adolescents' disclosures are in turn influenced by a variety of factors including the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and the domain of activity that is discussed. Adolescents are most likely to conceal information about activities that they view as personal involving control over one's body and preferences for friends and free time activities<sup>9</sup>. However, if adolescents judge their activities as threatening to their safety, they are more likely to view these activities as legitimate topics for disclosure and to view their parents as having a right to know<sup>9</sup>. Parents may also use information from teachers, other adults, and peers to make decisions about when to intervene to ensure the adolescent's safety.

Parents must balance concerns for the adolescent's safety with support for the adolescent's autonomous decision-making. Supporting autonomy requires the parent to distinguish between aspects of the adolescent's life where continued rules, guidance and supervision are necessary and areas where the adolescent can be trusted to make independent decisions. Parents' difficulties in adequately balancing safety and autonomy concerns are implicated in adolescent problem behaviors. On one hand, when adolescents endorse too much independent decision-making, they are more likely to engage in substance abuse and rule-breaking behaviors<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, adolescents who perceive their parents as psychologically controlling or intrusive and not respectful of the adolescent's autonomy are

also more vulnerable to developing problem behaviors<sup>11</sup> and are less likely to appropriately assert their autonomy-related needs<sup>12</sup>. In contrast, when supervision is provided through conversations that clarify the parents' concerns, the adolescent becomes more capable of internalizing the parents' guidance in ways that support autonomous decision-making<sup>13</sup>.

Over the course of adolescence, the balance between parental supervision and support for autonomy gradually shifts toward reduced supervision and more autonomy<sup>14</sup>. The changing balance of supervision and support is further complicated by individual differences in adolescent personality and by competing demands for parents' attention. As a result, general parenting guidelines may fail to address the needs of a particular adolescent or family<sup>15</sup>. What we call sensitively attuned parenting provides an alternative to a one size fits all approach to defining optimal care for adolescents. Sensitive attunement allows the parent to adjust and remain open to change as adolescents mature and test their ability to make autonomous decisions in an expanding range of contexts. It also allows the parent to adapt to and accommodate the differing needs of particular adolescents. Even when the contributions of parental sensitivity during infancy and early childhood are controlled, parental sensitivity and monitoring during adolescence have been found to contribute to young adults' internalization of confidence in others<sup>16,17</sup>.

### 3. Parenting Practices that Facilitate Sensitive Attunement

The parenting practices that facilitate or inhibit parents' abilities to maintain sensitive attunement to an adolescent's dynamically changing needs have been extensively investigated over the past two decades<sup>15</sup>. These practices fall into three broad categories: positive engagement, monitoring and supervising behavior, and open communication. Parents' positive engagement is evident from interactions that are marked by mutual positive feeling and respect. This positive feeling and mutual respect sets the tone for the relationship and shapes the adolescent's view of the parent as an available resource for advice, guidance, and comfort. Descriptions of positive engagement include expressions of affection<sup>18</sup>, parenting emotional climate<sup>19</sup>, mutual emotional support<sup>20</sup>, positive family relationships<sup>21</sup> and supportive parenting<sup>22</sup>. Not surprisingly, these assessments of positive engagement have been implicated in a broad range of positive adolescent outcomes, including adaptive emotion regulation, receptivity to parents, self-worth, and reduced risk for substance abuse and unprotected sexual activity. Parents' positive engagement may also be communicated to adolescents through structural aspects of family life<sup>23</sup>. Family routines assessed with parent and adolescent reports of family time and predictable schedules buffered the effects of parents' depression on adolescents' depression and immune function<sup>23</sup>. Other aspects of family routines, including adolescents' bedtimes, sleep quality and time in bed<sup>24</sup>, have been associated with positive parent engagement. Experimental manipulation of these aspects of adolescent sleep have been linked to improvements in their affective functioning in social contexts involving conflicts with peers<sup>25</sup>.

Monitoring and supervising the adolescent's behavior is a second practice required for maintaining sensitively attuned parenting. When monitoring provides relatively accurate knowledge of the adolescents' behaviors the parent can make well-attuned decisions about how to balance supervision and guidance with support for autonomous decision-making<sup>11</sup>.

Parental supervision can be adjusted based on the adolescent's behavior. When the adolescent successfully manages decisions and behavior, the parent's trust is enhanced and opportunities for autonomous decision-making can be gradually increased. Parents' autonomy granting has generally been associated with positive adolescent outcomes, particularly when adolescents perceive their decisions as guided by their own self-endorsed values<sup>10</sup> as opposed to conforming to parental prohibitions<sup>13</sup>. Alternatively, parents may learn that the adolescent is engaging in risky and problem behaviors and, as a result, adjust supervision to ensure the adolescent's safety and protection. Parents may also provide too much supervision and not enough autonomy. Perceptions of psychologically controlling parenting have been implicated in increases in both boys' and girls' internalizing as well as girls' externalizing problems over the course of adolescence<sup>11</sup>. Early intrusive and controlling parenting can also reduce the adolescent's later capacity for assertive autonomy in both family and peer contexts<sup>12</sup>. The challenge for parents in maintaining sensitive attunement is to make accurate assessments of their adolescent's needs and capabilities and to accordingly adjust their supervision and autonomy granting.

Open communication, a third component of sensitive parenting, is based on the parent's ability to accurately read and flexibly respond to their adolescent's verbal and non-verbal signals. The parent's capacity to attend, listen, empathize and respond fosters a sense of understanding that promotes flexible and cooperative negotiation of autonomy-related goal conflicts. Cooperative negotiation of goal conflicts increases the adolescent's trust in the parent and the likelihood that lines of communication will be open<sup>26, 27</sup>. Parents' abilities to maintain open communication have been most frequently tested with observations of how parents and adolescents discuss commonly occurring topics such as household rules, curfew, money and siblings<sup>28</sup>. The ability of parents to supportively summarize or acknowledge their adolescent's point of view has been consistently associated with more cooperative communication, more relationship satisfaction and better conflict resolution<sup>29, 26, 30</sup>. The importance of parents' attunement to non-verbal signals was evident in a study of early adolescents, in which mothers adjusted their responsiveness to their daughters' changing negative and positive emotions that accompany the pubertal transition<sup>31</sup>. Among families with adolescents diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes, collaborative communication predicted improved management of symptoms over the subsequent 12 months. By contrast, markers of non-cooperative communication, which included reciprocated hostile exchanges<sup>32, 28</sup> or overinvolved parenting that failed to engage the adolescent<sup>33</sup>, contributed to increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Parents' ability to maintain awareness of their own thoughts and feelings, as well as their adolescents', may be a common element that facilitates cooperative communication and support for the adolescents' growing capacities for self-regulation and autonomous decision-making. Parents' capacities to attend to the adolescent's thoughts, feelings and intentions have been described in terms of reflective function<sup>34</sup>, parental mindfulness<sup>35</sup> and meta-emotion philosophy<sup>36</sup>. This parental ability to attend to the adolescent's experience in a non-reactive manner has been related to more positive parenting practices and less adolescent psychopathology<sup>37, 38</sup>. Parental mindfulness may also allow parents greater flexibility in responding during emotionally challenging conflict discussions in a way that promotes more cooperative and open communication<sup>39</sup>. Together, these studies suggest that

parents' nonreactive awareness of thoughts and feelings makes an important contribution to their capacity for maintaining sensitive attunement to their adolescents.

#### 4. Challenges to Implementing Parenting Practices

Although the parenting practices of positive engagement, supervision, and open communication all contribute to sensitive attunement, implementing these practices is complicated by the need to take into account adolescents' individual differences as well as their parents' exposure to stressful events. Adolescents vary on a wide variety of dimensions that include temperament<sup>40</sup>, sensitivity to parenting<sup>41</sup>, biological vulnerabilities<sup>42, 43</sup>, psychopathology<sup>44, 45</sup>, personality<sup>46</sup> and relationship history<sup>47,48</sup>. These individual differences between adolescents may moderate the association between parenting practices and adolescent outcomes and further refine the meaning of sensitive attunement to encompass the ways in which parents adapt their practices to the characteristics of a particular adolescent. Parents' abilities to adapt their practices to the adolescents' characteristics and changing developmental needs may also be reduced by their exposure to both current and past stressful events<sup>49</sup>, to stress created by economic disadvantage<sup>50</sup>, and to the demands experienced by single parents<sup>51</sup>. Parent's own exposure to early contextual adversity<sup>52</sup>, may effectively undermine their ability to serve as an adolescent's caregiver<sup>53</sup>. In these contexts, adolescents may seek alternative adult caregivers or adopt early reproductive strategies as a way of transitioning into adult roles.

#### 5. Interventions designed to increase sensitive attunement

Adolescent risky and problem behaviors typically signal difficulties in maintaining sensitive attunement in the parent-adolescent relationship. As a result, many of the interventions designed to reduce adolescent problems or symptoms involve parents and frequently target parenting practices. Interventions for adolescents with substance abuse, aggression, and conduct problems commonly target the parental monitoring and supervision component of sensitive attunement<sup>54, 55</sup>. Interventions that target parent-adolescent communication have been used with families of adolescents with internalizing problems such as depressive symptoms and anxiety<sup>56</sup> or who are at risk for developing substance abuse<sup>57</sup>. Although they primarily rely on adolescent or parent reports, these interventions have generally proved effective in improving parent monitoring and supervision, parent-adolescent communication, or parents' positive engagement with the adolescent. Although most interventions involve parents and seek to improve sensitive attunement to the adolescents, interventions that target the adolescent's interpersonal skills have also been shown to be effective at improving communication and problem-solving in the parent-adolescent relationship<sup>58</sup>.

#### 6. Future Directions

Although the practices that promote sensitively attuned parenting and adolescent adaptation have been extensively investigated, much remains to be learned about adolescent and parent factors that moderate parents' abilities to implement these practices. There is a need to specify the mechanisms through which parenting influences adolescents' developing capacities for decision-making and their skills for forming and maintaining intimate peer

bonds. Much more research is needed on how individual differences in adolescents' genetics, temperament and stress regulation influence parenting practices and parents' abilities to maintain sensitive attunement with their adolescent. Access to affordable biomarkers of these individual differences has opened new opportunities for exploring these factors. There are also opportunities to better understand the neural correlates of these individual differences. Individual differences in parent personality is another area for continued investigation. Although much has been learned about intergenerational transmission of risk for psychopathology<sup>23</sup>, there is a need to further investigate the degree to which parents' capacities for empathy, parental mindfulness and capacity for flexible adaptation moderate the transmission of risk. Interventions offer an important window into the degree to which parenting practices are amenable to change and the extent to which changing these practices is effective in reducing adolescents' problem behaviors. Long-term follow-up of these interventions is needed to determine their effectiveness in changing the trajectories of troubled youth.

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### Highlights

- Brain development is associated with changes in adolescents' motivation and behavior.
- Parents must balance safety concerns with support for autonomous decision-making.
- Parenting practices include: positive engagement, supervision/guidance and open communication.
- Sensitively attuned parenting requires adapting practices to Individual differences.
- Sensitive attunement is a putative mechanism for reducing adolescents' problem behavior

<b>Parenting Practices</b>	<b>Markers</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Adolescent Outcomes</b>
<i>Positive Engagement</i>	Mutual respect/positive feeling	Attending to the adolescent Maintaining Family Routines	Trust in parent's availability Self-confidence
<i>Supervision &amp; Guidance</i>	Clear rules and expectations for safety/wellbeing	Balancing concerns for adolescent's safety/wellbeing with support for autonomy	Internalizing inhibitory controls Autonomous decision-making
<i>Open Communication</i>	Cooperative negotiation of goal-conflicts	Respecting adolescent's views Maintaining a mindful stance	Perspective-taking Communication skills

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