

Secrecy, Nondisclosure in Adolescence Explored

New research shows 'stronger manifestation of the darker side of secrecy' among younger teenagers.

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CHICAGO — Until recently, research on secrecy in adolescence focused largely on the emotional and physical costs of hiding misdeeds or risky behavior from parents.

But an investigation conducted a few years ago into both the advantages and disadvantages of secrecy in adolescence found quite different results.

That study, undertaken by Dr. Catrin Finkenauer and her colleagues in the Netherlands, found that adolescents who keep secrets from parents clearly contributed to the adolescents' overall feeling of emotional autonomy.

Those advantages of keeping secrets were seen even after controlling for the influence of disclosure, quality of the parent-child relationship, frequency of contact with friends and peers, depressive mood, and physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and nausea.

"Secrecy should contribute to the process of individuation among children and adolescents," Dr. Finkenauer and her colleagues wrote (*J. Youth Adolesc.* 2002;31:123-36).

However, three studies presented at a meeting sponsored by the Society for Research on Adolescence lend support to the notion that secrecy and nondisclosure are most damaging in early adolescence. The studies also back up the finding that such secrecy and nondisclosure are potentially beneficial to developing autonomy in the late teens.

In a longitudinal study, Dutch researchers conducted four annual interviews with more than 300 students, beginning at age 13 years. They reported that younger adolescents who hid information from their parents tended to internalize problems and to have less self-concept clarity and poor individuation, according to Loes Keijsers, Ph.D.

Furthermore, keeping secrets was associated with externalizing problems throughout the four years of adolescence studied, said Dr. Keijsers, research associate at the University of Utrecht (the Netherlands).

"Initially, children with the highest secrecy scores also had the highest depression scores, and in later adolescence, secrecy no longer predicted depression," she reported.

She added that secrecy was related to anxiety only in the early teens. "There seemed to be a stronger manifestation of the darker side of secrecy in early adolescence."

In addition, adolescents were more likely to keep secrets if they had unsatisfactory relationships with their parents, although secrecy increased through the four years

in both low- and high-satisfaction groups, Dr. Keijsers said.

In highly satisfying parent-child relationships, secrecy was a negative influence on self-concept clarity, which was the opposite of what the investigators had hypothesized, she said. However, as the participants got older, that effect diminished and by age 16, secrecy was positively linked to self-concept clarity in high-satisfaction families.

In addition, a correlation was found between secrecy and aggression, in that adolescents who were more aggressive had more secrets, Dr. Keijsers said.

"Secrecy predicted aggression over time, so that the children that had relatively more secrets at age 13 were likely to be higher in their aggression scores at each of the following intervals."

The study also confirmed that secrecy from parents had much stronger consequences than did disclosure. Tom Frijns, Ph.D., who conducted a separate analysis of the data for a poster presentation, said he separated "disclosure and secrecy, and found that it's actually secrecy that has all the predictive power regarding externalizing and internalizing problems."

And as had been suggested by earlier research, secrecy and nondisclosure increase over time, and secrecy was more prevalent among boys.

Further, relationship quality was related to secrecy and nondisclosure only among girls.

"Overall, it's what kids don't tell their parents that predicts their maladjustment. They want autonomy faster than their parents are willing to grant it, so they claim it by keeping more secrets about their activities," Dr. Frijns said in an interview.

In his study of 218 fifth-grade students and their mothers, Dr. Robert D. Laird explored the interplay among strategic nondisclosure (secrecy), parent-child relationship quality, and behavioral problems.

The sample was split evenly between girls and boys; most were 11 years old at the time of the interview, and three-quarters lived in a two-parent home. The sample reflected the ethnic diversity of south Louisiana and included roughly equal numbers of white and black adolescents, said Dr. Laird of the University of New Orleans.

The children were presented with five scenarios in which they had misbehaved or broken a family rule, and they were asked to indicate their likely response (tell all, tell if asked, provide selective information, keep it a secret, or lie).

"Overall, the highest scores were reported for the 'if asked' items and indicated that adolescents usually tell their parents everything if the parents explicitly ask the right questions," Dr. Laird said, adding

that the gap between "telling all" and "telling if asked" suggest that parental questioning might be important, contrary to previous findings.

The preteens reported "telling all" most often for the "at a friend's house with no adult around" scenario. It was for this same scenario that children were least likely to be secretive or to lie.

In contrast, adolescents were least likely to "tell all" and most likely to try to keep it a secret or lie after watching or listening to a forbidden TV show or music, Dr. Laird said, adding that secrecy was highest for personal issues, such as dating.

"These data also suggest that adolescents may be using strategic disclosure to expand their autonomy over issues in the personal domain," he said.

Dr. Laird also found that "telling all" was associated with fewer behavior problems; "telling if asked" was associated with less delinquent behavior and rule breaking but not with less depressed mood; and selective disclosure, keeping secrets, and lying were linked to more internalizing and externalizing problems.

Together, the pattern suggests that children are most honest and forthcoming for the scenario involving unsupervised time at a friend's house.

"Part of their motivation is to hide things they don't want their parents to know about, while another part of their motivation is to carve out things they don't think their parents should know about," according to Dr. Laird.

Clinicians should be aware of these motivations so they can help families sort them out and reduce conflict without prompting undue interrogations by parents.

"There's a lot of evidence showing that if parents have to ask their children what they're up to, it's already a bad situation, and for the clinician to urge parents to ask a whole lot of questions endangers an already shaky relationship," he said.

As in the Dutch study, youngsters were more likely to disclose information to parents with whom they had good relationships.

Predictably, delinquent behavior was lowest when children revealed more, and the frequency with which kids tell about their misbehavior is more strongly linked to delinquent behavior when family conflict is high, Dr. Laird noted.

"This pattern is consistent with our hypothesis that strategic disclosure is less problematic, and may be a sign of autonomy, when the parent-child relationship quality is high," he said.

Depressed mood was less prevalent among children who reported hiding very little, especially when conflict was low. Among those who hid more information, however, those with the least conflict reported the most depressed mood.

"Our results replicate prior work showing that hiding is linked with more behavior problems and telling with fewer behavior problems," Dr. Laird said.

"Although we looked at a more limited age group, our findings are similar to the Dutch findings by Dr. Keijsers and colleagues, whose age-related results make a lot of sense," he said, adding that keeping an occasional secret is not harmful.

"With my 11- and 12-year-olds, it's hard to imagine that keeping secrets in any situation is good, but by the time a person is 17 or 18, there are things in your life that your parents don't need to know about," Dr. Laird said.

A third approach to investigating adolescents' management of information was taken by researchers at the University of Rochester (N.Y.), who used Web-based daily diary methods to examine daily variations in secrecy and disclosure with mothers.

In this study, participants were poor 9th and 10th graders recruited from an urban high school. The sample had a mean age of 15 years and consisted of 108 students. Fifty of the

students were boys.

Each day for 2 weeks, e-mail links were sent to the adolescents' e-mail accounts. "Most of the kids had access to the Internet, and if they didn't have an e-mail account, we gave them a 14-day account on Gmail," said lead author Judi Smetana, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry. Those with no Internet access at home completed surveys at school.

The teens, most of whom lived chaotic, mobile lives, were rated on "how much they concealed or kept secret from mother," and on "how much they told or disclosed today without mother asking," as well as on measures of relationship quality and time spent that day with their mothers.

Also in the mix were bad behavior items relating to risky or unsafe behavior, activities that parents might not approve of, issues relating to school, and personal thoughts and actions.

As in Dr. Laird's study, the teens were more secretive about personal matters than they were about risky or bad behavior, which Dr. Smetana found surprising. Overall, levels of secrecy and disclosure, reported on a daily basis, were low and uncorrelated.

And as in Dr. Keijsers' study, secrecy was associated with problem behavior and negative interactions, Dr. Smetana said. However, Dr. Smetana added that the willingness of adolescents to disclose to their mothers fluctuated, depending on the quality of the relationship.

The next phase of the research will include adolescents' fathers and best friends.

"We still need to learn more about whether disclosure and secrecy are related to parental knowledge and problem behaviors," she said. ■



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