

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL FAVOURITISM



Picture: Rhonda Milner

LINKS WITH FAMILY FUNCTIONING

What is the effect of parental favouritism on adolescents' perceptions of their family environment?

GRANIA SHEEHAN AND PATRICIA NOLLER

This article is an extension on our earlier work reported in *Family Matters* (no. 46, 1997) linking parental favouritism and the nature of adolescent sibling conflict. It provides a summary of the findings from a study set up to investigate the relation between adolescents' experience of parental favouritism and family functioning. Parental favouritism is a specific parent-child dynamic which is influential in shaping a child's social and emotional development. This often destructive pattern of parenting also has implications for the nature of other relationships within the family system, and the level of inter-personal functioning in the family unit.



Family Functioning

Research in the field of family relationships has identified a number of key inter-personal processes, such as patterns of communication, conflict, punishment and decision making within families, that are important indicators of how well the family unit is functioning and supporting family members. Work by Noller et al. (1992) on family functioning in families with adolescent children identified three important characteristics of inter-personal functioning within the family system. These characteristics include family intimacy, conflict and control.

A high level of conflict and interpersonal difficulties between family members, and excessive interference by other family members when solving problems and making plans is indicative of a family not able to function as an adaptable and cohesive unit.

Intimacy experienced by family members is a second important characteristic of family functioning. Sharing and closeness between family members, as well as expressiveness and openness in communication is characteristic of families which are functioning as a supportive unit for family members.

A further aspect of family functioning that is of particular importance in families with adolescents is the way in

which the family works together when making decisions. The family decision-making style takes into account the extent to which family members have a say in making rules and decisions affecting the family. It also includes the extent to which family members are encouraged to make up their own minds and make a contribution to family-based discussions and decisions.

Adolescents' experience of the emotional and inter-personal climate in their family has been closely linked to their social development and emotional wellbeing. Families that function as cohesive, organised and expressive systems are better able to support their adolescent children through times of difficulty and help adolescents to engage in identity exploration, to develop and stabilise their sense of who they are (Burt et al. 1988; Grotevant and Cooper 1986).

A variety of factors have been identified as having the potential to affect adversely the way in which a family functions, ranging from external stressors (such as parental unemployment) to relationship-based stressors within the family system. The present study is concerned specifically with the effect of parenting behaviour on the family's level of functioning.



The Parent-Child Relationship

The relationship that exists between a parent and adolescent child is a unique one in which both the parent and adolescent play unequal but inter-dependent roles in the relationship, with the adolescent still heavily dependent on the parent for meeting or facilitating the meeting of their social and emotional needs.

The parenting behaviours which come to characterise this relationship during adolescence do not, however, operate in isolation from the overall family system. The nature of the dynamics that exist between the parent and adolescent can influence, and be influenced by, other relationships in the family system (Noller et al. 1995). A

result of this interdependence between family relationships is that when one particular family relationship (such as the marital or parent-child relationship) becomes strained and conflict-ridden, other relationships within the family system can be adversely affected.

The specific process or processes by which conflict and other negative relationship dynamics are transmitted from one particular relationship to another within the family are complex and varied. In some cases these processes are specific to the relationship in question, or the level of severity of the behaviour in the relationship (see Noller et al. 1995 for further details on the psychological mechanisms of transmission).

The transmission of conflict and other dysfunctional relationship dynamics in the parent-child relationship to other relationships in the family system can be understood in terms of a 'spill-over' effect (Piotrkowski 1979), involving the transfer of feelings from one setting to another. This process has generally been discussed with regard to links between work and family and can equally apply to intra-familial relations between the various relationships within the family.

Findings from our earlier work on parental favouritism and sibling conflict (Sheehan et al. 1997) suggest that a child's experience of being unjustly or unfairly treated in comparison to her or his sibling is a powerful parent-child relationship dynamic which has the potential not only to adversely affect the child's individual wellbeing, but also to shape the child's experiences of other relationships within the family system.

The present study was designed to extend our earlier work on the relation between parental favouritism and sibling conflict by looking at whether parental favouritism has more broad-based implications for adolescents' experience of family life. We set out to test whether adolescent twins' experience of being disfavoured in the family in comparison to their co-twin adversely influences their experience of their family's functioning.



The Study

The adolescents who participated in the study were those with identical and non-identical twins, identified through the National Health and Medical Research Council Twin Registry. The sample comprised 87 adolescent twin sibling pairs. Both twins within each twin pair are the same sex. Only families with twins were asked to participate. This strategy allows for issues relating to parental favouritism to be examined while holding constant sibling differences in age and birth order, both of which can affect differential parental treatment (Dunn and Plomin 1990).

The sample was not randomly selected and included twins who volunteered to participate from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The twins ranged in age from 15 to 18 years (with an average age of 16 years) and the majority of the families were in the middle to high socioeconomic bracket.

All twins involved in the survey were able to comment on their experience of parental favouritism based on a least 14 years of their lives spent living with their parents and co-twin. Almost all twins reported having done things together with their co-twin at least once a week at the time of the survey.

The twins provided information on a range of adjustment and parent-child relationship measures including measures of self esteem, anxiety and attachment style. The measures of relevance to this article include measures of parental favouritism and family functioning.

Twins reported on their experience of parental favouritism by comparing the parental treatment they received with what they felt was experienced by their co-twin. The twins' reports of parental favouritism were measured using a standardised questionnaire-based measure of differential parenting.

Four aspects of parental favouritism were assessed: differential maternal support and affectionate behaviour; (2) differential maternal disciplinary or controlling behaviour; (3) differential paternal support and affectionate behaviour; and (4) differential paternal discipline or controlling behaviour.

'Support' and 'affection' refer to the parents' use of behaviours

within the parent-adolescent relationship that communicate warmth, concern, encouragement, physical affection, or praise towards the adolescent. 'Discipline' and 'controlling' parental behaviour refer to a range of behaviours parents use to discipline, or encourage adolescents' compliance with parental desires.

These dimensions of parenting behaviour (parental affection and parental control), were chosen because they tap theoretically significant features of adolescents' relationships with their parents; there is strong empirical support for these dimensions as primary aspects of functioning for the parent-child relationship (Noller and Callan 1988).

Twins also reported on their family's level of functioning along the three dimensions discussed earlier - namely, family conflict, family intimacy and family decision-making style. Family functioning was assessed using the Intimacy, Conflict and Parenting Style Scales (Noller et al. 1992), which is a standardised measure of family characteristics developed for use with Australian adolescent samples.

Presented here is a brief summary of findings from the study related to family functioning. A fuller paper detailing findings pertaining to attachment style, adolescent adjustment, the statistical procedures used, and method of analysis is available from the authors on request.



Parental Favouritism and Family Functioning

Adolescent twins who perceive they have been disfavoured in comparison with their co-twin tend to view their family in a negative light. Twins who reported being disfavoured also tended to report their family environment as being less intimate, more conflicted, and the family decision making-style as more controlling. Conversely, twins who reported being favoured or receiving equal treatment tended to view the family more positively.

There was a very high level of agreement within twin pairs on their reports of parental favouritism with twins agreeing on whether their parents treated them equally and who among them was favoured or disfavoured. This finding is consistent with our earlier work on adolescent twins' reports of parental favouritism. Twins tend to agree on who is favoured in the family, what they disagree on is how much favouritism is going on in the family.

We know from previous research that parents and children have quite different perceptions of what happens in the family (Noller and Callan 1988; Noller et al. 1992), with adolescent children generally having a more negative view of family functioning and family interaction than their parents.

Each generation views family life in terms of its own bias. Parents have a tendency to see the family in a positive light and minimise differences between family members because of their level of investment in the family. Adolescents, on the other hand, tend to see the family in a more negative light and maximise differences between themselves and their parents. This bias on the part of adolescents is a function of their motivation to contrast themselves and their parents and to emphasise their own individuality and independence in this family context.

The tendency for adolescents to focus on parental behaviour which challenges the adolescents' independence and sense of self may cause them to be overly sensitive to differential parenting. Adolescents may be paying particular attention to any form of parenting behaviour, no matter how minor or justifiable, that suggests to the adolescent that she or he is in some way different or undeserving of parental attention.

In families where there are more extreme forms of parental favouritism being acted out, parental favouritism may both elicit or be a result of clinical levels of dysfunction in other relationships within the family system. For example, a child with serious behavioural problems may elicit a very different style of parenting from their mother and father than other children in the family. The child's behavioural problems may also be an enormous strain on the parents' time and resources such that over time the nature of the parent-child relationship will begin to cause inter-personal conflict and relationship breakdown throughout the family system.



Fathers' Differential Parenting

The twins' report of fathers' differential parenting behaviour was found to be related to adolescents' negative reports of their family's functioning.

Specifically, when adolescent twins report that they are being unjustifiably and unfairly restricted by their father in comparison to their co-twin, they also report the family environment as cold, controlling and conflicted. By contrast no association was found between fathers' differential affectionate behaviour and adolescents' reports of family functioning.

These findings suggest that fathers play a key role in regulating and controlling adolescents' behaviour. The nature of the child's attachment to her or his father changes during adolescence with respect to communication with one another, and in the emotional quality of the relationship (Paterson, Field and Pryor 1994). Adolescents continue to regard their father as a key attachment figure in their lives and the interactions they have with their father increasingly come to consist of the father exercising his authority, and of the giving and seeking of information and advice (Collins and Russell 1991).

On the surface, these changes in the dynamic between fathers and their adolescent children suggest that the role of the father in parenting becomes less important throughout adolescence. However, research has shown that the disciplinary, information and advice-giving function of fathers during adolescence is a crucial facilitator of adolescents' social and emotional development. During this period, the unique contribution made by the fathers' parenting style to child development appears to intensify (Collins and Russell 1991).

Adolescence is a time when children are actively exploring the social environment outside of their family and moving towards a state of greater independence from their parents. At this time in a child's development, parental control is a salient and often volatile issue between parents and children. Given the importance and salience to adolescents of their fathers' regulatory behaviour it is not surprising that differential paternal control is distressing for adolescent twins and colours the way they see and respond to family life.



Mothers' Differential Parenting

The results for mothers' differential parenting are consistent with early research defining the mother's unique parenting role. In our study, adolescent twins who reported receiving less affection and support from their mother than their co-twin also reported their family environment as cold, controlling and conflicted. In particular mothers' differential affectionate and supportive behaviour was the strongest predictor of family functioning of the four differential parenting scales. Adolescents' reports of differential maternal control were also associated with adolescents' negative views on family life.

These results reflect the primary caregiving role mothers play in rearing their children. Mothers' affection for and support of their children has for a long time been considered the primary attachment bond in the child's life. Maternal affection directed at the child and maternal responsiveness to the child's needs shape young children's and adolescents' notions of themselves as worthwhile people, and their notions of others in their lives as available, trustworthy and supportive (Bowlby 1973; Bretherton 1987; Feeney et al. 1994).

Parenting has traditionally been conceptualised and measured in absolute terms, with insensitive parenting behaviour defined in terms of the absolute level of a particular parental behaviour directed towards any one child in the family. Our findings highlight the importance of extending this definition to consider children's experiences of *relative* deprivation of parental warmth and affection. Being less favourably treated by your mother in comparison with your co-twin can lead to distress and disruption of the mother-child attachment bond above and beyond the absolute level of warmth and affection a child receives.



Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the role of parental favouritism as a powerful form of injustice within the family system, which for the disfavoured child causes varying levels of distress and ill-feeling which in turn appears to 'spill over', colouring the adolescent's experience of relationships and interpersonal dynamics throughout the family system. The findings also serve as a reminder to parents and practitioners to consider marked insensitive differences in parenting behaviour towards children within a family as a pattern of parenting that may be indicative of more serious and widespread dysfunction occurring in the family.

However, the findings should not be interpreted as advocating a standardised form of parenting practice for all children in the family. Differential parenting is a frequent practice in families. It is also a practice which both parents and adolescents commonly understand to be fair and equitable provided that differential parenting is founded on very real developmental, skills-based, health, age and temperament differences between children. Parental favouritism becomes an issue to be addressed when differential parenting is perceived by children to take the form of unfair, insensitive or unjustifiable differences in parenting behaviour directed towards children in the family.

References

- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. Basic Books, New York.
- Bretherton, I. (1987). 'New perspectives on attachment relations: security, communication and internal working models', in J.D. Osofsky (ed.) *Handbook of Infant Development*, Wiley, New York.
- Burt, C. E., Cohen, L. H., & Bjorck, J. P. (1988). 'Perceived family environment as a moderator of young adolescents' life adjustment', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 16, pp. 101-122.
- Collins, W.A. & Russell, G. (1991). 'Mother-child and father-child relationships in middle childhood in adolescence: a developmental analysis', *Developmental Review*, vol. 11, pp. 137-163.
- Dunn, J. & Plomin, R. (1990). *Separate Lives: Why Siblings are so Different*. Basic Books, New York.
- Feeney, J. A. Noller, P., & Hanrahan, M. (1994). 'Assessing adult attachment: developments in the conceptualisation of security and insecurity', in M. B. Sperling & W. H. Berman (eds) *Attachment in Adults: Theory Assessment and Treatment*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Feeney, J. A. & Noller, P. (1990). 'Attachment style as a predictor of adult romantic relationships', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 58, pp. 281-291.
- Grotevant, H. D. & Cooper, C. R. (1986). 'Patterns of interaction in family relationships and the development of identity exploration in adolescence', *Child Development*, vol. 56, pp. 415-428.
- McHale, S., Crouter, A. & McGuire, S. (1995). 'Congruence between mothers' and fathers' differential treatment of siblings: links with family relations and children's wellbeing', *Child Development*, vol. 66, pp. 116-128.
- Noller, P. & Callan, V. (1988). 'Understanding parent adolescent interactions: perceptions of family members and outsiders', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 707-714.
- Noller, P., Feeney, J., Peterson, C., & Sheehan, G. (1995). 'Learning conflict patterns in the family: links between marital, parental and sibling relationships', in T. J Socha & G. H. Stamp (eds), *Parents, Children and Communication: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.
- Noller, P., Seth-Smith, M., Bouma, R., & Schweitzer, R. (1992). 'Parent and adolescent perceptions of family functioning: a comparison of clinic and non-clinic families', *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 15, pp. 101-114.
- Paterson, J., Field, J., & Pryor, J. (1994). 'Adolescents' perceptions of their attachment relationships with their mothers, fathers, and friends', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, vol. 23, pp. 579-600.
- Piotrowski, C. S. (1979). *Work and the Family System*, Free Press, New York.
- Sheehan, G., Noller, P., Feeney, J., Peterson, C., & Thompson, S. (1997). 'Adolescent sibling conflict: the role of parental favouritism', *Family Matters*, no. 46, pp. 37-39.

Grania Sheehan is a Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Professor Patricia Noller is the Director of the Family Centre, University of Queensland.