

Child TRENDS FACT SHEET

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THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP: A FAMILY STRENGTH

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BACKGROUND

The great majority of parents have positive and nurturing relationships with their children.¹ In fact, findings from research show that parents and their adolescent children generally have close emotional ties.²⁻³ These findings run counter to anecdotal portrayals of parents as clueless and unconnected, especially when it comes to relating to their adolescent children.⁴ Recently released parent-reported data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), which has a very large, nationally representative sample, provide a window into parent-child relationships by children's specific ages. Child Trends drew on these data to look at three markers of these relationships for parents living with children between the ages of 6 and 17: parent-child closeness, the degree to which parents share ideas and talk about things that really matter with their children, and parents' acquaintance with their children's friends. Our analyses show that although some declines are seen in these areas as children get older, high parental involvement and positive parent-child interactions endure throughout childhood into the teenage years for most adolescents.

OVERALL FACTS

Data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health indicate:

- Most parents reported feeling *very close* to their children (87 percent).
- The great majority of parents reported that they can share and talk *very well* about things that really matter with their children (75 percent).
- Nearly all parents reported that they have met either *most* or *all* of their children's friends (84 percent).

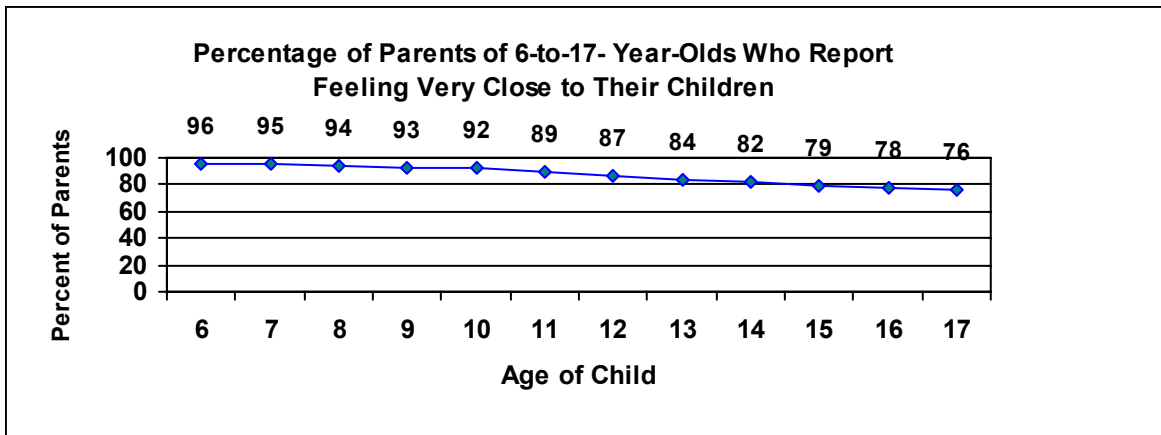
CLOSENESS OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Few people question the value of bonding between parents and young children. While less commonly noted, close relationships with parents have also been associated with positive outcomes for adolescents, such as better academic performance and fewer problem behaviors.⁵⁻⁶ The NSCH asked parents to assess their closeness with their children. The great majority of parents (87 percent) reported being *very close* to their children. Not surprisingly, a greater percentage of parents of 6-year-olds (96 percent) reported being *very close* to their children than parents of 17-year-olds (76 percent). However, for the most part, parents and children maintained close bonds, with three-quarters of these relationships described as *very close*, even when the child was 17.

- Among parents who lived with their children (ages 6-17), most reported feeling *very close* to their children, even as they grew into adolescence (87 percent).
- Only about 13 percent of parents reported that they were just *somewhat close* to their children.
- Less than 1 percent of parents reported that their relationship was *not very close*.

The very large sample size of the NSCH allows us to examine parental closeness to children by single year of age. Findings from the parent report data from the National Survey of Children’s Health complement and extend adolescent-report data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.⁷ Although most parents reported being very close to their children at all ages, this closeness declined somewhat with the age of the child, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1



COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

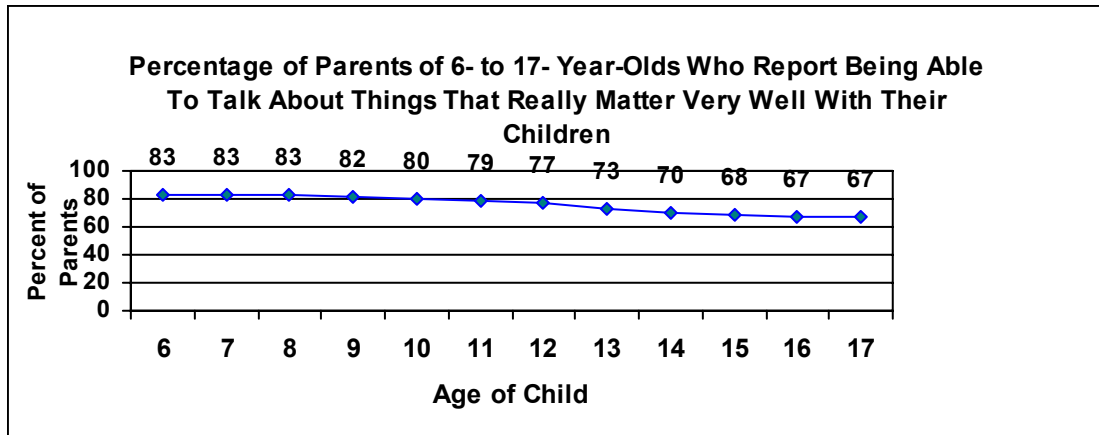
Good communication is an important parenting skill.⁸ Parents who discuss important matters—such as academic performance, puberty, and drug use—provide their children with knowledge that can help them lead more productive and safer lives.⁹ In addition, conversations about serious topics convey to children that parents are concerned with and interested in their lives.

The National Survey of Children’s Health asked parents to what degree they can share ideas and talk about things that really matter with their children. About 75 percent of parents reported that they were able to share and talk about things that really mattered with their children *very well*. The percentage declined with the age of the child, with 82 percent of parents of 6- to 11-year-olds and 70 percent of parents of 12- to 17-year-olds reporting that they could share ideas and talk with their children *very well* about things that really mattered. These findings indicate that communication between parents and children is relatively high, even for parents of children at the adolescent stage, when communication can be a greater challenge.

- The great majority of parents with children ages 6-17 reported that they could share ideas and talk *very well* with their children about things that really mattered (75 percent).
- Among parents of children ages 6-17, about 2 percent of parents reported that they could not share and talk about things that really mattered *very well* with their children (1 percent at ages 6-11 and 2 percent at ages 12-17). The remainder (about 23 percent) reported that they could share ideas and talk about things that really mattered *somewhat well* (see Table 1).

As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of parents who reported being able to communicate with their children about meaningful topics declined somewhat over time, especially in the early teens, but then stabilized and never fell below 60 percent.

FIGURE 2



PROPORTION OF CHILDREN’S FRIENDS THAT PARENTS HAVE MET

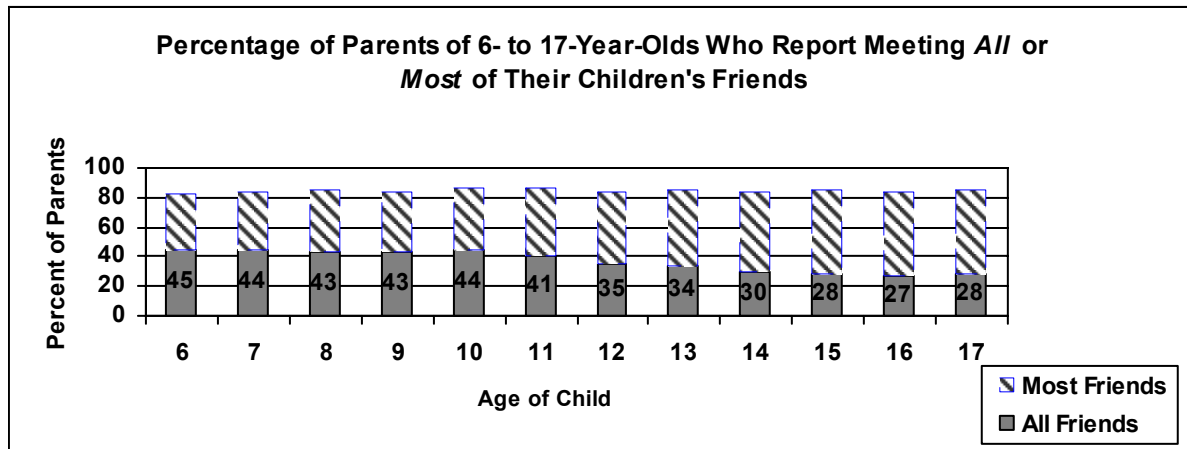
Researchers find that parental awareness of children’s friends is an important part of parenting.¹⁰ For parents, knowing their children’s friends can have a two-fold effect: it can help preempt their children’s involvement in negative social activities, and it can keep parents aware of their children’s social behaviors. In addition, research finds that parents who monitor their children’s friendships tend to raise more socially adept children.¹¹ Indeed, of the 10 rules that the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children provides parents, part of rule number one—making sure to know where children are located at all times—is parental awareness of children’s friends.¹²

The National Survey of Children’s Health asked parents how many of their children’s friends they have met. Overall, about 43 percent of parents of children ages 6-11 reported meeting *all* their children’s friends, compared with 30 percent of parents of adolescents ages 12-17. Another 42 percent of parents of 6- to 11-year-olds reported meeting *most* of their children’s friends, whereas 54 percent of parents of 12- to 17-year-olds reported meeting *most* of their children’s friends. The data suggest that parents of adolescents are more likely to know most rather than all of their children’s friends:

- Nearly all residential parents (85 percent) with children between the ages of 6 and 17 reported that they had met either *most* or all of their children’s friends (85 percent at ages 6-11 and 85 percent at ages 12-17)
- Among parents of children ages 6-17, less than 1 percent reported that they had met *none* of their children’s friends.

As shown in Figure 3, parents were less likely to know all their children's friends when children were teens, but they continued to know most friends.

FIGURE 3



CONCLUSION

Overall, we found that most parents reported close bonds with their children, communicated with their children about important topics, and were acquainted with most of their children's friends. These findings were apparent even among parents of adolescent children (ages 12-17), who are often presumed to feel distant from their children.¹³ It is important to note that our analyses were based exclusively on parent-reported data for parents who live with their child. However, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth also showed positive parent-child relationships for a smaller sample of adolescent respondents.¹⁴ Given the importance of positive communication and relationships for parents and for children of all ages, these findings are reassuring. The findings also suggest that a minority of parents could use help in strengthening their relationships with their children.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, all estimates are based on weighted data from the National Survey of Children's Health, 2003. Available at www.nschedata.org

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The **National Survey of Children's Health** is a national telephone survey involving 102,353 interviews completed between January 2003 and July 2004. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Regarding [CHILD's NAME]'s friends, would you say that you have met all of his/her friends, most of his/her friends, some of his/her friends, or none of his/her friends?

Is your relationship with [CHILD's NAME] very close, somewhat close, not very close, not close at all?

How well can you and [CHILD's NAME] share ideas or talk about things that really matter?

**Table 1: Parent-Reported Data from the National Survey of Child Health (NSCH) 2003,
By Age of Child 6-17 Years**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Age of Child</i>														
	6 years	7 years	8 years	9 years	10 years	11 years	6-11 years	12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	16 years	17 years	6-17 years	12-17 years
Percent of Parents Who Are Close to Their Children															
<i>Very Close</i>	96	95	94	93	92	89	93	88	84	82	79	78	76	86%	81
<i>Somewhat</i>	4	5	6	7	8	11	7	12	16	17	20	21	22	13%	18
<i>Not Very</i>	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	1	1	1	1	<1%	<1
<i>Not Close</i>	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Percent of Parents Who Can Share Ideas and Talk About Things That Really Matter															
<i>Very Well</i>	83	83	83	82	80	79	82	77	73	70	68	67	67	75%	70
<i>Somewhat</i>	16	16	16	17	19	20	17	22	25	29	30	30	30	23%	28
<i>Not Very</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	2%	2
Percent of Parents Who Have Met Their Children's Friends															
<i>All</i>	45	44	43	43	44	41	43	35	34	30	28	27	28	36%	30
<i>Most</i>	38	39	42	41	42	45	42	49	51	54	57	57	57	49%	54
<i>Some</i>	15	16	14	14	13	13	14	14	14	15	15	15	15	14%	15
<i>None</i>	1	<1	1	1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1%	<1

Source: Child Trends' analyses of the National Survey of Children's Health, 2003

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