

More insight into the secret life of the American teen

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Andrew Fuligni and his colleagues want to understand the secret life of the American teenager. Their research has examined whether stress in the teen years affects kids' health as adults (it does), whether teens maintain their religious ties and beliefs as adults (they do) and if ethnic minority–based stigmatization affects how they perform in school (it does).

Now the researchers are looking at another big-ticket item for teens: arguments. Specifically, they're examining how arguments with friends at school may spill over and cause arguments at home, along with the reverse -- how verbal fights at home affect things at school.

Reporting in the September–October edition of the journal *Child Development*, the researchers found that adolescents experienced more arguments with parents or other [family members](#) on days in which conflicts with peers took place, and vice versa. Family fights seemed to last longer as well; the effect of family conflict spilled over into peer relationships the next day and two days later, while peer conflict only affected fights at home on the following day.

"Every parent of a teen knows these years can get a little emotional," said Fuligni, a professor of psychiatry at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA. "So when disagreements occur, we wanted to know if there was a transmission of negative emotions between the two groups.

"Adolescents tend to respond with more extreme and negative emotions than do pre-adolescents or [adults](#), probably because it's the time in their lives when they are experiencing multiple transitions that might be stressful," he said, citing such things as puberty, dating and changing schools as examples. "Given this tendency among adolescents, emotional distress might potentially explain this idea of a family–peer spillover of conflict."

The researchers recruited 578 ninth-grade students from three public high schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Ethnicities were mixed: 235 adolescents were from Mexican backgrounds, 172 from Chinese and 171 from European backgrounds. Students completed an initial background questionnaire at school and then completed a diary checklist at the end of each day for 14 days. In it, they recorded their emotions and whether various events had occurred that day, including arguing with parents and friends.

Besides finding there was emotional spillover between the two groups, the researchers also found that the effect of family conflict persisted longer than that of peer conflict. In addition, on days when teenagers argued with parents or other family members, girls experienced more peer conflict than boys. This, the researchers said, suggests that arguing with parents or other family members, as opposed to friends, may be a distinctly more stressful event for girls during this period. Finally, and contrary to the researcher's expectation, the daily family–peer link operated the same across ethnicities.

"The bottom line," said Fuligni, "is that adolescents' interactions in the home and with peers shape each other on a daily basis, at least in part, through emotional distress."

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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