

After family quarrels, who do teens turn to?

24 April 2012, by Elaine Bible

(Medical Xpress) -- When a teenager has an argument with their father, who do they seek out to talk through the situation? Do they turn to mom or dad? Associate Professor of Psychology Jeff Cookston explored this question in his latest study.

Associate Professor of Psychology Jeff Cookston "We found that the more warm and available parents are to their children, the more likely their kids are to talk to them about a conflict," said Cookston, whose study focused on how young people cope with conflicts with their fathers.

Conflict in families has been linked to anxiety, distress and behavioral problems in young people. Cookston is interested in how confiding in others helps children make sense of disagreements in the family and ultimately how those conversations shape children's emotions, well-being and behavior.

"If you talk things through with someone rather than sitting on your feelings, maybe conflict, in and of itself, isn't that bad," he said.

Cookston and his colleagues surveyed almost 400 families and asked parents and children about their relationship, their [cultural values](#) and how much time they spend together. Half of the families were of Mexican descent and half were European Americans.

"What was interesting is that the same pattern of support-seeking held up regardless of [ethnicity](#) and regardless of whether children were in a family with a stepdad or a [biological father](#)," Cookston said.

Parental acceptance was a key [driving force](#) affecting whether a [young person](#) chooses to seek out either parent for advice and support after a [disagreement](#). Cookston says this acceptance includes [affection](#), telling your kids you are proud of them, and accepting them for who they are.

For fathers, specifically, kids were more likely to

discuss a conflict with him if they already had an established pattern of confiding in their dad.

"As a parent, if you want to be sought out when the going gets tough, you have to have spent time cultivating that kind of relationship," Cookston said.

The results also found that the quality of the parents' marriage impacts who children turn to. "If mom and dad aren't on the same page, a child is less likely to talk to mom about a conflict with dad."

This latest study is part of Cookston's ongoing research at the Family Interaction Research Lab at SF State. It was published in March in the journal *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development* and is online available at [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 02/cd.20005/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1522-0095.2011.01902.cd.20005.abstract)

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