

Parents, your kids really are listening

Study reveals elementary school children focus on caregivers' academic and social expectations

BY SHANNON PROUDFOOT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE NOVEMBER 11, 2009

Parents wield as much influence with their adolescent children as their peers do, according to results of a University of California at Los Angeles study which defies the notion of parents fading into white noise while friends take centre stage.

In what is believed to be the first study to compare the effects of parents and peers on specific behaviours, researchers found that parents' expectations dictate the academic and social behaviours of students in Grades 4, 6 and 8, while peers shape social behaviour in all grades -- but academic behaviour only in older students.

"There's such a focus on peer influence becoming a lot stronger in adolescence and there's this lay assumption that peers become more important than parents," says Carrie Masten, a post-doctoral researcher in developmental psychology and co-author of the paper. "We don't find evidence of that. I think a lot of parents just feel that it's really hard to make a positive impact during this time when peers are around their kids all the time."

The researchers looked at social behaviours, such as standing up for people who are being teased and saying bad things about others, as well as academic behaviours, such as listening to teachers or turning in homework late. They asked 364 Grade 4, 6 and 8 students how often they engaged in those behaviours; how often the kids in their class did; and how important those behaviours were to their parents.

Older children told the researchers their parents cared only about their academic behaviours and their social conduct didn't matter as much. Masten believes this is because parents often remind their children of academic expectations and responsibilities, such as completing homework, but as they head into the teen years, they're less likely to get involved in their friendships or to remind them to treat others well.

"Kids may not think it matters to their parents whether or not they're mean, whether or not they tease their peers, so they engage in these behaviours because it might increase their social status among their peers," she says.

Given their unexpectedly strong influence, parents are an "untapped resource" to combat bullying, the authors write.

In both the classroom and the schoolyard, negative behaviours were more common in older children, the study found. Masten says it's a chicken-and-egg dilemma to sort out whether these behaviours simply happen more frequently in the independent environment of middle school or whether kids are following their peers in an attempt to fit in.

"Sometimes we think our work is done when they get to a point where they're reading the newspaper or they look so grown up, but they're still forming attitudes and sometimes what pops out of their mouths shocks us because we realize we still have so much work to do," says Ann Douglas, a Peterborough, Ont.-based author of *The Mother of All Parenting Books* and a mother of four.

On some level, parents know they still matter to their adolescents, she says, but it can be easy to overreact when a sweet child turns overnight into "the spawn of Satan" when the teen years hit. She used to think "nothing was being absorbed" when her children were teens, Douglas says, but now the two who have gone away to college will periodically mention the lessons they learned around the dinner table.

"Sometimes, because the teen years can be such a rocky and tumultuous time, we think that bond has been lost when really, that connection may just have gone underground," she says. "It's still there."