CHAPTER 3

Don't Ask, Don't Tell (Your Mom and Dad): Disclosure and Nondisclosure in Adolescent–parent Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Much research has shown that adolescent–parent relationships are transformed during adolescence from unilateral to mutual forms of authority and from dependence to independence (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Although parents believe that it is important to facilitate teens’ independence, they are also concerned with protecting their adolescents, keeping them safe, and ensuring that they follow social and moral norms (Smetana & Chuang, 2001). Therefore, parental monitoring, including knowing where children are, whom they are with, and what they are doing when they are away from home, becomes increasingly important during adolescence. Monitoring allows parents to supervise and protect their teens from a distance, thereby scaffolding their growing autonomy. A firmly established conclusion, based on a great deal of psychological research, is that parental supervision and monitoring during adolescence lead to reductions in externalizing behavior, including conduct disorders, juvenile delinquency, and drug and alcohol use (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986, 1998).
This research has assumed that parental monitoring entails parents’ active tracking and surveillance, but as has been noted recently (Crouter & Head, 2002; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000), monitoring has been assessed primarily in terms of parents’ knowledge of children’s activities, and recent research has shown that parental knowledge can be obtained in different ways. Parents can seek information by asking the child directly, talking to the child’s siblings, friends, or to other parents, listening in on conversations (for instance, while in the car or when the teen is on the phone), or even searching the teen’s room. Parents also can attempt to control adolescents’ behavior (for instance, by restricting their activities). On the other hand, adolescents may voluntarily disclose their behavior to their parents. Kerr & Stattin (2000; Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) investigated the influence of child disclosure, parental behavioral control, and parental solicitation of information on juvenile delinquency and found that only adolescents’ voluntary disclosure predicted more positive outcomes. Moreover, by controlling for the influence of parents’ trust in the adolescent, Kerr and Stattin ruled out the alternative hypothesis that these associations were due to higher quality parent-adolescent relationships.

Although current theoretical perspectives have emphasized the importance of transactive relationships between parents and adolescents and the contributions of adolescents’ willingness to be socialized (e.g., Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & Navara, 2006), the strong presumption in much of the research on parenting is that the direction of effects is from parents to adolescents. Thus, Kerr and Stattin’s findings underscore the need to focus on adolescents’ and parents’ reciprocal relationships and on adolescents’ management of information. As adolescents spend less time with parents and more time with peers (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson et al., 1996), they have increased opportunities to decide whether to disclose their activities or keep them secret. Furthermore, the findings raise interesting and unanswered questions about whether all (or how much) disclosure is healthy for adolescent development. In this chapter, we propose that identifying and theoretically specifying the conceptual domains of activities that are disclosed or kept secret can lead to a better understanding of these issues.

Consider the following example. Adolescents may feel differently about disclosing (and adults might respond differently to hearing) that teens were drinking alcohol at a party than disclosing (or parents learning) that adolescents have a new romantic interest to whom they have recently sent a love note. Adolescents may choose not to tell their parents about either of these events, but adolescents (and their parents) may differ in their beliefs about whether they are obligated to disclose in these different situations. Adolescents’ decisions not to disclose may be motivated by different reasons, and their disclosure might elicit different parental responses. In the former instance, adolescents may believe that they are obligated to tell their parents but still conceal their behavior out of fear of punishment; if told, parents may react...
with alarm or anger. In the latter instance, adolescents feel that they do not have an obligation to disclose this information to parents and may choose not to disclose out of embarrassment or a belief that the acts are private matters. Revealing these feelings and actions to parents might lead to greater closeness, attachment, and intimacy.

As others (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosedet, 2005; Searight et al., 1995) have noted, however, we cannot assume that all disclosure to parents is appropriate or positive. Searight et al. (1995) have proposed that too much or inappropriate self-disclosure across intergenerational boundaries is more likely in enmeshed families, whereas too little adolescent self-disclosure characterizes disengaged families and that both too much or too little self-disclosure is associated with poorer adjustment. Likewise, Marshall et al. (2005) have suggested that knowing what to disclose may indicate better social skills and that as children move through adolescence, keeping some things private may index greater autonomy. However, this research has not specified what is considered “appropriate,” “inappropriate,” or “too much” disclosure.

In this chapter, we consider the recent findings on parental monitoring and child disclosure first in light of social-psychological and developmental research on intimacy and self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships and then in terms of social domain theory (Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 1995, 2002, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 1998, 2002), which, we assert, provides a potentially useful framework for understanding adolescent disclosure and its role in adolescent development. We review previous research on adolescent–parent relationships from the social domain perspective and then present some research employing this framework to examine adolescents’ and parents’ perceptions of disclosure and nondisclosure in their relationships.

**SELF-DISCLOSURE AND INTIMACY IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Another body of literature, prominent in the 1980s, has examined self-disclosure during adolescence (see reviews by Berndt & Hanna, 1995; Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In these studies, self-disclosure has been defined as disclosure of private thoughts and feelings and has been assessed through global questions, such as “How often do you share your private thoughts with your parents?” Thus, this literature differs from the current research on parental knowledge, which examines how much parents know and how they come to learn about adolescents’ everyday activities. Drawing primarily on Sullivan’s (1953) theory of interpersonal relationship development, this earlier research views self-disclosure as an aspect of intimacy development, although it is not equivalent to intimacy per se, as intimacy includes a broader range of qualities, including feeling validated, understood, and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, self-disclosure may be one route towards achieving intimacy.
The vast majority of studies on adolescent self-disclosure of private thoughts and feelings have focused on normative developmental changes in the targets (recipients) of self-disclosure (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). These studies have revealed that there is an increase with age across adolescence in self-disclosure to same-sex friends (and increasingly with age, romantic partners). Based on a review of 50 studies, Buhrmester and Prager (1995) concluded that there is a modest decline across adolescence in self-disclosure to parents and that disclosure is greatest between mothers and daughters, less between sons and parents, and least between fathers and daughters.

These latter findings are consistent with the studies of disclosure of daily activities, which also indicate that there are gender differences in disclosure. Across adolescence, both boys and girls, but especially girls, disclose more to mothers than to fathers, especially about personal issues (Noller & Callan, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). However, in families that included both early and middle adolescent boys and girls, Bumpus, Crouter & McHale (2001) found that fathers knew more about their sons’ than daughters’ daily experiences. Likewise, Noller and Callan (1990) found that adolescent males selectively disclose more (particularly about personal topics) to fathers than to mothers.

Although relatively few studies have examined parental knowledge of adolescents’ activities separately for mothers and fathers, the available research has shown that mothers know more about their adolescents’ lives than do fathers (Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 2001; Crouter et al., 1999; Crouter & McHale, 1993; Crouter, McHale, & Bartko, 1993; Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newson, 2004), most likely because mothers are more involved in the everyday details and provide more emotional support than do fathers. Mothers also consistently know more about the activities of their second-born (pre- and early adolescent) than first-born early and middle adolescent offspring (Bumpus et al., 2001; Crouter et al., 1999). Furthermore, mothers and fathers of teenagers ranging in age from 10–17 appear to obtain their information in different ways. Waizenhofer et al. (2004) found that mothers relied more on asking the adolescent directly, asking informed others (like teachers or one’s spouse) about what teens were doing, actively participating in activities with adolescents (such as driving the child to activities), and obtaining information voluntarily from their adolescent (e.g., child disclosure) than did fathers, while fathers relied more on obtaining information from their wives, particularly about their daughters. Crouter et al. (2005) have obtained similar findings in their sample of parents of 16 year olds, but they also conducted profile analyses; these revealed that there were three distinct groups of fathers and three somewhat different clusters of mothers. Some fathers relied primarily on their spouses for information, some relied on others inside (e.g., siblings) or outside the family, and others used relational methods (e.g., listened and observed, learned from their offspring’s self-disclosure, or solicited information directly). Mothers likewise used relational methods, but they also questioned their teens or relied on others, including their spouses, for information. Longitudinal analyses revealed that
relational methods in early adolescence led to greater parental knowledge when children were 16 years of age, which in turn negatively predicted risky behavior (such as alcohol, substance, and cigarette use and skipping school) one year later.

What do adolescents talk to their parents about and what do they keep secret? There has been little research addressing this issue. Youniss & Smollar (1985) found that middle and late adolescent males and females talk to both mothers and fathers about schoolwork, future plans, and social issues, but they do not communicate much about issues like dating (although they disclose more to mothers than to fathers). Research also has not considered how normative changes in disclosure might be linked with more general developmental processes of changing parental authority during adolescence.

SOCIAL DOMAIN THEORY AND ADOLESCENT–PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

Social domain theory focuses on identifying conceptual and developmental distinctions in children’s social knowledge (for overviews, see Helwig & Turiel, 2003; Killen, McGlothlin, & Kim, 2002; Nucci, 1996, 2001; Smetana, 1995, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 1998, 2002). Social domain theory also has provided a theoretical framework for understanding transformations in adolescent–parent relationships and the development of adolescents’ autonomy (Smetana, 1996, 2002). This research has shown that moral judgments, or prescriptive judgments regarding others’ welfare, trust, or fairness, are conceptually and developmentally distinct from social conventions, or the arbitrary, consensually agreed on norms (like etiquette and manners) that provide individuals with expectations regarding appropriate behavior (Turiel, 1983, 1998).

In turn, morality and social convention have been distinguished from issues that are judged to be under the individual’s jurisdiction and beyond the realm of societal regulation and moral concern (Nucci, 1996, 2001; Smetana, 1995, 2002). Personal issues comprise the private aspects of one’s life and entail issues of preference and choice pertaining to friends, activities, the state of one’s body, and privacy. Nucci (1996, 2001) has asserted that defining an arena of control over personal issues satisfies basic psychological needs for autonomy, personal agency, and effectance. Therefore, although there may be variations in the boundaries or content of the personal domain, as a substantial amount of research has shown (see Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2002 for reviews), all cultures are thought to define a set of issues as up to the person to decide. Prudential issues, which pertain to safety, harm to the self, comfort, and health, also can be distinguished from moral issues (which have harmful consequences for others) and personal issues (which pertain to the self but do not have negative consequences—Nucci, Guerra, & Lee, 1991; Smetana & Asquith, 1994).
Research has demonstrated that these conceptual distinctions are useful in understanding parent-adolescent relationships. Several studies, including research with European-American (Smetana, 1988; Smetana & Asquith, 1994) and African-American middle-class families with teens ranging from 10 to 18 years of age (Smetana, 2000; Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005), Mexican American immigrant families (Lins-Dyer, 2003, described in Nucci, Hasebe, & Lins-Dyer, 2005), and middle- and lower-class children and adolescents in northeastern Brazil (Nucci, Camino, & Milhitas-Sapito, 1996) have shown that adolescents and parents agree that parents have the legitimate authority to regulate moral, conventional, and prudential issues. Although both adolescents and parents agree that adolescents should have some autonomy over personal issues (like choice of clothes or hairstyles or how to spend their allowance), adolescents usually want more control over personal issues than parents are willing to grant. Adolescents also assert autonomy over multifaceted issues, which entail overlaps between domains. (For instance, keeping the bedroom clean may be seen as a conventional issue of custom, authority, or social coordination by parents and a personal issue of identity, autonomy, or control by adolescents; likewise, some friendship issues may entail overlapping conventional, prudential, and personal concerns.) These studies demonstrate that adolescents and parents disagree as to the boundaries of adolescents’ personal freedoms. Daddis (in press a, b) has proposed that adolescents’ push for greater autonomy from parents may be partly influenced by close friends. His research demonstrates that reciprocally nominated close friends are more similar in how they define their personal domains than are nonfriends and that friends are important sources of information when making decisions about personal issues.

Furthermore, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have indicated that discrepancies between parents’ and adolescents’ interpretations of issues result in conflict and that conflict (in the context of warm, supportive parent-adolescent relationships) provides a context for parents and children to articulate, challenge, and negotiate their divergent perspectives (Smetana, 1989; Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). These negotiations, in turn, lead to changes in the boundaries of parental authority and increases in adolescents’ autonomy.

Conflict is only one route to independence, however. Adolescents’ increasing involvement with peers provides many opportunities to disclose or conceal their activities, and decisions not to disclose to parents (at least over some issues) may provide another route to autonomy. Because personal issues are, by definition, private matters, adolescents and parents may view disclosure over personal issues as discretionary rather than obligatory, and disclosure over these issues may depend on the nature of the parent-adolescent relationship. Warm, trusting, and supportive relationships may entail voluntary disclosure over personal issues (as a way of enhancing the relationship or increasing intimacy), whereas relationships that are less supportive and warm or that are characterized by attempts to control
psychologically or undermine autonomy may not. However, because parents consistently grant adolescents less autonomy over personal issues than adolescents feel they are due, adolescents and parents are likely to disagree over adolescents’ obligations to disclose these issues, with parents viewing adolescents as more obligated to disclose to parents than adolescents view themselves.

RESEARCH ON DISCLOSURE AND NONDISCLOSURE IN ADOLESCENT–PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

We have conducted several studies using the framework of social domain theory to examine disclosure and secrecy in adolescent–parent relationships (Smetana et al., 2006, 2007a,b). Given our interest in the underlying beliefs that structure behavior (Goodnow, 1988; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), our first study (Smetana et al., 2006) examined adolescents’ and parents’ perceptions of adolescents’ obligations to disclose to parents their behavior in different social-cognitive domains, as well as their reports of actual disclosure, secrecy, and parental solicitation. Disclosure was defined in this study in terms of how much teenagers willingly disclosed different activities to parents, whereas secrecy was examined in terms of how often teens “keep secret or try to hide what they are doing” from their parents. Based on the prior research on concepts of legitimate parental authority, we expected that adolescents would be seen as more obligated to disclose moral, conventional, and prudential issues than personal issues, but we did not necessarily expect that similar distinctions would emerge in actual disclosure. Furthermore, the previous research led us to expect that there would be discrepancies in adolescents’ and parents’ perceptions, particularly over multifaceted and personal issues, and that parents would view adolescents as more obligated to disclose and more disclosing than adolescents perceived themselves to be. We included both middle (ninth graders) and late adolescents (twelfth graders) so that age differences could be examined, and we expected that disclosure (both obligations to disclose and actual disclosure) and parental solicitation would decrease with age. We also compared adolescents’ ratings of disclosure and parental solicitation for mothers and fathers.

Finally, we examined the influence of domain-differentiated disclosure on adolescent adjustment. Our aim was to examine whether, including beliefs in our analyses, we obtained similar results to Kerr and Stattin (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). More specifically, we examined the influence of trust in the parent–adolescent relationship, beliefs about disclosure, actual disclosure, and parental solicitation on both internalizing symptoms (depression and anxiety) and adolescent problem behavior.

Sample and Procedures. The sample for our study consisted of a community sample of 276 lower middle class, ethnically diverse adolescents and parents
drawn from a suburban high school near Rochester, NY. The sample included 154 ninth graders \(M = 14.62\) years of age, \(SD = 0.51\), \(n = 53\) males and 101 females) and 122 twelfth graders \(M = 17.40\) years, \(SD = 0.47\), \(n = 42\) males and 80 females) and their parents, \((n = 249\); see Smetana et al., 2006). The adolescents were 70% European American, 9% African American, 9% Asian, 7% biracial, 4% Hispanic, and 2% other, and most participating students (72%) lived in two-parent families with two biological parents. The students participating in the study closely matched the demographic characteristics (both race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) of the school district from which they were recruited. Participation rates (33% for the ninth grade and 27% for the twelfth grade) were about average for community studies of this type.

Beliefs about Legitimate Parental Authority and Obligations to Disclose to Parents

We used procedures from previous research (Smetana, 1988, 2000; Smetana, Crean & Campione-Barr, 2005) to assess adolescents’ and parents’ beliefs about parents’ legitimate authority to regulate moral (e.g., how friends are treated, hurting brothers and sisters), conventional (e.g., talking back or being rude to teachers, cursing or swearing), prudential (e.g., drinking alcohol when out with friends, smoking cigarettes, going to a party where alcohol is served), multifaceted (e.g., watching or listening to R-rated moves or CDs, if or who teens are dating, if a teen hangs out a friend’s house when no adult is home), and personal issues (e.g., how teens spend their free time, how teens spend their own money, what teens talk about on the phone with friends, how teens like or have a crush on). Although a great deal of research has shown that morality and social convention are distinct forms of social knowledge (see Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006 for reviews), they are both socially regulated (albeit for different reasons). Thus, for the purposes of the present analyses, and consistent with a previous study (Smetana & Daddis, 2002), we combined moral and conventional issues to form a socially regulated category. We expected that there would be moderate to strong correspondence between judgments regarding the legitimacy of parental authority and beliefs about adolescents’ obligations to disclose to parents, and thus we assessed beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority to examine associations between these two sets of beliefs.

Beliefs about obligatory disclosure to parents were assessed by asking participants, “Should teens tell parents what they are doing, that is do they have a duty or obligation to tell parents about their behavior?” They rated the same set of issues used in the assessment of legitimate parental authority on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (no, not at all) to 5 (definitely yes). Adolescents’ and parents’ ratings of adolescents’ obligation to disclose their behavior to parents are shown in Figure 3.1. These responses were analyzed for differences in
Figure 3.1 Adolescents' and parents' ratings of adolescents' obligations to disclose to parents

judgments according to adolescents' grade and sex, generation (parent versus adolescent), and conceptual domain.

As expected, and as found in the previous research on legitimate parental authority, parents' and adolescents' judgments consistently differed. Parents viewed adolescents as significantly more obligated to disclose all issues than adolescents perceived themselves to be. Furthermore, there were significant domain differences in obligations to disclose to parents. Parents and adolescents viewed adolescents as more obligated to tell parents about prudential (mis)behavior than anything else and about behavior regarding multifaceted issues than either socially regulated or personal issues. (Parental authority was seen as more legitimate, however, for socially regulated than multifaceted issues.) As expected, adolescents were seen as least obligated to disclose about personal issues. Indeed, consistent with our hypotheses, adolescents on average rated themselves as "probably not" obligated to disclose those issues.

Parents viewed their adolescents as less obligated to disclose all issues as they grew older, but differences between ninth and twelfth graders only approached statistical significance. Finally, we expected that beliefs about obligations to disclose to parents and beliefs about the legitimacy of parental authority would be highly correlated, and indeed, they were, $r(275) = 0.59$ for teens and $r(249) = 0.62$ for parents. Although these correlations are high, the strength of the correlations suggests that these two constructs are not identical.
Parental Solicitation of Information

Do parents who view their adolescents as more obligated to tell them about different types of issues try to find out more about those same behaviors? We also asked adolescents and parents to rate (on a five-point scale) how much parents “usually ask, try to find out about, or want to talk about” each issue. Parents’ ratings of adolescents’ obligations to disclose to parents were highly correlated with parents’ reports of how much they sought information about those issues, \( r(248) = 0.56, p < 0.001 \), but adolescents’ ratings were not, \( r = 0.12, \text{n.s.} \). Although the data are cross-sectional and thus, the causal direction cannot be determined, our hypothesis is that parents’ information seeking is informed by beliefs. That is, parents are more likely to seek information about an activity or behavior when they believe their adolescents ought to disclose about it.

Because adolescents separately rated how much mothers and fathers sought information about each issue, we first examined differences in adolescents’ judgments according to grade, gender, domain, and parent (mothers versus fathers). The findings were consistent with previous research (Bumpus, Crouter & McHale, 2001; Crouter et al., 1999; Crouter & McHale, 1993; Crouter, McHale & Bartko, 1993; Noller & Callan, 1990; Waizenhofer, Buchanan & Jackson-Newson, 2004; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) in indicating that adolescents perceived their mothers as trying to obtain more information about their behavior than did fathers. There also were more complex interactions that elaborated on this finding. More specifically, adolescent girls were more likely than adolescent boys to view mothers as trying to find out about personal and multifaceted issues.

Next, we examined differences (again, by grade, sex, and domain) across generations. Because most (84%) of participating parents were mothers, we compared adolescents’ ratings of their disclosure to mothers with their mothers’ reports. As hypothesized, and as can be seen in Figure 3.2, mothers reported seeking more information about their adolescents’ behavior than adolescents reported their mothers seeking.

Furthermore, parental solicitation was greatest over multifaceted than all other issues. It might seem surprising that parents sought more information about multifaceted than prudential issues, as the prudential items included here were issues of risk during adolescence (drinking, smoking cigarettes, and trying illegal drugs). However, other studies have shown that parents solicit more information when their adolescents are more involved in problem behavior (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003); as this was a community sample (and as our data show), the rates of problem behavior were low. Furthermore, previous research has indicated that multifaceted issues are significant sources of disagreement and conflict in adolescent–parent relationships (Smetana, 1989, 2000; Smetana & Asquith, 1994) and that adolescents typically view these issues as personal whereas parents typically view them as social-conventional or prudential.
Figure 3.2 Adolescents' and mothers' ratings of parental solicitation of information

Mothers also reported soliciting more information about prudential and personal activities than about socially regulated behavior, most probably because the socially regulated (moral and conventional) behaviors examined in this study entailed routine expectations that are generally taken for granted by the time children transition to adolescence. Moreover, parents were seen as soliciting more information from their ninth graders than twelfth graders about socially regulated, multifaceted, and personal issues, but there were no age differences in how much mothers sought to find out about their adolescents' prudential behavior.

Disclosure

Next, we examined adolescents' and parents' perceptions of adolescent disclosure to parents, assessed in terms of how often the adolescent "usually tells or is willing to tell your mother (father) without them asking." We focused on disclosure regarding everyday issues (peers, personal, socially regulated, and school work) to ensure that most teens would have opportunities to disclose (or conceal) their behavior. In assessing disclosure and secrecy, we focused our analysis of multifaceted issues to peer relationship issues (seeing someone parents don't like, going to someone else's house when no adult is at home, and whether and who the teen is dating). The socially regulated issues included teasing or saying something mean to someone you know, hurting (pushing, shoving, or hitting) a friend or sibling, lying to a friend, spreading rumors or saying something cruel about someone, talking back, not listening,
or being rude to a teacher, and cursing or using swear words. The personal issues included how teens spend their free time, how teens spend their own money, who teens like or have a crush on, what teens talk about on the phone with friends, and what teens write in e-mails, letters, or journals. Rather than prudential issues of risk, we focused on schoolwork issues, including getting a bad grade or not doing well on an assignment, whether homework or assignments are completed, how teens are doing in different school subjects, and doing particularly well on an assignment.

We first compared adolescents’ ratings of disclosure to mothers and fathers. Overall, and as shown in Figure 3.3, disclosure was moderate.

![Figure 3.3 Adolescents’ disclosure to mothers and fathers](image)

Consistent with previous research (Noller & Callan, 1990; Waizenhofer et al., 2004; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), however, there were interactions between adolescents’ and parents’ gender. Teenagers disclosed more to mothers than to fathers, and girls disclosed more to mothers than did boys. Adolescents disclosed more about schoolwork than about any other issue, and they voluntarily disclosed more about peer relations than about socially regulated and personal issues.

Finally, we compared mothers’ and adolescents’ ratings of adolescents’ disclosure. The analyses revealed variations by age, gender, generation, and topic. Overall, mothers believed that their adolescents disclosed far more than adolescents reported disclosing. Although adolescents and parents both believed that adolescents’ obligation to disclose to parents decreased from
middle to late adolescence, adolescents’ disclosure about peer issues showed a significant increase from ninth to twelfth grade (although parents’ ratings about these issues did not show a corresponding increase). Previous research has shown that antisocial conformity to peers peaks at ninth grade, so it is possible that the older adolescents were more conforming to adult values (and thus, had less to hide) or at least, were more willing to be open. However, we also assessed adolescents’ involvement in problem behaviors using a modified version of the Problem Behavior Survey (PBS) (Mason et al., 1996), a 19-item report of problem behavior adapted from Jessor & Jessor (1977). The measure was modified slightly for this study to omit some of the more serious, violent behaviors, which we have found to be rare in community samples of adolescents, and to include more everyday instances of problem behavior. The 19 items used here were: drink beer or alcohol, use pot (marijuana), smoke cigarettes, take part in street-gang activity, cheat on school tests, steal at home, steal from places other than home, go to school high on drugs, get into fights, threaten to hurt people, go joy-riding, vandalize or trash property, cut classes or skip school, disobey at school, have unsafe sex, stay out past midnight, use drugs such as LSD or Ecstasy, and copy homework from others (alpha was 0.90). Contrary to the hypothesis that older adolescents had less to hide, however, problem behavior increased with age. Thus, adolescents may have engaged in more misbehavior, but they reported being more likely to voluntarily disclose to parents about their activities with peers than about their prudential misbehavior.

THE INFLUENCE OF BELIEFS, DISCLOSURE, AND PARENTAL SOLICITATION OF INFORMATION ABOUT MULTIFACETED AND PERSONAL ISSUES ON ADJUSTMENT

Finally, we examined the role of adolescents’ domain-differentiated beliefs about obligations to disclose, actual disclosure, and parental solicitation on adolescent adjustment. For each of these assessments, the analyses included only personal and peer issues. Thus, our measure of disclosure included items that were similar to the ones used by Kerr and Stattin (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). We also selected these items because they focused on everyday activities and behaviors, and therefore, they were likely to be salient issues for the youth in our sample. Using structural equation modeling, we examined the path model presented in Figure 3.4.

As can be seen, we hypothesized that there would be a direct path from adolescents’ disclosure to parents and their perceptions of parental solicitation of information to adolescent adjustment. We also examined whether adolescents’ obligations to disclose to parents about personal and multifaceted issues and their trust in their parents would have both direct as well as indirect effects, as mediated by disclosure and parental solicitation, on adjustment.

Trust was assessed on the 10-item Trust subscale of the Parent–Peer Attachment Inventory (PPAI, Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Adolescents
separately rated their relationships with mothers and fathers (alpha's = 0.74 and 0.77, respectively) on items such as, "I trust my mother," "my mother understands me," "my mother accepts me as I am," "I wish I had a different mother," and "when we discuss things, my mother considers my point of view." Adjustment was examined in terms of both externalizing behavior (as described previously) and internalizing symptoms, which were assessed using the Depression and Anxiety subscales (alpha = 0.89) of the Youth Self-Report—Child Behavior Checklist (YSL—CBC) (Achenbach, 1991). Finally, adolescents' age, gender, and family marital status (coded as two birth parents versus all else) were also incorporated into the model. The bivariate correlations among these variables are shown in Table 3.1. Trimming the model to include only significant and near-significant paths, the standardized structural coefficients and the goodness-of-fit indices suggested that this model provided an excellent fit of the model to the data, $\chi^2 = 12.74$, RMSEA = 0.044; CFI = 0.99. The results of the structural equation test of the model are presented in Figure 3.5.

### Table 3.1 Correlations among variables

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<td>7. Teen disclosure</td>
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<td>9. Internalizing</td>
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*Note: All variables pertain to teen reports (for trust, parental solicitation, and disclosure, means are for ratings of mothers and fathers combined). Marital Status = married, two parent versus all else. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.
As shown in Figure 3.5, trust and adolescents' obligations to disclose to parents about personal and peer issues strongly and significantly contributed to adolescents' disclosure about these issues. Although adolescents who believed they were more obligated to disclose these issues also rated their parents as trying to find out more about these issues, trust had only a marginally significant effect on adolescent-rated parental solicitation of information about personal and peer issues. However, in contrast to previous research (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and although adolescents' voluntary disclosure to parents showed a modest bivariate association with problem behavior, disclosure did not contribute significantly to problem behavior in the model. Consistent with previous findings, however, the path between (adolescent-rated) parental solicitation of information about personal and peer issues and problem behavior also was not significant.

Adolescent-rated trust in parents and adolescents' perceptions of parents' attempts to solicit information about personal and peer issues had marginally significant effects on depression and anxiety, although for parental solicitation, the relationship was in the opposite direction from our predictions. Adolescents who perceived their parents as trying to find out more about these issues reported more internalizing distress. Previous research has shown that adolescents interpret parents' attempts to control their personal domains as overly intrusive and psychologically controlling (Smetana & Daddis, 2002) and
research also has shown that overcontrol of the personal domain is associated with more internalizing problems (Hasebe, Nucci, & Nucci, 2004). The present findings are consistent with this research and suggest that parental solicitation of information about personal and peer issues may be perceived as intrusive, and thus is associated with more internalizing symptoms. Kerr & Stattin (2000) likewise have found that adolescents whose parents use high levels of behavioral control feel controlled and that feelings of control are related to poorer adjustment. (In their research, when adolescents' feelings of being controlled were partialed out, parental control was associated with better adjustment.) These results suggest that more research is needed on the ways that parents can seek information about their adolescents' activities without appearing overly intrusive. Given that parents appear to seek more information when they have indications that their adolescent is in trouble (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003), it is possible that the parents in the present study sought to find out more about their adolescents' behavior because they perceived that their adolescents were experiencing psychological distress.

The structural model also indicates that adolescents' beliefs about their obligations to disclose to parents and especially, adolescent trust, had strong, direct, and negative associations with problem behavior. That is, adolescents who had more trusting relationships with parents and who believed they were more obligated to disclose their behavior to their parents reported lower levels of problem behavior. Adolescent trust also was significantly, strongly, and negatively associated with internalizing disorders (indicating that higher levels of trust were associated with less depression and anxiety), although beliefs about obligations to disclose were not.

Our finding that adolescents' voluntary disclosure regarding personal and peer issues did not influence adjustment differed from Kerr and Stattin's research (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000), although there were several important differences between the studies. First, our model did not include assessments of either parental knowledge or control, which were key measures in their research. In addition, our measure of trust assessed communication, trust, and understanding in the parent-teen relationship, whereas Kerr & Stattin (2000) focused explicitly on parents' trust in the adolescent. Kerr, Stattin & Trost (1999) assert that parents' trust in the teen and adolescents' trust in parents are profoundly different, due to their different developmental histories and trajectories and power inequalities in the parent-child relationship. In our study, we also obtained assessments of parents' perceptions of trust, communication, and understanding with their adolescents using a reworded version of the 10-item PPAI Trust scale (alpha was 0.69). Supporting Kerr and Stattin's assertion, we found that adolescents' and parents' perceptions of trust in the other were significantly but only moderately (0.39) correlated. In addition, our model expanded on the previous research by including beliefs about adolescents' obligations to disclose to parents, and adolescents' beliefs that they were less obligated to disclose to parents contributed significantly to problem behavior. Like others
(e.g., Goodnow, 1988), our hypothesis is that beliefs influence behavior but as our data are cross-sectional, further longitudinal research would be needed to test the causal direction.

Finally, Kerr & Stattin (2000) found that adolescent disclosure had an independent effect on conduct problems over and above the effects of trust. Although they did not systematically examine the domain of the items included in their assessment, their items were similar to the items categorized here as personal and multifaceted. However, Kerr and Stattin assessed disclosure by asking whether adolescents spontaneously tell, like to tell, usually tell, keep a lot of secrets, or hide their everyday activities from their parents. Previous research has shown that disclosure and secrecy are only moderately (and inversely) correlated (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Finkenauer et al., 2005) and that they have different implications for adjustment (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002) as well as parenting (Finkenauer et al., 2005). As we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Smetana et al., 2006), we also obtained parallel ratings of adolescents’ secrecy regarding the same issues and found that these ratings were significantly but moderately and inversely related to voluntary disclosure (r = 0.46). Thus, it is possible that Kerr and Stattin’s inclusion of secrecy along with their assessment of disclosure influenced their findings.

Our findings point to the centrality of trust, and more generally, the quality of the parent–child relationship in predicting lower levels of problem behavior and internalizing symptoms in a community sample of North American, ethnically diverse, lower middle-class middle and late adolescents. The findings are consistent with our hypothesis that disclosure over personal issues may contribute to the quality of parent–adolescent relationships but that such disclosure is discretionary rather than required. Indeed, our analyses indicated that disclosure over these issues was seen as less obligatory as adolescents got older.

Kerr, Stattin, & Trost (1999) have shown that adolescents who are more disclosing view their parents as more trusting of them, but we further hypothesized that adolescents’ trust in parents would be more positively associated with disclosure in the personal domain than in other domains. To test this hypothesis, we examined associations between adolescents’ ratings of trust and their self-rated disclosure in each domain. Adolescents’ trust in their mothers was significantly associated with their self-reported disclosure to their mothers regarding social, multifaceted, and personal issues, rs (275) = 0.33, 0.45, and 0.47, respectively. Adolescents’ trust in their fathers was likewise significantly associated with their disclosure to their fathers regarding social, multifaceted and personal issues, rs (256) = 0.32, 0.46, and 0.45, respectively. Using r to z transformations, we examined differences among these correlations and found that adolescents’ trust in mothers was more strongly associated with disclosure regarding personal than social issues, z = 1.948, two-tailed test, and that adolescents’ trust in fathers was more strongly associated with disclosure regarding personal and peer than social issues, z = 1.85, 1.98, respectively, two-tailed
test. Thus, these findings show that trust in parents is strongly associated with adolescents’ disclosure of personal issues (and for fathers, multifaceted peer issues). Adolescents who disclose more regarding personal issues have closer relationships with their parents (although the causal direction of these findings cannot be determined because our data are cross-sectional); we have recently replicated these findings in another sample (Smetana et al., 2007a). The test of the structural model showed, however, that not disclosing these issues, at least in our sample, did not appear to have significant negative consequences for adjustment.

The findings also point to the potential importance of the conditions under which disclosure occurs. The results suggested that although beliefs about obligations to disclose personal and peer issues did not show a direct relationship with internalizing symptoms, they had indirect effects, as mediated by disclosure. In other words, adolescents who believed that they were obligated to disclose more about personal and peer issues disclosed more, which in turn, was significantly associated with less anxiety and depression. This suggests that adolescents’ voluntary disclosure of personal issues is associated with better adjustment. In other analyses reported elsewhere (Smetana et al., 2006), we found that more (parent-rated) psychological control was uniquely associated with more (adolescent-reported) disclosure over personal issues, but not other issues. Together with the present findings, this suggests that disclosure about personal issues that feels coerced may negatively influence adjustment. It should be noted that our results are consistent with Kerr & Stattin’s (2000) findings, which also focused on voluntary disclosure, but our research examines the types of issues where voluntary disclosure may matter.

In future research, these findings should be compared with a similar model that focuses on prudential issues (like drug, alcohol, and cigarette use), particularly as adolescents and parents in the present study believed that adolescents are strongly obligated to disclose their prudential behavior. This is consistent with recent research indicating that adolescents believe that it is acceptable to lie to parents to circumvent their (what are seen as illegitimate) directives regarding moral or personal issues but that adolescents accepted the legitimacy of parental directives regarding prudential acts and considering lying regarding prudential behavior as wrong (Perkins & Turiel, 2007). Nevertheless, other studies suggest that adolescents do conceal these behaviors from their parents and that parents have a “parental personal fable” (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005) that maintains an image of themselves as good parents while avoiding knowledge of their adolescents’ potentially risky behavior. Unfortunately, in the study discussed here, we did not obtain an assessment of adolescents’ disclosure over prudential issues because our methods were not sufficiently sensitive to distinguish between adolescents who engage in risky behavior but conceal their involvement and adolescents who have nothing to disclose (because they are not involved in these behaviors).
We have done this, however, in our more recent research (Smetana et al., 2007a,b), using a procedure similar to the one employed in the Issues Checklist (Prinz et al., 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989), a widely used measure of adolescent-parent conflict. Adolescents (seventh and tenth graders drawn from the same school district as the previous study) first identified which of 27 prudential, multifaceted, peer, and personal behaviors or activities they had engaged in at least once and then rated their disclosure to parents only for those activities. For instance, teens were asked whether they had ever gone to a party where teens were drinking alcohol; only teens responding affirmatively rated their voluntary disclosure to parents about this issue. Overall, the level of involvement in problem behaviors was low in this sample, although it increased with age. Similar to the findings just discussed, we found that controlling for age, sex, demographic background, behavioral control, and trust in the parent-adolescent relationship, adolescents' greater voluntary disclosure about personal and multifaceted issues was not significantly associated with problem behavior but it was significantly associated with lower levels of depressed mood. Underscoring the importance of focusing on the domain of the activities that adolescents voluntarily disclose to parents, we also found, employing the same controls, that adolescents who disclosed more about prudential activities (but not about personal and peer issues) reported lower levels of problem behavior (Smetana et al., 2007a). Like our previous study, the study was cross-sectional, leaving causality to be determined in future research.

More generally, the findings from the analyses discussed in this chapter suggest that we need to focus less on parental surveillance, control, and adolescent compliance and more on the factors that facilitate adolescents' and parents' positive, trusting relationships. Furthermore, the findings suggest that adolescents construct domain-differentiated notions of appropriate disclosure that guide their willingness to talk to parents and that disclosure thus entails reciprocal, transactive processes between parents and adolescents. Thus, parents must balance their need to remain informed about their adolescents' behavior and whereabouts with a sensitivity to adolescents' developing autonomy, desires for greater personal freedom, and hence their need for parents not to intrude too deeply into their personal domains. Others have argued that "precision parenting" requires an appropriate and delicate balance between sufficient control to keep adolescents safe and not too much control, which will stifle adolescents' developing autonomy (Mason et al., 1996). Likewise, precision parenting is needed to create an emotional climate that encourages adolescents' voluntary disclosure and permits parents to seek information when needed, without seeming coercive or controlling. Furthermore, our research suggests the need to take a developmental perspective on what constitutes healthy and unhealthy disclosure, parental solicitation of information, and adolescents' strategies for disclosure (Darling et al., 2004; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005) for different kinds of issues.
REFERENCES


