

## Parenting for child and adolescent health: Who's supporting the parents?

Associate Professor David Bennett  
Department of Adolescent Medicine  
The Children's Hospital at Westmead  
National President, AWCH

## The concerns of Australian parents

- Parents lack confidence (56%) and believe they could be better parents (62%)
- Parents do not believe that parenting comes naturally (almost ¾)
- Parents want more information and support to achieve better outcomes for their children

Tucci, Goddard & Mitchell, Australian Childhood Foundation, 2004

## Fostering resilience

"What seems important is to approach life's challenges with a positive frame of mind, a confidence that one can deal with the situation, and a repertoire of approaches that are well-adapted to one's own personal style of doing things."

Michael Rutter, 1993

## Protective factors

- **Personality characteristics** such as autonomy, self esteem and a positive social orientation
- **Family cohesion**, warmth and an absence of discord
- **External support systems** that encourage and reinforce a child's coping efforts

Masten & Garmezy, 1985

## Understanding adolescence

"A time of cosmic yearnings and private passions, of social concern and private agony"

Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Teenager*, 1969

## Infuriatingly normal behaviour

"Teenagers dominate the telephone, play unbearably loud music, never tidy their rooms, are incredibly moody, and push their parents to the limit."

David Bennett, *Growing Pains*, 1987

### Parental mental health

- 40% of parents report increase in distress during early adolescent years (especially mothers)
- Special vulnerability of parents at mid-life - some more vulnerable than others

### Parental mental health

- Lowered self esteem
- Diminished life satisfaction
- Increased anxiety and depression
- More frequent rumination about middle age

### Dealing with difficult behaviour

The three Ps:

- Keep it in *perspective* – there are bits of my life that are OK
- Don't take it *personally* – of course God doesn't make it happen just to me!
- It won't *persist* – this time next year I'll be laughing

### The family in transition

“Like a living organism, families seek to adjust to natural changes that occur across the family life cycle”

### Diversity dominates

“There is more blending, more divorce, more single parents, more same sex couples, more working couples, more defacto couples and more groups of people who share rent, housekeeping bills and argue whose turn it is for dustbin night.”

Anne Deveson, *Resilience*, 2003

### Family and resilience

“... the central importance of caring relationships between children and adults for the development of resilient adolescents and young adults ...”

Michael Resnick et al, 1993

### Authoritative parenting

- Parenting that is warm, involved and responsive
- Parenting that is firm, strict, with...expectations
- Parenting that fosters and encourages psychological autonomy

Diana Baumrind, 1971

### 'More time rather than more stuff'

- A parent at home does not easily substitute for an absent parent
- If there is enough basic money, kids prefer time over more parental earnings
- Young people want parents present for special events, celebrations & achievements

Pocock and Clarke, *Can't Buy me Love?* The Australia Institute, 2004

### The importance of chores/participation

"The lessons we instil by insisting that our children do mundane tasks may very well be the ones that stay with them longest, helping them to become self-reliant adults, responsible community members, and loving parents."

Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, 2001

### Adolescents from authoritative homes

- Achieve more in school
- Score higher in measures of self-reliance and self-esteem & report less depression and anxiety
- Show more positive social behaviour, self-control, cheerfulness and confidence
- Are less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour

Lawrence Steinberg, 2001

### Families and health outcomes

- Family conflict and poor parenting are generic risk factors for a variety of adverse developmental, health and mental health outcomes
- "...a sometimes comforting, sometimes devastating house of life and memory."

Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*, 1992

### Authoritarian parenting

"...parenting styles of low warmth, high use of punishment and low monitoring of the child's behaviour were associated with externalising behaviours and with substance use."

Australian temperament Project, 1983-2000, Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Pathways from Infancy to Adolescence*

### Permissiveness

- In 1946, Dr Spock recommended that children be granted maximum freedom of choice & self expression; in 1957 - *Nowadays, there seems to be more chance of a conscientious parent getting into trouble with permissiveness.*
- "The most infallible way to make your child miserable is to accustom him to obtain everything he desires."

Jean Jacques Rousseau

### A good school feels positive & safe

- Having good friends
- Having good teachers
- Believing you fit in
- Feeling respected by teachers
- Having an adult take an interest in you

Bennett and Rowe, 2004

### Children/Teenagers at risk

- Those who are perceived as different
- Those who experience serious losses or other traumas
- Those in difficult external circumstances

### Risk taking behaviour

- Adolescents experiment with new activities, testing their limits, exploring new skills, and enjoying the often exhilarating sense of freedom involved
- **Biology of the brain relevant:** ongoing development; vulnerable to effects of alcohol & other drugs

### Teenagers and smoking

- About 1 in 5 teenagers smoke
- Smoking by both parents increases risk three-fold; parental disapproval or quitting reduces this risk
- Smoking is strongly linked with other substance use (especially drinking) and poor mental health

Kate Woodhouse, 2004

### This generation of drinkers

"This generation of drinkers start younger, drink more, and indulge in binge drinking to a greater extent than any previous generation."

*2001 National Drug Strategy Household Survey,*  
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2002

### Poor outcomes in later life

Regular drinking in adolescence is an important risk factor for developing abusive, dependent and risky patterns of behaviour in young adulthood.

Bonomo et al, 2001

### A rite of passage equal to none

- "Dad, I would like to learn to drive in a different car, one with more power."
- One third of road accident deaths are in the 16-20 year age group

### Protective factors for drug taking

- Warm and happy families...
- High achieving role models
- Environments that encourage a healthy lifestyle

Crome I, *Young People and Substance Misuse*, 2004

### Family meals

- Frequency of family meals is inversely associated with tobacco, alcohol and marijuana use, depressive symptoms and suicide involvement, particularly among adolescent girls
- Eating meals as a family has benefits for young people above and beyond their general sense of connectedness to family members

Eisenberg et al., 2004

### Sexuality – a sensitive issue

"Love is the answer. But while you're waiting for the answer, sex brings up some pretty good questions."

Woody Allen

### A guide for parents

- Be open and honest
- Discuss values and beliefs
- Discuss 'what if' scenarios
- Respect a young person's privacy
- Make sure teenagers get accurate information

### Adolescent mental health problems

- One in five young people has a mental health problem
- 75% of mental health problems begin in adolescence

### Supporting parents: What works?

- Parents need educational and support strategies which specifically set out to affirm them and build their parenting skills

### Teach by example...

- Persevere – don't give up
- Have proper conversations
- Listen and show respect
- Know what's normal and when to worry
- Hug your kids – just get in there and hold on

Bronwyn Donaghy, 2001

### Letting go when you want to hold on

"This can be our finest hour. To let go when you want to hold on takes utmost generosity and love. Only parents are capable of such painful greatness."

Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Teenager*, 1969