FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PARENTS: A
GAME

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By

Benjamin Michael Raskin

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The graduate project of Benjamin Michael Raskin is approved:

___________________________  ______________________
Cecile G. Schwedes, M.A.       Date

___________________________  ______________________
Tovah Sands, Ph.D.             Date

___________________________  ______________________
Stan Charnofsky, Ed.D., Chair  Date

California State University, Northridge
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This project is dedicated to all of the children who find it difficult to connect to their parents, and all the parents who find it difficult to connect with their children. This is also dedicated to anyone with a desire to grow into a happier, healthier, more balanced person. I would also like to thank my family. A final thanks to all my friends who I learned with and made mistakes with throughout my adolescent years. I now know that you embodied my first experiences of the symptoms resulting from a low level of parent-adolescent connectedness. Connectedness… those with it float, those without it sink.
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ABSTRACT

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One of the elements that is central to a positive or negative manifestation of behavior in adolescents is the level of connectedness that adolescents perceive as having with their parents. The purpose of this project is to review the research on connectedness as a pivotal element of the relationship that adolescents have with their parents, and its implications upon their adjustment to society as a whole and their personal health. This will be done by looking at research findings regarding what connectedness is, cultural and gender influences on connectedness, the prevalence of a lack of connectedness, factors which influence connectedness and the effects of a high level or low level of connectedness between adolescents and their parents. The research reviewed in this project indicates that the level of connectedness between adolescents and their parents has broad implications upon adolescents’ social as well as psychological health. This project will also examine various methods that can be used to increase the level of connectedness between adolescents and their parents. This project proposes a game that will be specifically developed to increase the connectedness between adolescents and their parents. This game will provide a process for establishing an empathic understanding between adolescents and their parents, and thus increase the level of connectedness within their relationship.
CHAPTER I

Introduction

Connections that young people have to adults, the schools they attend, and the communities in which they live are key determinants of their future health and well-being. A sense of connectedness to others and key institutions in their lives is a protective factor against an array of health risk behaviors, and is associated with better mental health outcomes (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999; Resnick et al., 1997).

Background of the Problem

Due to the current economic condition of the United States, it is rare to be able to support a family on a single income. For parents affected by these harsh circumstances, the time spent at the job is time spent away from their children. Parents are often overworked and stressed about their job security, coming home exhausted and bringing their job anxieties and financial worries home with them. Due to these stresses, parents often do not have the time or energy to worry about finding ways of connecting emotionally and cognitively with their adolescent.

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of connectedness and empathic understanding amongst many adolescents and their parents. Blum and Rinehart (1997) assert that high levels of parent-adolescent connectedness are associated with lower levels of health risk behaviors. In other words, a lack of parent-adolescent connectedness may result in higher levels of behavioral problems, which could lead to health risks. According to these researchers, “children who report feeling connected to a parent are protected against the emotional distress caused by a lack of connectedness, and suicidal thoughts and attempts; cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use; violent behavior; and early sexual activity” (1997, para. 6). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
“alcohol use by persons under age 21 years is a major public health problem.” This indicates the possibility of a wide spread lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents in the United States.

**Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to examine the need for improving the connectedness between adolescents and their parents, and to introduce a tool to facilitate the enhancement of connectedness within these relationships. The tool that is being proposed is a game that will be specifically developed to help facilitate parent-adolescent connectedness and a mutual empathic understanding. It is hoped that the use of this game will achieve the following: a) enhance awareness of the amount of connectedness present between the adolescent and parent, b) aid to promote a greater amount of connectedness and empathic understanding between the adolescent and parent, and c) help recognize the benefits of a more connected relationship.

This project will also provide an organized resource for researchers and can be used and referenced to influence the creation of games that will enhance the relationship, i.e., connectedness between parents and their adolescent children. Parents, therapists, and schools can use this information and these types of games for developing a higher level of connectedness and fostering an empathic understanding between adolescents and their parents.

The adolescent and parent relationship is foundational to all subsequent relationships in an adolescent’s life. If a strong connection is not established, it will likely negatively affect the ability of the adolescent to form strong connections with others later on. An example of other people with whom adolescents might not be able to form connections is their teachers. Adolescents who do not form connections with their teachers will likely be less motivated to learn and are thus less likely to succeed in school. Consequently, this shows how a lack of
connectedness could have negative effects on the adolescent both personally and societally. It will follow that adolescents who are not well connected to their parents may have difficulty forming connections to employers as well as future spouses.

In order to better understand this issue, it is necessary to review previous studies and research regarding parent-adolescent connectedness. This includes the prevalence and effects of a lack of connectedness as well as the benefits of a more connected relationship. This paper will also explore the use of tools, such as games, to promote empathic understanding and connectedness amongst adolescents and their parents, which will be accomplished in the following chapter.

Definitions

Adolescent: A person between the ages 12 and 18, as per Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development. For the purpose of this project, “child” and “adolescent” will be used interchangeably.

Empathy: the ability to identify with and understand somebody else's feelings or difficulties. For the duration of this paper, the terms "empathy" and "empathic understanding" will be used interchangeably.

Parent-Adolescent Connectedness or Connectedness: is “a condition characterized by the quality of the emotional bond between parents (or those with a parenting role) and their children, and by the degree to which this bond is both mutual and sustained over time” (Planned
Parenthood, 2011, pg. 2). For the purpose of this project, parent-adolescent connectedness, parent-child connectedness and connectedness will be used interchangeably.

**Parents:** Primary caregivers or adult figures who are invested in establishing a more connected relationship to an adolescent.

**Organization of the Project**

Chapter two is organized to first provide the reader with information relating to parent-adolescent connectedness, more specifically, what parent-adolescent connectedness is, cultural influences of parent-adolescent connectedness, the societal prevalence of a lack of parent-adolescent connectedness, the advantages and disadvantages relating to the maintenance or lack thereof of parent-adolescent connectedness, and lastly information on resources and strategies currently available to help parents and adolescents achieve and maintain a high level of connectedness. Chapter three explains the development of this project, its intended audience, equipment and environment, and an outline of the project. Chapter four includes a summary, discussion, and recommendations for future research. The appendix contains the game developed in correspondence with this project.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

What is Parent-Adolescent Connectedness?

According to Lezin and other researchers, parent-child connectedness is “characterized by the quality of the emotional bond between parent and child and by the degree to which this bond is both mutual and sustained over time” (Scarborough et al., 2011). In other words, connectedness between parents and their children is an emotional and cognitive state. According to Grotevant and Cooper, connectedness was conceptualized as consisting of two elements (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). The first of these elements was referred to as mutuality. This was described as the demonstration of sensitivity and respect of the beliefs, feelings, and ideas of others. The second element was named permeability. This is understood as the responsiveness or openness of an individual to the ideas of others. This can be demonstrated by the way parents respond to their child’s needs. Barber and Schluterman also referenced a study by Byers and other researchers who found parent-adolescent connectedness as being characterized by mutual reciprocity and trust. Other researchers have characterized connectedness as the experience of families’ feelings of closeness, satisfaction with relationships, and a sense of being loved and cared for. Resnick et al. describes family connectedness as being evidenced by the enjoyment of times together. An example of enjoyable times might be in the form of sharing a game together. Connectedness has also been associated with the elements of a relational bond and adolescents’ feelings of validation of their individuality. Barber and Schluterman stated that connectedness between children and their parents is formed by varying combinations and levels of encouragement, consistency, loving, predictable, supportive, devoted, and affectionate relational exchanges (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). In other words, one of the ways that parents can
communicate trust to their adolescents is by acknowledging their individuality and providing them with developmentally appropriate autonomy and freedom throughout their daily activities. A study by De Luca, Wyman, and Warren (2012) supports the social-ecological theory which states that the relationships between people and the social and environmental system that they are a part of can have a positive or negative impact on their development. This supports the need adolescents have to feel connected to their parents as this relationship is often their first and most influential one and if not available, would have a negative impact on the adolescent’s development.

**Cultural and Gender Influences on Parent-Adolescent Connectedness**

According to Smokowski and others, an added influence which negatively relates to parent-child connectedness and acts as a diminishing factor for family functioning is the creation of an acculturation gap (Scarborough et al., 2011). This results from adolescent acculturating faster than their parents in immigrant families. Abraido-Lanza and other researchers attribute this pattern to the U.S. or host majority culture having more permissive cultural norms (Scarborough et al., 2011). In 2001, Hofstede found that individuation and parent-child connectedness differ widely between cultures considered collectivist and individualist (Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2010). For example, adolescents in western societies such as Europe and the United States are expected to individuate from their parents by developing their own attitudes, values, emotional detachment and self-reliance. In contrast, adolescents in more collectivist cultures such as Asia, Africa, and South America are not encouraged to develop separately and are not expected to differentiate into developing a separate self and identity. When a lack of connectedness does occur within a family whose culture is otherwise collectivist, this can result in greater negative consequences. For example, a study by De Luca et al. (2012)
found that a lack of connectedness between Latinas and their fathers increases the incidence of suicidal behaviors. In contrast, suicidal ideations decreased when Latinas perceived their fathers as supportive and parents as caring for them. Youniss and Ketterlinus found that while sons and daughters saw their mothers as knowing them equally well, daughters viewed their fathers as knowing them significantly less than as reported by sons (Youniss & Ketterlinus, 1987).

**Prevalence of the Lack of Connectedness between Adolescents and their Parents**

In a longitudinal study by Crespo, Kielpakowski, Jose, and Pryor in 2009, which lasted over two years, 1774 adolescents were surveyed and reported a perceived decrease in connectedness over the last two years of their development (Crespo, Kielpakowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2009). In other words, as children progress through adolescence, their perceived level of connectedness decreases. This suggests that interventions made during these years to promote parent-adolescent connectedness would greatly benefit the adolescent. Research shows that depression in adolescents is often times a symptom of a lack of connectedness between adolescents and the significant people in their lives, which are most commonly parents. According to Rushton, with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 28.6% of 7th to 12th grade students experience depressive symptoms, many of which are moderate to severe (Houltberg, Henry, Merten, & Robinson, 2011). This suggests that these depressive symptoms which many adolescents are struggling with are symptomatic of adolescents’ perceived lack of connectedness with their parents. Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Perry (2006) describe a nationally representative study which found that only 41.7% of boys and 58.4% of girls saw their mothers as being the first person they would consult with for health care concerns. Similarly, the results of their own study involving a sample of over 4700 students in public schools found that the youth who reported feeling that their mothers
cared very little or not at all about them exhibited a higher prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems such as: weight control/eating disorder problems (63% of girls and 25% of boys), suicide attempts (33% girls, 21% boys), low self-esteem (47% girls, 24% boys), and depression (63% girls, 33% boys). Borowsky et al. and Kerr et al. associated adolescent’s perceived connectedness to their families with a decreased risk of suicidal behaviors (De Luca, Wyman, & Warren, 2012). De Luca et al. (2012) reports that in the United States, suicide is the third most common cause of death for 10 to 24 year olds. This suggests that there is an obvious lack of parent-adolescent connectedness in American families and the consequences of this deficiency are devastating to the lives of young people and their families.

**Factors Which Influence Parent-Adolescent Connectedness**

*Empathy*

Many findings in research literature conclude that empathy helps to improve adolescents’ attitudes and behaviors towards others, while a lack of empathy is associated with more negative attitudes and behavior (Oezmete & Bayoglu, 2009). Multiple studies have also found the importance of parenting and parental support in a person’s development of empathy. A study by Barnett and other researchers explains the parental role in children’s empathy development with that of the social learning theory (Miklikowska, Soenens & Duriez, 2011). This theory sees supportive parents as influential role models to their children’s empathic development. Also, perceived parental support was found to be very influential on the development of empathy for adolescents (Miklikowska, Soenens & Duriez, 2011).

Empathic understanding contains both affective and cognitive components. Eisenberg and Fabes (1990) proclaim that the affective component represents care for others based on the understanding of their internal state. This can also result in the motivation to relieve the other
person’s distress (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Consequently, a lack of this component would result in an indifference to the other’s distress or internal state, assuming one’s internal state has been communicated to the other person. The cognitive component, often referred to as perspective taking, pertains to the cognitive understanding of internal states and the cognitions of others (Miklikowska, Soenens & Duriez, 2011). This suggests that empathic understanding is one of the key elements in forming connectedness in any relationship.

Home Environment

It is also important for adolescents to perceive their parents as providing a safe, warm, and affectionate home environment, which encourages individuality and exploration of new physical, cognitive, and social potentials. Parents who show an interest and involvement in their adolescent’s activities are thus communicating caring and taking the first step towards achieving a more connected relationship (Oezmete & Bayoglu, 2009). This involvement could be an invitation to play a game, which in turn is a demonstration of parental care. According to Warr, the greatest predictor of low delinquency rates in adolescents is the amount of time parents spend with their children (Judy & Nelson, 2000).

According to Bernat and Resnick (2009, p. 379), parent-adolescent connectedness is defined as “closeness to parents, perceived caring, satisfaction, and feeling loved and wanted.” When parents have other duties, such as work, it is easy to overlook the quality of their relationship with their adolescent. This can, in turn, give the impression that the adolescent is unimportant and can ultimately have a negative effect on their relationship and the adolescent’s self-concept. By increasing the awareness (or empathic understanding) of the challenges both adolescents and parents face, the emotional distancing and lack of understanding which negatively influences their relationship will be lessened. Therefore, a greater amount of
empathic understanding is vital to developing a more connected relationship between the adolescent and parent.

A study by Riggs et al. in 2010 found that a parent’s lack of available time was a barrier to parent-child connectedness. This deficiency in time was described as commonly being a result of an overly demanding work schedule. This reflects the multiple environmental factors which interfere with a parent’s ability to maintain and develop a connected relationship with their adolescent children (Scarborough et al., 2011). A study by Ackard and other researchers found that lower SES was regularly related to adolescents having a lower perception of their family’s connectedness (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006). This suggests that lower SES family’s experience of economic related stress gets in the way of parents ability to connect with their children which consequently has negative effects on adolescents physical, emotional, and psychological health. A study by Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) is a reminder that parental caring, while extraordinarily important in the lives of adolescents, is not a substitute for threats to health relating to economic disparities. These researchers also state that the sense of disconnectedness in a growing amount of young people is correlated to current trends in the economy (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). This suggests that for many families, adolescents’ sense of disconnectedness could partially be explained by societal/economic factors which cause stress for families.

**Disadvantages of a Lack of Connectedness**

*Personal and Societal Problems*

According to Oezmete and Bayoglu (2009), a lack of connectedness between an adolescent and his or her parents results in many personal issues. Some of these difficulties can manifest themselves as conflict between adolescents and their parents. Research shows that
conflicts are more prevalent among adolescents who perceive their parents as being uncaring and unsupportive. One major source of conflict is the perception by adolescents that their parents are overly controlling and exercising unjustifiable constraints upon them (Oezmete & Bayoglu, 2009). In an article by Barber and Schluterman, Adolescents who perceived their parents as being psychologically controlling showed higher levels of anti-social behaviors and higher levels of depression (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). These feelings, perceptions and the resulting conflicts can be explained as resulting from a lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents.

According to a 1999 study done by Allen and Land (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009), if there is a lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents, it is easy for this lack of connectedness to translate negatively into other social situations which the adolescent is exposed to, such as the school environment (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). In a study by Kelly, O’Flaherty, Toumbourou, Homel and Patton in 2012, the level of school connectedness for adolescents was found to be influential on student’s future levels of educational attainment, academic competence, and job satisfaction (Kelly, O’Flaherty, Toumbourou, Homel & Patton (2012). In other words the more connected an adolescent is to his or her parents, the more likely they are to achieve higher levels of education and a job or career which provides them with satisfaction, not just a wage. Day and Padilla-Walker also note that Adolescents who are less connected to their parents will not only be less likely to form connected relationships with peers, but will also be less able to seek help or assistance from others, such as teachers or counselors. Also, adolescents who do not have a strong empathic connection to their parents are often perceived by others as being less approachable. This in turn will make it more difficult for them to receive the resources that they might require (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). This suggests that
the adolescents’ difficulties may persist for an extended period of time and increase the likelihood that they seek out alcohol or drugs for temporary relief to any negative emotions they may feel. Also, a study by Ackard and others in 2006 found that adolescents who perceive themselves as having a negative relationship with their parents often have feelings of dissatisfaction with their body image and value friend’s opinions over those of the parents (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010). Young et al. 2004 have also found links between body dissatisfaction and eating disorder (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2009). This suggests that adolescents who are less connected to their parents are more likely to suffer from eating disorders at some point in their lives. Alternatively, Ackard and other researchers found that when adolescents value their parent’s opinions, this acts as an added protective factor against unhealthy emotional and behavioral health. Another interesting find was that girls who perceived their mothers as having minimal care for them commonly also reported a higher level of unhealthy weight control (63% vs. 18%) and suicide attempts (33% vs. 10%) compared to peers who reported higher levels of maternal care. These researchers also provide research which relates family connectedness to several other health risk behaviors relating to emotional health, depression, self-worth, substance use, and bulimic symptoms (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006).

**Advantages of a More Connected Relationship**

There are many advantages for both the adolescent and parent when a more connected relationship is established and maintained. A study by barber, Stohls, and Olsen describes *connection* between children and their significant others as providing children with an absence of loneliness, a perceived bond, and a sense of belonging (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Also, connectedness between youth and their families has been found to act as a supportive structure in
other areas of children’s lives. When a high level of connectedness is maintained, children are more likely to turn to parents for information and guidance than looking for it from their peers (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006). A study done by Houltberg, Henry, Merten, and Robinson (2011) noted that a high level of connectedness between adolescents and parents lessens the likelihood adolescents experience a depressed mood when faced with adverse circumstances. According to a study done by Saluja in 2004, depression is one of the most common challenges to adolescents’ mental health. This further highlights the importance of a connected relationship between adolescents and their parents and could hint that a lack of parent-adolescent connectedness is prominent amongst many families. A study by Plunkett in 2007 explains that negative views of the self, world, and future, accompanied by emotions such as worthlessness, hopelessness and guilt will commonly historically precede many diagnoses of adolescent depression (Houltberg, Henry, Merten, & Robinson, 2011). In other words, symptoms of depression in adolescents can partially be explained by a lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents or caregivers. This suggests that if identified early, a more connected relationship can likely reverse these symptoms and reduce the chance and severity of adolescent depression.

Similarly, Ohannessian et al. (1998) found that adolescents who both perceive a close emotional connection and feel accepted by their parents have higher levels of self-competence. In addition, Papini and Farmer (1990) found that adolescents disclose more to their parents about their emotional states when they perceived their parents as being open to discussion, warm, and caring. This in turn allows the adolescent to talk about his or her feelings with the parents rather than with peers. This suggests that disclosing also helps parents to gain insight about what their
adolescent is dealing with, and puts parents in a better position to help their adolescent through challenges which are common during the adolescent years.

According to Steinberg and other researchers, consistent with the Social Developmental Model, an elevated level of family relationship quality has a direct positive effect on adolescents’ school connectedness and academic achievement (Kelly et al., 2012). Furthermore, connectedness was found to be a protective factor in regard to adolescents’ health (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Other researchers found parent-adolescent connectedness as being directly related to an increased self-esteem in adolescents (Padilla-Walker, Hardy, & Christensen, 2010). In a 2008 study by Barber and Schluterman, research found that parent adolescent-connectedness was a protective factor against delinquent, criminal, violent, and risky behaviors as well as poor emotional well-being (Barber& Schluterman 2008). Specifically, girls’ perceptions of themselves having a poor body image were correlated with parent-adolescent connectedness (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2009).

According to the social control theory described by Hirschi, children’s bond to parents or caregivers helps to inhibit behaviors which society deems unacceptable (Scarborough et al., 2011). Research has also shown that parental involvement and connectedness in children’s lives influences children’s abilities to internalize healthy behaviors and to experience a sense of hope (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). This suggests that a more connected relationship to parents facilitates a greater sense of resiliency in children. In a study by Resnick, Harris and Blum, adolescents’ level of resiliency and their feeling a sense of meaning in relation to the world were both influenced by the level of connectedness and caring between adolescents and the important adults in their lives. The analyses discussed in this study also describe adolescents' feelings of connectedness as a necessary component for an adolescents overall health (Resnick, Harris, &
Blum, 1993). In another study by Padilla-Walker and other researchers, parent-child connectedness was positively related to school engagement and other pro-social behaviors (Padilla-Walker, Hardy, & Christensen, 2010).

**Resources Currently Available to Promote a More Connected Relationship**

A study by Youniss and Ketterlinus (1987) is a reminder that parent-adolescent relationships are not static but develop and change over time. This understanding is necessary throughout a child’s development into adolescence for healthy autonomy and individuation to occur. It is important for a parent and child can view each other as they are, rather than how they were from an earlier developmental lens (Youniss, & Ketterlinus, 1987). Research also shows that Mother-child relationships are adaptable and able to be improved in a relatively short period of time (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006). This suggests that resources made to help foster an increased level of connectedness between adolescents and their parents can have a rapid and measurable impact on their experiences of connectedness which the family themselves can monitor. Alternatively, for adolescents who are unable to obtain a higher level of connectedness to their parents or caretaker, a study by Houltberg, Henry, Merten, and Robinson in 2011 found that the internalization of a close relationship to God may offer an alternate form of connectedness where adolescents perceive a lack from their families (Houltberg, Henry, Merten, & Robinson, 2011).

According to Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Sales, Leonard, and Updegraff (2002), in order to foster a more connected relationship between adolescents and their parents, it is important to evaluate existing interaction patterns, family rules, and family member responsibilities in order to determine how connected the family presently is, so that together, they can strive for more connectedness. Helping parents and adolescents renegotiate their relationship patterns, while
recognizing adolescents’ developmental needs for autonomy, will not only foster more connectedness within the family, but also enable adolescents to establish close relationships outside of the family. In a study by Barber and Olsen, upon research gathered from a longitudinal analysis of adolescents, it was found that adolescent’s relational deficits in the home environment may be compensated for by the forming of positive relationships in other areas of an adolescent’s life, such as school (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006).

Research has also found that when parents provide opportunities for adolescents to learn new skills, which could be in the form of learning how to play a new game to improve communication between parents and adolescents, the level of connectedness between them will increase (Madden-Derdich et al., 2002). This translates to an invitation to gain a greater amount of understanding for each other and thereby achieving a higher level of connectedness. In a study by Belman and Flangan (2010), it was noted that games were particularly beneficial in fostering empathy in adolescents because they allow adolescents to role-play others in a unique and immersive way, thereby learning others’ perspectives. A study by Toumbourou and Gregg describes one parent based approach which focuses on strengthening adult-child relationships through the use of lessons which relate to solving conflicts in a respectful manner, without the use of criticism or blame. They describe their goal to be for parents and children to experience solving problems constructively, exploring mutual needs relating to communication, and encouraging adolescents experience of autonomy (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006).

One suitable strategy for helping families adapt to the normal changes brought about by the child's transition to adolescence may be to focus on patterns of self-disclosure (Hendrick, 1987). This suggests that a game which precipitates self-disclosure amongst its players such as
adolescents and their parents can help adolescents share what they are going through with their parents, while simultaneously allowing the parents the ability to learn more about their child and thus increasing both the communication between the two and the level of connectedness that they have. In a study by Coyne et al. (2010), games were found beneficial in improving adolescents’ perceived parental responsiveness to their feelings and needs. Time spent in a mutual pursuit with their parent demonstrates to the adolescent that their parents love them and enjoy spending time with them. It also demonstrates to the adolescent that relationships are fluid rather than static. In other words, this explains that relationships require constant communication, not a lack of it in order to maintain its connectedness. A study by Scarborough and other researchers in (2011) described another way that programs can strengthen communication. This can be done by engaging families in activities which promote conversations about topics such as psychological, social, and physical changes that are to be expected during an adolescent’s puberty phase (Scarborough et al., 2011).

The research done in this paper demonstrates that there is often a lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents, which manifests itself as a major impediment to a positive relationship between them and their parents or caregivers, as well as to the adolescents’ current and future relationships with others. This project provides evidence that there is a substantial need for an effective tool or strategy to bridge the gap between adolescents’ connectedness with their parents.

As per the research collected above, this project proposes the creation and utilization of a specifically adapted game to help pre-adolescents/adolescents and their parents to gain and maintain a higher level of connectedness and empathic understanding with each other. This will in turn lead to a greater level of social, personal, psychological and physical health for
adolescents and provide an added protective factor to support adolescents during difficult or stressful times, and thus ultimately decrease the possibility that adolescents will suffer from the consequences described above.
CHAPTER III

Project Audience and Implementation Factors

Development of Project

This project, and the corresponding game, was developed to provide parents of pre-adolescents and adolescents with a tool which can be used to establish and maintain a high level of connectedness. The inspiration for this project and game came from my work as a School Counseling Intern, and as an In Home Outreach Counselor. Throughout these experiences, I became aware of a family’s influence on an individual’s psychological and emotional health and realized how many children and adolescents feel severely disconnected to their parents. I developed this game using these experiences as well as much of the research found in the literature. I am hopeful that the game created for this project will be useful to parents, families, and practitioners in their attempts to create more connected relationships between adults and adolescents. This project and game were created with hopes to eliminate or drastically decrease the negative effects resulting from a lack thereof.

The game provides an evidenced based structured 8 week intervention for use at home or in any other settings that has specific instructions on the duration of each session, rules of conduct, and other pertinent information to optimize the positive effects from its use.

The game is broken down into five sub-focused areas which all relate to a family's overall level of perceived connectedness. The game includes a pretest and a posttest to be taken before and after the 8 week intervention. The game provides players with instructions relating to behaviors, phrases, and topics to be discussed throughout each session. The game also includes guidelines for parents on how to play the game in a way for it to be most effective.
**Intended Audience**

This game is intended to be used by parents or parent figures of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 who wish to establish and maintain a more connected relationship to their children. The game requires 1 adolescent and 1 parent, and should not include more than this as adding more players will decrease the positive effects of the games use. The game could be used in a therapeutic setting in which its facilitation could be done by a counselor.

**Environment and Equipment**

This game can be provided to families in mental health agencies, psychotherapy offices, middle and high schools, and in appropriate commercial settings. Game materials are provided in a package and no prior experience or knowledge is necessary for the games use other than an understanding of the instruction packet. The game should be played in a comfortable area with limited distractions. The game must be played for 50 minutes to an hour twice a week for 8 weeks for the full effectiveness of the game to be achieved. The game does not require any additional equipment to be played.

**Project Outline**

The game will include the following:

1. One instruction sheet explaining the goals behind the games creation and implementation/playing process.

2. One Pre-shuffled Deck of cards consisting of:

   Six sets of cards relating to the 6 focus areas associated with experiences of connectedness. One set of Cards of Compromise with compromising scenarios.


5. One adolescent and parent pre-test and post-test.
6. References

*See APPENDIX A
CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Summary

This project was developed for parents and adolescents who perceive a low level of connectedness and are experiencing some of the negative symptoms resulting from this lack of parent-adolescent connectedness. Research shows the importance of a connected relationship for both adolescents and their parents however many families don’t know where to turn. For others, the financial burden of counseling or professional therapeutic services in an un-manageable, unattainable option.

This game covers and exercises five foundational conditions of a highly connected relationship which families can practice as they pursue a more connected relationship. The purpose of this game is to provide families with a structured, systematic intervention that they can use at home to increase their overall level of connectedness. The game can be prescribed by mental health professionals, school counselors, along with other settings or people who have an interest in gaining and maintaining high levels of parent-adolescent connectedness.

Discussion

Providing families with a resource to increase the level of overall connectedness between adolescents and their parents has the potential to have drastic positive effects on the whole family, and society at large. The literature reviewed in chapter two highlighted the importance for parents to have a connected relationship to their adolescent children. It did this by discussing both the negative impact that a perceived lack of connectedness has on an adolescent’s mental, emotional, and physical health, along with the positive effects on adolescents when they perceive themselves as having a highly connected relationship. The game provides a systematic and
structured process in which parents and adolescents can work together to increase their level of connectedness in a fun and engaging way.

The literature review also suggests that even though the negative effects associated with a lack of connectedness between adolescents and their parents is readily accepted, the development of specific resources for families to utilize at home are not so common. As a result, families who cannot afford mental health services are falling through the cracks and suffering from the symptoms of a low level of parent-adolescent connectedness. The research that could come out of the implementation of a specific game to address low levels of parent-adolescent connectedness could jump start further development and innovation in the area of at home resources which would not require the high fees associated with traditional mental health services, but still provide families with an effective and practical resource to address their mental health, emotional, and relational needs.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this game provides an invaluable resource for families and mental health professionals who work with families who struggle with the symptoms of a low level of connectedness, future work can be implemented into testing the impact of such resources to optimize their effectiveness in use with families. The systematic creation of other models of games which may address more specific age groups, cultures, player’s intellectual ability, and relational attributes relating to connectedness would also provide valuable supportive tools which can be used in correspondence with traditional therapeutic services for populations which may not be as responsive to other interventions or experience financial limitations when it comes to traditional therapy. Furthermore, finding new ways of creating fun, engaging, and effective therapeutic games which not only provide players with an undeniable enjoyable experience, but
also challenge families to examining their relational norms and practice exercising healthier, and more connected interactions, may stimulate further research into other ways of helping families adapt to healthier more connected relationships without the need for long term and highly expensive traditional therapeutic or psychotropic interventions. Research in this area may have great societal and social implications for the families of the 21st century.
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FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PARENTS: A GAME

By

Benjamin Michael Raskin
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This game is not recommended as a replacement for psychotherapy and the game’s associates may not be held liable for any negative experiences, or damage related to the playing of the game.

The game Connect is for parents and adolescents to gain and reinforce a healthy and connected relationship. The game does this by providing players with opportunities to practice connecting through the use of questions, information and instructions.

The aspects of connectedness which are addressed by the game and exercised throughout game play are as follows:

- Empathy
- Caring and Affection
- Respect and Individuality
- Understanding and Attunement
- Compromising and Communication
The game achieves these outcomes by providing players the opportunity to practice healthy communication and interaction which have been associated with experiences of connectedness. This occurs while players simultaneously learn what research shows about connectedness.

- **Frequency of Use:**
  
  o Game is intended to be used at least twice a week for 8 weeks.
  
  o Game is intended to be played for 50 minutes to one hour each session without breaks in between.

- **Rules of game:**
  
  o **Step 1:** Together players shall read over game contents and the introductory instruction sheet describing the game's goals.
  
  o **Step 2:** Both players shall privately fill out the pretest and fold them to be inserted in envelopes (to be filled out only once prior to first session).
  
  o **Step 3:** Players take turns rolling the dice. First person who scores a 3 starts the game, shuffles the deck of and pulls the first card.
  
  o **Step 4:** Starting player pulls card from top of deck, reads out loud, and then answers accordingly. During this time, other player must remain quiet. From this point on, players will take turns pulling cards and answering accordingly for the remainder of the session.
  
  o **Step 5:** Some of the question cards have corresponding instructions (Act it Out) or information on connectedness on them. These are to be read and completed after the initial question has been answered.
These cards ask the card holder to carry out certain tasks or provide information on what research says about the importance of parent-adolescent connectedness.

- **Step 6:** Cards of Compromise will prompt the players to engage in compromising scenarios. These cards instruct the players to utilize the Compromising Checklist, Questions for discussion and the Triangle of Compromise tool.

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**The Game Contents:**

- *Instruction Sheet (goals and rules)*
- *Adolescent and parent pre-test*
- *Pre-shuffled deck consisting of:*
  - *Cards of Connect (6 sets) some of which have information on connectedness and “Act It Out” prompts*
  - *Cards of Compromise - each card has a scenario to be compromised about*
- *Compromising Checklist, Questions for Discussion, Triangle of compromise Tool*
  (Allows players to plot how close they are to a compromise as they are in the compromising process)*
- *Adolescent and parent post-test*
- *One dice*
Adolescent Pretest:

For family to measure their current level of perceived connectedness

Test is to be taken prior to the first session of game play

Prompt players to be as honest as possible as this affects therapeutic effect.

8 questions (Circle your answer)

1. If I am having a rough day, my parent can normally tell
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

2. I feel my parent listens to me regularly
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

3. I usually feel free to share my feelings with my parent
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

4. I generally enjoy the time I spend with my parent
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

5. I generally feel that my parent understands me when I share things with him/her
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

6. I feel that my physical and psychological wellbeing is important to my parent
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always
7. I generally know what makes my parent upset
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

8. My parent generally knows what makes me upset
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

Parent Pretest:

1. It is easy for me to think of my adolescent’s positive qualities
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

2. I can normally tell when my adolescent is upset or not feeling well
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

3. I generally understand my adolescent’s needs and feelings
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

4. I generally communicate well with my adolescent
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

5. When we have a disagreement, we are usually able to reach a compromise
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always
6. I am aware of some of the difficulties associated with the adolescent years
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

7. My adolescent feels comfortable sharing concerns with me
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

8. My adolescent understands the limits that are associated with being an adolescent
   1= never  2=rarely  3=half the time  4=most of the time  5=Always

**CARDS OF CONNECT**

**Cards of Empathy**

1. The most difficult thing I have ever heard my adolescent/parent say to me was...

2. Something that I have difficulty talking about with my parent/adolescent is...

3. Something that I feel more comfortable talking about with my parent/adolescent than anyone else is...

4. (Staring contest) Look at each other in the eyes for 10 seconds without smiling or blinking. First person to blink or smile loses.

5. How do you know when your parent/adolescent needs your attention?

6. I get sad when my parent/adolescent says…
7. I get angry when my parent/adolescent…

8. I feel the most connected to my parent/adolescent when…

9. One thing that’s difficult about being me is…

**Cards of Caring and Affection**

1. One thing that I admire about my parent/adolescent’s personality is…

2. Thank your parent/adolescent for something good they’re doing.

3. I feel most affectionate to my parent/adolescent when…

4. I know that my parent/adolescent cares for me when he/she…

5. I feel uncared for by my parent or adolescent when he/she…

6. I feel unappreciated by my parent/adolescent when he/she…

7. One way I like to show my parent/adolescent affection is…

8. I am in the most need of my parent/adolescent’s affection when…

**Cards of Respect**

1. I feel most respected by my parent/adolescent when he/she ____

2. I feel less respected by my parent/adolescent when he/she ____
3. During a disagreement, I can show my parent/adolescent respect by ____

4. What are three ways that you can show your parent/adolescent respect throughout the day?
   
   5. Being respected is important to me because ____
   
   6. My definition of respect is ____
   
   7. Respect is important for all relationships because ____
   
   8. One thing my parent/adolescent can do to help me feel more respected is ____

Cards of Understanding/Attunement

1. I feel that my parent/adolescent understands me the most when____

2. How can talking help in increasing an understanding between parents and their adolescent?
   
   3. I feel my parent/child does not understand me when____
   
   4. When I’m not understood by my parent/adolescent, I feel____. Why?
   
   5. One way that I can help my parent/adolescent understand me more is____

Cards of Individuality/Autonomy

1. Two ways in which my parent/adolescent is different from me is______

   2. My favorite part about my personality is______
3. One thing I like about my parent/adolescent’s personality is____

4. One way that I deal with my parent/adolescent’s differences is____

5. I consider a sense of autonomy to be very important because____

6. It is important for me that my parent/adolescent respects my individuality because____

Cards of Compromising and Communication

1. Compromising is an important aspect of my relationship with my parent/adolescent because____

2. One way that my parent/adolescent helps me feel supported is____

3. One way that my parent/adolescent communicates his/her feelings is____

4. Think of an example of a successful compromise between you and your parent/adolescent. What made it successful?

5. One way that I can initiate a compromise with my parent/adolescent is____

6. Compromising can sometimes be difficult because____

7. One way that my parent/adolescent and I can compromise more often is to____

8. Why is it important for a parent and adolescent to compromise?

9. What are the most frequent compromises between my parent/adolescent and me?

Cards of Compromise

11 Separate cards which will be mixed in with the Cards of Connect

Cards notify players to engage in a compromising exercise which is written on the back.
Scenarios on the back of Cards of Compromise

1. Parent wants to go out, adolescent wants to stay home… Compromise!
2. Adolescent wants to go out, parent wants to stay home… Compromise!
3. How late to stay out? … Compromise!
4. Future plans? … Compromise!
5. Dating and relationships? … Compromise!
6. What to eat? … Compromise!
7. Having pets? … Compromise!
8. Family expectations and traditions VS. Present societal norms? … Compromise!
9. Parent work schedule? … Compromise!
10. What to spend money on? … Compromise!
11. TV, Internet? … Compromise!

Steps to be completed once a player pulls a Card of Compromise

Step 1: See Compromising Checklist before compromising

Step 2: Consider questions for discussion while searching for a compromise

Step 3: Use Triangle of Compromise to plot the relative distance you are from compromising.

Questions for discussion when searching for a compromise

1. What does a compromise with this situation look like to me?
2. How does my parent/adolescent see a compromise with this situation?
3. Are there any parts to this situation which I have not considered?
4. Has anything happened recently which might affect my ability to compromise?
5. Can the consideration of previous compromises be helpful in finding one in this situation?

**Research-Based Information on Various Cards of Connect**

**Two facts for each of the 6 sets**

- Parent-adolescent connectedness is characterized by the quality of the emotional bond between a parent and an adolescent and by the degree to which this bond is both mutual and sustained over time.

- Respecting each other’s beliefs, feelings and ideas is an important part of maintaining a healthy and connected relationship.

- Trust has been found to be an essential part of connectedness between adolescents and their parents.

- Families who try to make their time together enjoyable are more likely to maintain a connected relationship. What activities can you think that would be enjoyable for you and your family?

- One of the ways that parents can communicate trust to their adolescents is by acknowledging their individuality and providing them with developmentally appropriate autonomy and freedom throughout their daily activities.

- Adolescents who feel connected to their parent/s are less likely to experience symptoms of depression.
• Conflict between adolescents and their parents is often a sign of a lack of connectedness.

• Adolescents who have a strong connection with their parents tend to be more successful in their other relationships.

• Adolescents who are more connected to their parents tend to have a more positive self-image.

• Researchers found that when adolescents value their parent’s opinions, this acts as an added protective factor against unhealthy emotional and behavioral health.

• Adolescents who both perceive a close emotional connection and feel accepted by their parents have higher levels of self-competence.

• Other researchers found parent-adolescent connectedness as being directly related to an increased self-esteem in adolescents.

*Act It Out! Prompts on Various Cards of Connect*

Two prompts for each of the 6 sets

• The most common phrase my parent/adolescent says is… Act it out.

• For 2 minutes, act like your parent/adolescent… Act it out.
• For 1 minute, talk like your parent/adolescent... Act it out.
• Act out how the other does when they’re angry with you... Act it out.
• How does the other person walk? Act it out.
• How does your parent/adolescent look when he or she is tired? Act it out.
• How does your parent/adolescent talk to others on the phone? Act it out.
• How the other behaves in a store? Act it out.
• How does your parent/adolescent behave in an argument? Act it out.
• How would your parent/adolescent act if he or she were wrong about something? Act it out.
• Your parent/adolescent is late for an appointment. Act it out.
• How does your parent/adolescent act when he or she is happy? Act it out.

Adolescent Posttest:

For family to measure for positive increase in perceived level of connectedness

Test is to be taken upon the completion of the 16th session

8 questions (Circle your answer)

1. If I am having a rough day, my parent can normally tell

1= never 2=rarely 3=half the time 4=most of the time 5=Always

2. I feel my parent listens to me regularly

1= never 2=rarely 3=half the time 4=most of the time 5=Always

3. I usually feel free to share my feelings with my parent

1= never 2=rarely 3=half the time 4=most of the time 5=Always
4. I generally enjoy the time I spend with my parent
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5. I generally feel that my parent understands me when I share things with him/her
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1. It is easy for me to think of my adolescent’s positive qualities
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8. My adolescent understands the limits that are associated with being an adolescent
   1= never   2=rarely   3=half the time   4=most of the time   5=Always
Triangle of Compromise

The Triangle of Compromise is a tool that was developed to provide families with a systematic process for compromising.

Triangle? A triangle was chosen as it is a shape in which the two distant points at the bottom eventually meet in the middle. This is precisely the dynamic and goal in which a compromise can be attained. A compromise occurs when both people give up a little of their preference to reach a mutual consensus.

Compromising Checklist Prior to Beginning a Compromise

To be checked off by players upon the pulling of a Card of Compromise

**Step 1:** Both players must agree to compromise prior to one being attained

(Once agreed, check below)

Check if yes: Player 1_____ Player 2______

**Step 2:** Both players must first agree that a compromise is possible

(Once agreed, check below)

Check if yes: Player 1_____ Player 2______

**Step 3:** Both players must exercise a positive attitude regarding the compromise process

(Once established, check below)

Check if yes: Player 1_____ Player 2______

**Step 4:** Both players must agree that the present time is an optimal one for a compromise to occur
(Once agreed, check below)

Check if yes: Player 1_____Player 2_____

**Step 5:** Both players must state their position clearly and fully until mutual understanding of the situation is attained

(Once stated, check below)

Check if yes: Player 1_____Player 2_____

**Step 6:** If all of the above fields are checked in agreement, proceed to engage in the

**Triangle of Compromise!!!!**

**But wait…How does it work?**

Players must seek a compromise until a compromise has been found, i.e., both players are pleased with decision. If a compromise could not be established, no decision shall be made regarding issue, compromising shall continue at a later time.

This is a physical plastic tool which is found in the box.
References


