

Original Papers

Polish Psychological Bulletin
2018, vol. 49(4) 424–431
DOI - 10.24425/119511

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Communication in the families of high-achieving students

Abstract: Good quality communication in the family is a source of positive relations among its members. It is the most important characteristic of a well-functioning family. Very interesting perceptions of communication in the family are held by high achieving students. In those young people, communication in the family correlates negatively with their high grade point average. Also, they evaluate positively communication in the family as a whole but less positively one-to-one verbal interactions with the mother and the father. This observation is explained by the fact that the family forms a system. Moreover, communication is associated with positive relationships and attitudes such as acceptance and autonomy, but correlates negatively with control, over-demanding behaviour, and inconsistency in the parents of high achieving students.

Keywords: communication, family, family relations, high school achievement

Introduction

Family studies have a long tradition in psychology. Nevertheless, it is worth continuing to explore this topic, because the world around us is changing and so is the family. There are various approaches in family science, however, it seems that the best approach and one that is most often used today is to study the family as a system. When investigating families, scientists pay attention to their composition, status, cultural environment, and other sociodemographic variables. Researchers in psychology concentrate on the parenting attitudes and relationships prevailing in the family, which may influence a number of variables, including psychological and pedagogical ones. Psychologists are interested in both the marital dyad and parental influences on children (Plopa, 2011). Sociology and psychology provide multiple definitions of the small social groups we call families. A family is a group of people who have a common goal. Family members are connected by relationships which distinguish a family from a random set of people. It is a group of people who are linked by special, close ties and who share a life together (Braun-Gałkowska, 2008). In other words, the family is a spiritual union of a small group of people.

Its members live in one household and are connected by relationships based on mutual assistance. They take care of each other because they are connected by biological and social ties. They have a common spiritual culture and tradition (Adamski, 2002). The family is the basic group that passes on moral values to young persons and shapes their conscience (Marianski, 2012). The family is the fundamental learning environment, in which individuals develop socially and intellectually. The processes that occur within the family have an impact on people's emotional, cognitive, and social development (Liberska, 2011). Despite the fact that society is changing, the family still remains the most important value in life for most people. Of course, it is subject to change, too, which affects the roles and functions of the family. Various scientific fields which deal with human development emphasize that the family is not only the place where a person is born, but also the place where they become human. It is not solely the foundation of human existence from a biological perspective, but it also has the task of creating an optimum environment for children. Sociologists emphasize that the family socializes people into becoming members of a community. Psychologists draw attention to the psychological development of a person at every stage of their family life.

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Specialists in education deal with the educational role of parents. Scientists from different fields look at the impact of the family on a human being in different ways, but they all emphasize that this impact is strong, all-encompassing, and long-lasting (Gorbaniuk & Parysewicz, 2009).

It is emphasized that the family shapes a person's sense of self-worth, need for achievement, self-esteem, activity, and communication styles. The family environment is key to the development of the human being, regardless of his or her genetic make-up. It seems that upbringing in the family may have more influence on the child than biological determinants (Dysarz, 2003).

Relationships in the family depend on such factors as the quality of communication, the degree of autonomy-control, and family identity and cohesion. Importantly, these factors should be looked at as part of a system in which a child has a separate relationship with each of the parents and its siblings and is also affected by the relationship between the parents (Plopa & Połomski, 2010). When speaking of relationships in the family, one should focus not only on feelings, but also on thoughts, specific activities, events, and emotions. It is these elements and their properties that reflect how intimately family members are connected. They can also be understood in terms of exchange of goods. Family members, so to speak, exchange their feelings, mutual love, respect, as well as information and services (Plopa, 2008). It is often emphasized that family relationships are among the most important factors affecting the quality of life (Rostowska, Jarmołowska, & Lewandowska-Walter, 2010).

The relationships in the family translate into the general atmosphere that prevails at home. Parents of gifted children create a unique atmosphere based on support. Homes like this follow a democratic style of parenting, with each family member having the right to express their opinion. Decisions are made jointly whenever possible. The child is not ignored and is provided with a great sense of security. What is important, the atmosphere of emotional security is one of the predictors of school achievement (Landau & Weissler, 1993; Bialecki & Siemieńska, 2007). Intra-family relationships have a direct impact on a child's school performance. And since the family is a system that is governed by the feedback principle, it is not only parents who influence the child's achievements, but also the child's achievements can differentially affect the quality of the parent-child relationship (Sikorski, 2011).

One of the key characteristics of the family, according to Braun-Gałkowska (2009), is conversation. The author emphasizes that the quality of dialogue in the family increases the cohesion of the latter, giving family members a sense of security and closeness (Braun-Gałkowska, 2009). The ability to talk to one another is quoted as an important factor contributing to family happiness. Conversation is indispensable in upbringing. Positive communication patterns are passed on from parents to their offspring, affecting intergenerational as well as peer relationships. Good communication in the family is characterized by honesty, openness, the ability to listen and understand, and empathy. A lack of communication or dysfunctional communication lead to dysfunctions in the family (Błasiak, 2012).

Communication is one of the most important dimensions of cohesion in the family. It is responsible for proper adaptation in the family and in social environments. Positive, open conversation allows family members to understand one another and freely exchange information. It also teaches children empathy. Good quality conversation allows the family to retain its cohesion even if problems, such as illness or suffering, arise. Family members can support one another because they are able to listen and talk to one another (Kalus, 2009).

The quality of communication is of great importance to mutual marital support. The spouse is most often reported as the primary provider of support. For this support to be effective, it is essential that husband and wife live in mutual understanding, i.e. that they are able to interpret each other's messages and respond to them appropriately. In practice, mutual understanding means discerning and meeting the other person's needs. Importantly, the benefits of good communication are felt not only by the person who receives support, but also by the person who provides it. Providing support to others has a good impact on one's mental condition and quality of life (Hołyń, 2011).

An important element of the family system is the quality of communication between its subsystems: the already mentioned marital subsystem and the much more complicated parent-child (parental) subsystems. More and more authors emphasize that communication between the child and the mother develops already in the prenatal period. As the child develops, going through the successive stages of growing up, communication in this subsystem changes to accommodate the new roles that family members assume. The relationship evolves from one of the child's total dependence and the parent's full responsibility for their offspring, to one of equality and partnership in conversation. As the family moves from one developmental stage to the next, communication among its members undergoes strong transformations. The content of conversations and communication rules change along with evolving family relationships and ties (Harwas-Napierała, 2014).

Communication also importantly depends on the level of child development. Difficulties in communication between a parent and a teenager child result from the specific characteristics of the child's developmental stage. Adolescents are not yet adults, but they are no longer children. Problems arise when parents fail to notice this and choose inappropriate language and level of conversation. Teenagers seek independence and want to be heard. This is the time in which their views are formed, which often deviate from the norms and principles adopted by the parents. This is why communication between a parent and a teenager is difficult, but if it is based on respect, openness and partnership, it can be positive (Kozera-Mikuła, 2015).

The issue of high school achievements causes researchers many problems. First of all, it is difficult to define and differentiate between certain concepts such as a gifted student, an outstandingly able student, a student with outstanding achievement, a creative student, etc. Another problem is related to the need for clear criteria of

achievement. Nowadays, achievement is assessed by both measurable school outcomes, such as a high grade point average, excellent test scores and successes in competitive examinations, as well as standardized instruments for measuring creativity, intelligence, and motivation. At the same time, researchers emphasize that the psychological approach based only on the examination of the intellect significantly limits the identification of the student's potential (Tokarz, 2005).

Many factors influence a student's school success. Predictors of high achievement include high intelligence, creativity, and certain personality factors. Of course, the environment in which a young person develops – his/her family, school, and interactions with peers – also play an important role. Researchers are looking for new relationships and factors that promote high achievement. Among others, investigators explore the system of values of talented people, their styles of communication, the level of creativity, and family influences (Chagas & Fleith, 2006; Sękowski & Łubianka, 2014). High achievements can be counted among giftedness criteria. However, school success will not always translate into success in adult life. Still, it certainly increases an individual's sense of self-efficacy and boosts their aspirations. Especially academic success of university students may have an impact on their later achievements in professional life (Sękowski & Siekańska, 2008). Research confirms that people who have had high school achievements are more satisfied with their professional work in adult life (Siekańska & Sękowski, 2006).

Research questions and hypotheses

How do students with high and average achievement differ in their perceptions of communication in the family?

1. High achieving students perceive communication in their families more positively than do students with average achievement.

There are relationships between a student's positive perceptions of communication in the family and his or her high school achievement. Students with high school achievement are expected to have positive perceptions of communication with their parents. Family communication is one of the most important predictors of good family relationships. Therefore, the possibility of having an open conversation with a parent plays a very important role in a child's development and consequently in the development of his/her achievement (Reichenberg & Landau, 2009). Authors also accent the importance of partnership in parent-child communication (Chwedorowicz, 2013).

What attitudes and relationships are associated with communication in the family?

2. Communication in the family is positively correlated with family cohesion and positive maternal and paternal attitudes of acceptance and autonomy, and negatively correlated with control, over-demanding behaviour, and parental inconsistency.

Communication in the family is one of the most important factors that affect relationships with family members. It is crucial for personal development and self-esteem. What is important, people acquire communication skills primarily in the family. Parents teach a child to interact with other people and engage in social behaviours (Satir, 2000). That is why communication is one of the most important dimensions of family life, which shapes the remaining relationships and attitudes.

Method

The present study was conducted using questionnaires in which the respondents (adolescent students) assessed the attitudes and relationships in their own families. Two instruments were employed: the Family Relationships Questionnaire (My Family, My Mother, and My Father versions) and the Parental Attitudes Scale (My Mother and My Father versions). Also a survey designed by the present authors, regarding family structure and school achievement was used. The 'My Family' version of the Family Relationships Questionnaire is intended to elicit a child's assessment of the family as a whole. This instrument is used to study perceptions of the family in young people between the ages of 15 and 20. It consists of 32 items. The respondents are asked to rate their degree of agreement with the statements in each item on a five-point scale (1. Agree 2. Rather agree 3. Don't know 4. Rather disagree 5. Disagree). Family relationships are described in terms of four dimensions: "Communication", "Cohesion", "Autonomy-Control", and "Identity". The "My Mother" and "My Father" versions of the questionnaire have 24 items each and describe relationships with regard to three dimensions: "Communication", "Cohesion", and "Autonomy-Control" (Plopa & Połomski, 2010). The "My Mother" and "My Father" versions of the Parental Attitudes Scale are used to examine parental attitudes as perceived by young people aged 13 to 20 years. The respondents rate their degree of agreement with the statements on a five-point scale (1. Agree 2. Rather agree 3. Difficult to say 4. Rather disagree 5. Disagree). The questionnaires consist of 45 items each, grouped into five scales: "Acceptance-Rejection," "Autonomy," "Protecting," "Demanding," and "Inconsistency" (Plopa, 2012).

Procedures

The questionnaires were administered to groups of students in schools. The questionnaires were completed during one lesson (45 minutes). The respondents were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. A few students refused to take part in the survey. Each student received a set of test sheets and a survey sheet. The average response time was about 25 minutes.

Participants

The study group consisted of first-grade gymnasium (junior high school) students aged 16 years. Only individuals from full families were included in the study.

Half of the families were “two plus two” families, 22% of the respondents had two siblings, fewer than 14% were the only child in their families, and about 6% of the sample had four to eight siblings. Achievement was measured by grade point average from the last school year.

Results

High achievers assessed communication in their family as being better than did the controls. The results are shown in Table 1. Girls with a high grade point average evaluated the quality of dialogue in their families and

communication with their fathers higher than their peers in the control. The results are presented in Table 2. The Communication scale in the “My Father” version of the Family Relationships Questionnaire correlated negatively with the average grade point (-0.24 ; $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). In the same group divided by gender, the correlation was positive in girls at 0.2 ; $p < 0.05$. In boys, the correlation was negative at -0.28 ; $p < 0.05$ (Table 4). Moreover, the dimension of Communication with the Mother entered the regression model for the whole group ($\beta = -0.325$) and for the group of men ($\beta = -0.239$). The results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 1. Perceptions of communication in the family by students with high and average school achievement (GPA)

	High achievers (N = 148)		Control group (N = 158)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Communication in the family	31.33	5.84	29.61	6.36	-2.46	.01

Table 2. Perceptions of communication in the family by students with high and average GPA

	High achieving girls (N = 95)		Girls in the control group (N = 97)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Communication in the family	31.72	5.77	28.22	7.02	-3.78	.001
Communication with the father	28.75	8.04	25.03	8.09	-3.19	.002

Table 3. Correlations of communication with the father with GPA

	Grade point average from the last year	
	High achievers (N = 148)	Control group (N = 158)
Communication with the father	-.24*	.01

Note. * Significance at $p < .001$.

Table 4. Correlations of relationship with the father with GPA by gender

Relationship with the Father	Girls		Boys	
	Grade point average from the last year		Grade point average from the last year	
	High achievers (N = 95)	Control group (N = 97)	High achievers (N = 53)	Control group (N = 61)
Communication	-.12	.2***	-.28***	-.03

Note. *** Significance at $p < 0.05$.

Table 5. Contribution of the psychological variables in explaining variance in students' high achievement measured on the basis of their grade point average from the last school year

Psychological variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> <
	Parameter estimate (B)	Standard error	β		
(Constant)	5.723	0.31		14.972	.001
Mother: Communication	-.040	.008	-.325		

Note. $R = 0.327$; $R^2 = 0.107$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.1$; $df1 = 1$; $df2 = 625$.

Table 6. Contribution of the psychological variables in explaining variation in the students' high achievement measured on the basis of their grade average from the last school year in the group of male students

Psychological variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	F	p <
	Parameter estimate (B)	Standard error	β		
(Constant)	5.161	.448		6.331	.001
Mother: Communication	-.036	.015	-.239		

Note. R = 0.311; R² = 0.097; adjusted R² = 0.081; df1 = 1; df2 = 237.

Table 7. Correlations between dimensions of family relations and relationships with the mother and the father for the high achievers by gender

Family relations		Girls (N = 95)				Boys (N = 53)			
		Communication	Cohesion	Autonomy-Control	Identity	Communication	Cohesion	Autonomy-Control	Identity
Relationship with the mother	Communication	.74*	.73*	.55*	.63*	.73*	.66*	.55*	.65*
	Cohesion	.66*	.73*	.47*	.57*	.66*	.69*	.52*	.63*
	Autonomy-Control	-.58*	-.51*	-.72*	-.42*	-.31**	-.29**	-.45*	-.17
Relationship with the father	Communication	.57*	.56*	.49*	.54*	.73*	.69*	.43*	.59*
	Cohesion	.67*	.66*	.45*	.62*	.76*	.78*	.43*	.57*
	Autonomy-Control	-.49*	-.37*	-.57*	-.27*	-.38*	-.37*	-.34**	-.31**

Note. * Significance at p < .001; ** Significance at p < 0.01.

Table 8. Correlations between scores on the "My Mother" version of the Parental Attitudes Scale and scores on the Family Relationships Questionnaire ("My Family", "My Mother", and "My Father" versions) for high achievers by gender

Parental Attitudes of the Mother		Girls (N = 95)					Boys (N = 53)				
		Acceptance-Rejection	Independence	Protecting	Demanding	Inconsistency	Acceptance-Rejection	Independence	Protecting	Demanding	Inconsistency
Family relations	Communication	.66*	.6*	.17	-.49*	-.51*	.63*	.52*	.16	-.08	-.35*
	Cohesion	.69*	.52*	.18	-.49*	-.53*	.64*	.44*	.15	-.13	-.44*
	Autonomy-Control	.42*	.62*	-.24**	-.58*	-.59*	.48*	.65*	-.12	-.42*	-.32**
	Identity	.6*	.39*	.2	-.29*	-.49*	.65*	.5*	.24	.03	-.25
Relationship with the mother	Communication	.84*	.73*	.32*	-.57*	-.66*	.68*	.7*	.14	-.36*	-.55*
	Cohesion	.85*	.71*	.31*	-.56*	-.69*	.86*	.73*	.12	-.3**	-.62*
	Autonomy-Control	-.57*	-.74*	.25	.84*	.75*	-.31**	-.54*	.18	.71*	.54*
Relationship with the father	Communication	.32*	.25**	-.04	-.23*	-.20***	.44*	.35**	.11	-.06	-.14
	Cohesion	.42*	.32*	-.01	-.31*	-.31*	.45*	.35**	.06	-.16	-.33**
	Autonomy-Control	-.29*	-.33*	.09	.32*	.36*	-.37*	-.39*	.21	.4*	.41*

Note. * Significance at p < .001; ** Significance at p < 0.01; *** Significance at p < 0.05.

Table 9. Correlations between scores on the “My Father “ version of the Parental Attitudes Scale and scores on the Family Relationships Questionnaire (“My Family”, “My Mother”, and “My Father” versions) for high achievers by gender

Parental Attitudes of the Father		Girls (N = 95)					Boys (N = 53)				
		Acceptance-Rejection	Independence	Protecting	Demanding	Inconsistency	Acceptance-Rejection	Independence	Protecting	Demanding	Inconsistency
Family relations	Communication	.59*	.53*	.34*	-.32*	-.42*	.61*	.58*	.41*	-.25	-.45*
	Cohesion	.58*	.46*	.28*	-.27*	-.48*	.74*	.61*	.52*	-.32**	-.5*
	Autonomy-Control	.49*	.51*	.13	-.32*	-.41*	.33**	.56*	-.01	-.4*	-.28***
	Identity	.57*	.36*	.43*	-.19	-.37*	.45*	.47*	.42*	-.05	-.29**
Relationship with the mother	Communication	.44*	.40*	.27*	-.21*	-.36*	.47*	.53*	.34**	-.3**	-.3**
	Cohesion	.43*	.44*	.16	-.28*	-.43*	.46*	.50*	.31**	-.38*	-.35**
	Autonomy-Control	-.38*	-.35*	-.05	.27*	.33*	-.29**	-.36*	-.04	.51*	.49*
Relationship with the father	Communication	.86*	.67*	.35*	-.48*	-.57*	.77*	.70*	.35**	-.39*	-.53*
	Cohesion	.84*	.59*	.39*	-.36*	-.54*	.89*	.83*	.44*	-.52*	-.63*
	Autonomy-Control	-.37*	-.62*	.11	.75*	.66*	-.44*	-.53*	.02	.67*	.57*

Note. * Significance at $p < .001$; ** Significance at $p < 0.01$; *** Significance at $p < 0.05$.

Correlations between communication and other dimensions of family relationships and relationships with the father and the mother are given in Table 7. The next tables present correlations of family relations (including communication) with the attitudes of the mother (Table 8) and the father (Table 9). It can be added here that high achieving girls and boys had different perceptions of communication with their mothers and fathers. The correlation between Communication with the Father and Communication with the Mother in girls was only 0.28; $p < 0.01$, whereas in boys it was 0.68; $p < 0.001$, the difference between the correlation coefficients was significant at $p < 0.001$. This means that the girls perceived communication with their fathers as being different than their communication with their mothers, while boys evaluated their exchanges with both parents in a similar way.

Discussion

The first hypothesis that high achieving students perceive communication in their families more positively than do students with average achievement, was partially confirmed by the results. Significantly higher scores on the dimension of Communication were obtained by the high achieving group as a whole. High achieving girls had significantly higher scores for communication in the family as a whole and communication with the father. The hypothesis was not confirmed in the case of boys; however, it must be emphasized that boys in all groups perceived communication in their family rather positively, which is a good trend.

No hypothesis had been formulated regarding gender differences in the way high achievers perceived communication in their families, but it can be added here that boys evaluated their verbal interactions with their fathers better than did girls. Interestingly, this trend was also observed in the control group. Communication is one of the dimensions of family relationships. In this study it was investigated using three standardized psychological tests which provided information on how the respondents perceived communication in the family as a whole and how they perceived their communication with each parent separately. The “My Family”, “My Mother” and “My Father” versions of the Family Relationships Questionnaire were used.

Both girls and boys rated communication at 6 to 7 on a 10-point scale. This applied to both communication in the family as a whole and one-to-one exchanges with the mother and the father. The coefficients of correlation of the dimension of Communication with the GPA were very low. However, they pointed to a positive correlation in girls, and a negative one in boys. This may have been related to the developmental age of the participants – adolescence is the time when teenagers find it particularly difficult to talk to their parents about their problems and often fight with them over their ideologies (Kozera-Mikuła, 2015). In the regression model, Communication with the Mother explained the students’ GPA in a negative way, which may mean that young people who had problems in their relationship with the mother wanted to improve it by being good students. Given the age of the respondents, the communication problems

may have been related to the young people's desire to become independent, their rebellion against the mother's attentiveness (Kozera-Mikuła, 2015). In addition, it should be remembered that the actual communication was not investigated, but only how young people evaluated its quality, which leaves open the possibility that the gifted students, owing to their over-perfectionism, may have assessed their communication in the family as being worse than it actually was. In addition, it has to be remembered that young people tend to idealize the vision of the family they would like to create in the future, usually seeing their family of origin as deviating from that ideal (Baniak, 2010).

The second hypothesis, regarding the positive correlation of communication with parental acceptance and autonomy as well as a negative correlation with parental control, over-demanding behaviour, and inconsistency, was confirmed. Communication correlated highly with cohesion. The correlation coefficients were 0.82 in both girls and boys when the family was considered as a whole, and 0.87 in girls assessing communication with the father. When family was regarded as a whole, communication correlated positively with Autonomy-Control, but when interactions with the mother and the father were considered separately, the correlation was negative. Communication correlated positively with Autonomy and, as it had been hypothesized, it correlated negatively with Over-demanding Behaviour and Inconsistency; the correlation coefficients represented a moderate association.

Just as expected, positive dialogue in the family is associated with good relationships and positive attitudes. Verbal interaction is one of the components of family life that is worth taking good care of, because it allows the system to function properly. A family in which individuals are able to talk and listen to one another is cohesive and is characterized by a lack of inconsistency, despotism and excessive control.

Conclusion

Many researchers emphasize that communication is one of the most important elements of the proper functioning of the family (Satir, 2000; Braun-Gałkowska, 2008, 2009; Harwas-Napierała, 2014; Kozera-Mikuła, 2015). The specific character of verbal interactions is of great importance to the quality of family ties (Gwiazdowska-Stańczak, 2015). Positive communication promotes child development and good relationships, and thus the development of achievement in students (Reichenberg & Landau, 2009). However, the relationships obtained in the present study show minor inconsistencies in this respect. It turns out that dissatisfaction with communication with the father favours the achievement of success in school. Communication with the mother is also negatively associated with a high GPA. These findings can be explained in various ways. Firstly, the quality of communication with parents may have been negatively affected by the developmental age of the respondents. Secondly, a role may have been played by excessive perfectionism, which often characterizes gifted

students. They may see communication with a parent as being worse than it really is (Sękowski & Knopik, 2008; Śliwińska, Limont, & Dreszer, 2008). It may be the case that children who are dissatisfied with the quality of their communication with a parent make every effort to improve this relationship. They become successful to "earn" the parent's love and acceptance or, perhaps, to compensate for the lack of a good atmosphere at home.

The dimension of Communication in the family was positively correlated with such relationships as Cohesion, Autonomy and parental Acceptance, and negatively with Inconsistency and Over-demanding Behaviour. These results once again confirm that communication in the family is one of the most important elements of the proper functioning of the family system (Braun-Gałkowska, 2008; Guzik & Guzik, 2010; Harwas-Napierała, 2014; Kozera-Mikuła, 2015). Positive communication is associated with a good level of cohesion in the family and satisfaction with autonomy and acceptance. In homes where parents keep an open dialogue with their children, there is an atmosphere of understanding, kindness, and love. In this light, it is not surprising that negative communication is associated with such attitudes as inconsistent and excessively demanding behaviour. Pressure, lack of support, and a sense of threat are hardly conducive to family conversation. Dialogue in the family is important because without it, it is impossible to solve conflicts and problems. Parents who can listen to their children and try to understand and accept their views, will certainly foster their positive development. In addition, children who trust their parents know that they can share with them both their successes and failures.

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