The Relationship between Parents and their Adolescent Children

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MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

- From research published in the HBSC survey (Currie et al., 2008), we find that Maltese adolescents have a low degree of trust in their parents when compared to adolescents in 40 other countries.

- When it comes to trust between a mother and her children, Maltese 11-year-olds ranked 34th, 13-year-olds were in 37th place and 15-year-olds were in the 36th place. The relationship between a father and his children was weaker still, with fathers ranking 40th place right at the bottom of the list!
The Centre for Family Studies found these figures alarming. This was why, under the auspices of H.E. The President of the Republic, the Centre carried out research on this subject in order to analyse parents’ relationship with their adolescent children.

A group of researchers consisting of two psychologists and two lawyers teamed up to study this phenomenon in depth.
In terms of the research design, we opted for a qualitative study. This is because we wished to study the relationships of adolescents and their parents in as much depth as possible.

We felt that such an exploratory study would provide us with rich data and important insights that would help us understand the dynamics at play between parents and their adolescent children.

We interviewed a whole range of parents and children coming from different family backgrounds including non-distressed, distressed and separated families.
Participants in the study

In all, 25 families were interviewed including 24 mothers, 24 fathers and 30 children aged between 11 and 16 years of age.

Each of the participants (mother, father and respective children) were interviewed separately. This provided triangulation of the accounts.

It was much more difficult to engage distressed and separated families in the study. Several parents refused to take part when contacted for the interview in spite of the fact that they had initially accepted to participate.

We wonder whether the issues of the impending divorce referendum and the approaching annual exams affected participation.
RECRUITMENT

- Parents were recruited through the counselling services in schools. Thus school counsellors also guaranteed support to the families who participated in the research if needed.

- A team of experienced male and female interviewers of different ages including counsellors, family therapists and psychologists carried out the interviews. This way of collecting data was very helpful given our limited time frame for the study.

- The methodology adopted is based on Framework Analyses (Ritchie, Spencer & O’Connor 2003).
TYPES OF FAMILIES

- Non-Distressed
- Distressed
- Consensually separated
- Contentiously separated
Non-Distressed Families

- The majority of the parents were dual earner families.
- We found the parents to be reflexive in their answers. They were able to reflect on how their upbringing influences their parenting and the effect their behaviour was having on their children.
- There was a high level of congruence between different members of the family regarding their experience of the relationships amongst them, even when the picture was not always ideal.
NON-DISTRESSED FAMILY MEMBERS

- Mothers repeatedly told interviewers how they struggled to win some of their children’s trust.
- Fathers were concerned by issues relating to discipline. Some complained that they had to work overtime to cope with the expenses and when they came home after work, they were too tired to carry on with the children.
- The children asked for more quality time as a family. They wished that their parents would speak calmly to them and said that shouting deterred them from confiding.
DISTRESSED FAMILIES

- Distressing issues that the families presented with included infidelity, alcoholism and anger management, incompatibility to the extent that the father threatened to leave the home.

- Some mothers blamed the father for their domineering attitudes towards them (and the children) and mentioned lack of participation in household chores.

- A number of inconsistencies emerged in the process of triangulating the data.
DISTRESSED FAMILY MEMBERS

- Mothers feel they have to take charge of everything at home. When the husband behaved in a domineering way or belittled them it made them very unhappy. Many of them ended up over identifying with their children.

- Fathers were often not aware of the extent of the negative impact on their wives or children.

- The children tended to confide more in their mother. They disclosed that they evaluate consequences before they confided. They do not like pressure and shouting by parents and this deters them from opening up. They would like to spend more quality time with parents.
The majority of both parents interviewed were cohabiting or in a new relationship. Some had just moved out of a relationship.
MOTHERS (CONSENSUALLY SEPARATED)

- One mother was distressed & depressed and said she coped with things “minute by minute.” She feels guilty about her previous relationship with a boyfriend.
- Another mother trusts the child 100% but feels overburdened with financial and parental responsibilities and this makes her sad.
- Some mothers fear that because fathers end up doing the fun bits, children will be more attracted to them.
Fathers (Consensually Separated)

- Fathers look forward to spend time with their children.
- One of the fathers uses Skype to chat with his son on a daily basis.
- Another father works less to dedicate time with the children.
- One of the fathers caught up with his relationship with the son at a later stage following an incident at school.
- Only one of the fathers from those interviewed seemed to have an erratic relationship with his sons (he did not turn up for appointment and children complained that he came late for them).
Some of the children do not remember how life was for them before the separation.

Very few of the children confide in both parents.

One boy craved for time alone with father but the latter found it difficult to make such an arrangement.

One child wished that he could confide in his father when he could not do so with his mother.

Another boy was uncomfortable sleeping at his father’s place where the father lives with partner and her two children.

One particular girl was very upset with her mother’s relationship with boyfriend whilst others admitted that they got used to it.
Only four families agreed to interviews. In all four there is a strong theme of loss and abandonment of one of the parents.

In two of the interviews the children have a strong bond with the mother. The father is peripheral in their lives.

In the third family the boy has a strong bond with his father. His mother refuses to see him.

In the fourth family although the parents do not communicate much the daughter has built a very close relationship with the father.
THEMES

1. Parenting Relationship - (relationship between the parents)
2. Confiding Relationship - (relationship between the children and parents)
3. Changes after separation
4. Desired changes and Help
# 1. PARENTING RELATIONSHIP

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers take a more active role, fathers’ opinion is often sought when things are increasingly difficult</td>
<td>Mothers’ versions – highly critical of the fathers’ input whereas fathers’ perspective is mixed.</td>
<td>For some the relationship improved after the separation and is flexible and children had a say in this.</td>
<td>Both parents highlighted the lack of contact between them.</td>
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<td>Marital arguments upset son</td>
<td>Some parents try to attend school activities together.</td>
<td>One mother was uncomfortable with father’s fun role towards son.</td>
<td>One mother mentioned that she would have liked to maintain contact with father for the benefit of the children.</td>
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## 1. PARENTING RELATIONSHIP

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<td>Mother is the main confidante and she facilitates father’s confiding relationship with the children</td>
<td>Different parenting styles lead to ambivalence and conflict. Children take advantage of this.</td>
<td>Overall mothers were much more vocal regarding the lack of collaboration/communication in parenting relationship. Only one father made reference to lack of contact with the mother.</td>
<td>The parenting relationship is marked by abandonment. This features twice – mother’s abandonment has a more profound effect on the child. Some mothers felt blamed and criticised by father in their role.</td>
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<td>Parents balance each other out in the face of disagreement</td>
<td>From mothers’ perspective – husbands were sometimes domineering and authoritarian</td>
<td>In certain families both mothers and fathers mentioned mutual support in the parenting relationship.</td>
<td>Paternal grandparents maintain contact with grandchildren in spite of lack of contact with father.</td>
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Mothers tend to take on the greater role of disciplinarian with fathers being ultra strict or abdicating responsibility

Parenting styles regarding discipline were varied and there was no team work

Most parents did not communicate to effect joint discipline

Fathers were mostly absent except in one family so discipline was marked by lack of communication
1. Parenting Relationship

Discipline:

“...le, nghannqu mieghi u hekk all right imma qatt ma nbusu jkun imqajjem; u gieli meta nargumenta mieghu u nara li beka vera, sa tant jibda jibza li jirremetti, ara kemm jibza minni!“

"Aħna daqsxejn oppositi, bħal ma għidtlek il-mara strict, jiena m’iniex strict, l-uniku problema hija li l-mara jekk tghid kelma ma tmurx lura milli qalet, u jien sfortunatament kemm mat-tifel u kemm mat-tifla, ma nafx nghid le."
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
non-distressed Families
(Children’s Perspective)

- Mother is the preferred confidante.
- Mothers act as intermediaries.
- Confiding relationship with mother is open and they disclose on school matters, personal issues, friends and arguments with friends (not on their romantic intentions).
- They are not so confiding with father.
- Conversations with fathers revolve around practical matters and male talk.
Some children can confide in both parents.

Other children do not confide in parents (e.g. one boy mentioned lack of fathers’ availability).

Some children prefer to confide in friends.

One boy shares with his mother and if the father happens to be in the room he doesn’t mind him listening in although he also shares with his father if the mother is not available.

One boy mentioned that he confides with father in order not to distress mother.

One boy feels that mother is friendly and feels comfortable confiding in her.

One boy mentioned that he confides with mother through younger sister as he feels afraid of his mother’s reaction.

Another boy mentioned that in order to confide in father, he needs to be sure that he is understood.
Another boy mentioned that in order to confide in father, he needs to be sure that he is understood, “...ghax biex niftah qalbi ma’ missieri...l-ewwel irridu jifhimni ... ehe, mhux jaqbad itini pariri mill-ewwel ...”
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
Consensual Separation
(Children’s Perspective)

- Children feel that they disclose more with mother (except for one adolescent girl who felt closer to father, perhaps due to the extramarital affair of mother which led to parents’ separation).
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
Contentious Separation (Children’s Perspective)

- Due to feelings of abandonment, trust in their parents is compromised.
- One boy feels angry towards his father.
- Another adolescent boy experiences rejection from his mother who refuses any contact with him.
- One boy mentioned that he confides more with mother, especially on serious matters, while he jokes around with his father.
- For some children, their father is peripheral, “Sahha u bongu jew hello happy Christmas jew thank you meta jiftakar li ghandna il-birthday ... Boghod mill-ghajn boghod mill-qalb hux hekk jghidu u vera hekk hu ghal missieri“
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
Non-distressed Families
(Father’s Perspective)

- On a general note, children do not confide in fathers on negative issues, issues around puberty, personal worries, poor results at school, attraction to opposite sex and intimate relationships.
- One child confides with father about his psychosexual development.
- Children confide day-to-day practicalities e.g. about school and friends and common interests.
- Father gets more sensitive information about children through mother.
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
Non-distressed Families
(Mother’s Perspective)

- Children are willing to confide in mothers, even regarding bad behaviour for which they ask for forgiveness.
- Some children confide with mothers about everything.
- Children are cautious not to worry mother.
- Areas in which children do not confide with mothers – personal stuff, menstruation, things mothers would be angry about.
- Mothers are reflexive about what impedes their children from confiding, such as too many questions and lack of privacy.
- With mothers, children confide about girlfriends, school, issues around puberty, bullying, things they want to hide from others, mutual interests, emotional states and friends.
2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP
Distressed Families
(Parents’ Perspective)

Children do not disclose in order to protect father or mother; because of apprehension towards father; due to lack of privacy: “Jekk ikollu xi problema l-iskola mhux ha jghidli zgur u imbaghad taqbez ommu u tghidlu ha nghidlu lid-daddy u jghidilha le le ghax isawwatni, ghax hu jibza’ minni, minni ghandu naqra dixxiplina, izjed ma’ ommu hu...”

Unlike children in non-distressed families, children show no particular preference to confide in mothers.

Children disclose with friends on whole range of things e.g. sexual problems and difficulties.
## 2. CONFIDING RELATIONSHIP (Parents' Perspective)

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<td>Whereas some children succeed in having conversations with parents on issues such as annulment and separation, conversations remain on the surface. Other children avoid having such conversations.</td>
<td>Confiding relationship, according to the fathers, is limited and nonexistent except in the case of one daughter.</td>
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<td>Children avoid talking about partners, stepsiblings and the other parent, especially when parents are inquisitive. Fathers’ confiding relationship with their children was enhanced through MSN and Skype in two instances.</td>
<td>Mothers reported that probing has a negative effect on child who refuses to confide about visits with father. Two mothers report that children tend to share with them on everything, except boyfriends.</td>
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### 3. CHANGES AFTER SEPARATION  
(Children’s Perspective)

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<td>On a general note, children complained that meetings with father became less frequent after the parents’ separation and difficulties were more severe in the period soon after separation. Except in one case, where father was more available after separation.</td>
<td>One adolescent girl befriended father’s partner and came closer to her father.</td>
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<td>Children complained about lack of information following the separation.</td>
<td>In another case, boys were too young when father left.</td>
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3. CHANGES AFTER SEPARATION
(Children’s Perspective)

"... I was six. When my mum told me she didn't actually tell me that they separated because I was too young and I didn't understand anyways, but then when I found out they weren't together anymore, it was confusing, I didn't know when I was going to see him, the days were not sorted out then, but then everything settled and I got days."
3. CHANGES AFTER SEPARATION
(Children’s Perspective)

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<td>Some children do not remember how life was before separation, have now moved on and are more able to cope.</td>
<td>After the separation, children went through traumatic experiences – one child received psychiatric help because of sudden abandonment by father.</td>
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<td>One child noted that parents fight less.</td>
<td>The birth of a stepbrother exacerbated feelings of rejection.</td>
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<td>Mother is perceived to be more stressed with work and has less time for children.</td>
<td>Another child experienced total rejection by mother.</td>
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3. CHANGES AFTER SEPARATION
(Children’s Perspective)

“kienet tħobbni meta kont żghir, meta kont immur nghamillha hug dejjem kienet tigi u tghamilli hug, imma mbgħad meta kbirt qisha ma tridniex iżjed, ma tridniex magħha.”
3. CHANGES AFTER SEPARATION  
(Parents' Perspective)

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<td>Mothers feel overburdened with financial and parental responsibility. Yet, they feel more appreciated and supported for their work by ex-husband.</td>
<td>Fathers’ financial contribution went missing. Separation settlement led to high expectations, in one case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children spend more quality time with fathers according to both parents. One child repressed hurt and pretended to be in good spirits. Loss of father figure at home.</td>
<td>One mother reported that following separation, daughter made attempts at manipulating parents. Situation improved when family members accepted more what had happened. In another case, relationship improved with father following separation.</td>
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## 4. DESIRED CHANGES AND HELP REQUIRED (Children’s Perspective)

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<tr>
<td>❖ Some children did not desire any changes from mother.</td>
<td>❖ Did not desire any changes from mother.</td>
<td>❖ Wants Mother to stop whining and arguing with boy</td>
<td>❖ No help or desired changes from father.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Others did not desire any help from father.</td>
<td>❖ One boy did not desire any help from father.</td>
<td></td>
<td>❖ One is determined not to speak to him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Some children desired parents to be less strict and trust them more.</td>
<td>❖ Calmer and more lenient fathers who listen to them more</td>
<td>❖ Wishes help for father to make him stronger</td>
<td>❖ Wants his mother to treat him as a 16 year old and not as a problem child.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>❖ Lessen expectations re studying</td>
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4. DESIRED CHANGES AND HELP REQUIRED (Children’s Perspective)

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| ➢ Half of the children asked for more time with parents.  
➢ More relaxed and enjoying time together.  
➢ Another two wished to communicate more with parents. | ➢ One boy wished to confide more in his mother.  
➢ More protection from mother’s bullying  
➢ Less harsh discipline from father,  
➢ His brother wished that parents would agree more between them | ➢ More frequent meetings with dad.  
➢ More trust, daddy to notice more when he is sad.  
➢ More alone time with dad | ➢ Spending time with mother and her side of the family.  
➢ Reconciliation fantasies. |
4. DESIRED CHANGES AND HELP REQUIRED (CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVE)

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<td>Desired changes from parents in terms of nagging, moodiness, angry tone of voice, shouting</td>
<td>One boy needed more outside advice around his studies</td>
<td>Mother less fixated on school</td>
<td>Lower expectations re school achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>No help required; Would seek help from parents if need be</td>
<td>One boy wants his mother to joke more and believe in him more</td>
<td>Wish to confide more in parents</td>
<td>Provide help for some children in separated families</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More trust</td>
<td>Inner strength to keep calm</td>
<td>Less protective mother</td>
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4. DESIRED CHANGES (Children’s Perspective)

- Half of the children asked for more time with parents,

  “...Li kieku jkollu iktar ħin għax ma tantx ikollu ħin...”

  “Peress li jkun ix-xogħol ma tantx inkun miegħu u nixtieq li noqgħod miegħu iktar...”
4. DESIRED CHANGES (Children’s Perspective)

- Children desired changes from parents in terms of nagging, moodiness, angry tone of voice, shouting, “Gieli nitkellmu bis-salvagg, bin-nervi...zdiedet.”

- Children wanted calmer and more lenient fathers who listen to them more, “Ma jghajjatx għal xejn, nagħmlu xi ħaġa ħażina u joqghod jghajjat magħna u imbagħad jghaddilu, jghajjat naqra u jghaddilu...imma jien niddejjjaq...”
### 4. HELP REQUIRED  
**(PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE)**

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<td></td>
<td>School Support</td>
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<td>Support from extended family</td>
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<td>Support Group</td>
<td>Flexi time</td>
<td>Support Groups, even for children</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Financial help</td>
<td>Mediation post-separation</td>
<td>Flexi –hours</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Network of friends</td>
<td>Network of friends</td>
<td>Better social benefits from women and children</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family Coaching</td>
<td>Non-judgmental attitudes from society at large</td>
<td>Access to resources and opportunity for women</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parental Skills</td>
<td>Family therapy + psychological support</td>
<td>Professional help</td>
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<td></td>
<td>State funded family therapy + psychological support</td>
<td>Fathers’ involvement at home</td>
<td>Legal access to cross border maintenance</td>
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<td>Fathers’ involvement at home</td>
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OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

- These interviews bring to life the pressures of family life and the challenges of parenting adolescents.
- Parents especially some fathers need to be empowered to take on this relatively new role of adopting a warm and supportive relationship with their children.
- Children expect their parents to support them and be gentle with them. They want more time with their parents, they want them to be calmer and able to listen to them.
- Pressure on children and coercion corrode the relationship between children and their parents and kill sharing and mutual trust.
OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

- Financial pressures are highlighted. Parents and children complained that pressure of work and lack of flexi-time did not leave them enough time together.
- Resilience emerged across all types of families despite the adversity some faced. Focusing on resilience rather than pathologising families is much more constructive.
- Multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary teams that are family focused should be more widely available in schools, law courts, child guidance clinics, family services.
- Methods of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) should be used to help families respond to the issues that cause further distress within the legal process.
OVERALL OBSERVATIONS

- Parenting education is needed both at the preventive level and in the various stages of the family life cycle, including at post relationship breakdown.
- School has an extremely important role to play in the area of parent education especially in helping parents motivate their children at school.
- The dialogue between different disciplines should reflect the different needs of different families.
Thank you!

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