This is the published version of a paper published in *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

What characterises a good family?: Giving voice to adolescents.
*International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 20(4): 429-441
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2015.1018283

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-43532
What characterises a good family? 
Giving voice to adolescents

Agneta Tinnfält, Jennie Jensen & Charli Eriksson

School of Health and Medical Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

Published online: 09 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Agneta Tinnfält, Jennie Jensen & Charli Eriksson (2015): What characterises a good family? Giving voice to adolescents, International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, DOI: 10.1080/02673843.2015.1018283

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2015.1018283

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Versions of published Taylor & Francis and Routledge Open articles and Taylor & Francis and Routledge Open Select articles posted to institutional or subject repositories or any other third-party website are without warranty from Taylor & Francis of any kind, either expressed or implied, including, but not limited to, warranties of merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, or non-infringement. Any opinions and views expressed in this article are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor & Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.
This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

It is essential that you check the license status of any given Open and Open Select article to confirm conditions of access and use.
What characterises a good family? Giving voice to adolescents

Agneta Tinnfält*, Jennie Jensen and Charli Eriksson

School of Health and Medical Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

(Received 16 January 2015; accepted 9 February 2015)

Parents and family are very important for a young person’s health and development, but knowledge is scarce on how young people perceive them. The aim of this study is to give voice to adolescent girls’ and boys’ perceptions of how parents and families should be. Nineteen adolescents were interviewed. A descriptive design and a qualitative content approach were used to analyse the interview material. To make the approach participatory, young students were involved as partners. They did some pilot interviews, and their conclusions were used during the planning of the study. The results show that adolescents regard their parents and family as very important to them. Everybody in the family has shared responsibility for it, and it is important to spend time together, i.e., ‘to do family’. Moreover, parents have special obligations; in particular, they have a duty to ensure a good future for their children.

Keywords: parenthood; adolescent; The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; The socio-ecological model; participatory approach; perceptions on family

Introduction

Parents are very important for children and young people. According to public health research (Brown, Waterston, & Crowther, 2010) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the family provides the natural environment and base for a child. But knowledge is scarce about how young people perceive their family and parents, and children and young people have a right to be heard on subjects important to them. This study focuses on the viewpoints of Swedish adolescents on what mothers and fathers should be like, and how they wish their family to be.

The importance of the family and parents to the child

Most children in Sweden, under the age of 18 years, live with both their mother and their father (Statistics Sweden, 2009). But more children nowadays live with a single mother or father, or in families with another composition, not because of separations, but because more children are born outside a relationship and never live with both biological parents during their upbringing.

The importance of life conditions during childhood for health development over the life span has been developed in public health research. The relationship between the child and her or his parents has a great impact on the child’s health during childhood (Waylen, Stallard, & Stewart-Brown, 2008), and also in later adult life (Stewart-Brown, Fletcher, & Wadsworth, 2005). For example, parents’ influence on adolescents’ drinking behaviour is evident (Pettersson, 2010). A study that followed a cohort in Sweden shows

*Corresponding author. Email: agneta.tinnfalt@oru.se

© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The moral rights of the named author(s) have been asserted.
that family conditions during childhood and social class in childhood and in adulthood can prevent the risk of early death (Fors, Lennartsson, & Lundberg, 2011). The family provides the most important support that children can have (Werner & Johnson, 2004), and the family is actively engaged in promoting their health in everyday life (Christensen, 2004).

Mothers have been considered more important to the child than fathers (Hwang, 2005; Miller-Day, 2002). The mother’s and the father’s roles in the family are different; adolescents feel emotionally closer to their mother than to their father, and also that their mother knows them better. Adolescents perceive communication with their mother to be easy, and often choose to talk with her about important things (Levin & Currie, 2010). According to research, the tasks of the father are to play with the child in a tougher manner, and to take the child on sports and other outings (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). But, the father is not as much engaged in talking with the child as the mother, and children confide more to their mother than they do to their father. However, attitudes to the father’s role seem to be changing, and there is an increasing engagement of fathers in their children’s lives. A review article provides evidence that children’s mental health and social adaptation are promoted if the father is engaged with the child (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, & Bremberg, 2008). Even though roles are changing, culturally and structurally, the father’s role is less dominant than the mother’s for the child. But, Sarkadi et al. (2008) drew the conclusion that it is very important to engage fathers as well as mothers in parenthood; that is, the two parents are equally important.

Changes in the environment will take place during a child’s growth and development. To understand the importance of parents and family, the socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2000) is often applied. According to this model, most important for the child’s development and health is the dyad between parent and child. Moreover, other factors are important, e.g., the relationship between the parents and the child’s teacher, or conditions in the parents’ workplace. And, finally, children are affected by their culture and the social system, as expressed, for example, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The model suggests that if a system or an element in a system is changed, this will affect the child. Parents and family are the most important elements in child health and development in the Bronfenbrenner system.

Parents have an important influence on their children’s lives, but children also influence their parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2003). Glatz and Stattin (2013) show that parents sometimes react the opposite way to what is expected when they encounter problematic behaviours in their adolescents. When parents find their adolescents drunk, or in other ways behaving in a non-acceptable way, rather than reacting strongly, they change their attitude towards the child and lower their expectations about acceptable behaviours. Other studies show that, when parents experience that their attempts to change their children’s behaviours do not have any effect, they increase their negative strategies and decrease their positive strategies (Glatz, Stattin, & Kerr, 2011). Children’s effects on their parents’ behaviours matter for children’s health and well-being.

Parenting encompasses a myriad of issues, including attitudes and behaviours. Depending on theoretical perspective, the various strategies involved may be regarded as having different orientations. Using a motivational framework, parenting can be conceptualised as autonomous support for control, involvement and structure (the extent to which parents provide clear and consistent rules for child behaviours; Grolnick, Weiss, Mckenzie, & Wrightman, 1996). The focus of our study is on giving voice to adolescents, and analysing their narratives inductively, so as to develop knowledge about family life and parenthood.
Young people’s perceptions of parents

Adolescents find their parents important. This can be seen in research on parents’ monitoring and parental involvement in children’s problems (Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013). In a study of attitudes towards parents, adolescents were found to be very positive to their mothers, but to have a critical attitude towards fathers who did not communicate with them (Paintal & Pandey, 1996). Several studies deal with adolescents’ perceptions of, for example, parental style (Nguyen & Cheung, 2009), parental control (Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009) and parental action (Nilsson, Weinehall, Bergström, Stenström, & Janlert, 2009). The adolescents investigated supported parents’ taking action when they tried to prevent smoking (Nilsson et al., 2009), and they realised that they were dependent on their family for help and appreciated active parenting, i.e., parents being involved in their lives (Lamborn & Moua, 2008). Strengths in mothers were, for example, helping to succeed at school, acting against bullying and in conflicts, and preventing smoking and alcohol drinking (Beckert, Strom, Strom, Darre, & Weed, 2008). According to Swedish 13- to 16-year-old girls and boys, the most important factor in children’s and adolescents’ mental health is their relationship with parents (Johansson, Brunnberg, & Eriksson, 2007). How to feel loved by parents was also examined. Emotional and companionate support, instrumental support, moral guidance and advice, allowing freedom and showing respect or trust for the adolescent were all found to be important. Emotional and companionate support included encouragement, affection, talking and listening, and doing things together. Instrumental support included getting support and help, and educational help. Giving moral guidance and advice included being taught the right ways to behave and how to act morally (McNeely & Barber, 2010). However, there seem to be few studies dealing with adolescents’ perceptions of how they want their parents and family to be.

Young people’s viewpoints

When children and adolescents are asked to give their viewpoints on matters concerning them, their viewpoints are not always the same as those of adults. To provide children and adolescents with their rightful protection and care and right to be heard (United Nations, 1989), it is important to listen to their perceptions and ideas. By being involved in research on participation at school, adolescents make a contribution to new knowledge (Akerstrom & Brunnberg, 2012). In this study, adolescents have contributed to knowledge by being involved in parts of the research.

To support development, well-being and health in children and adolescents, we need to understand their perceptions of life and parenthood, since parents are the people who are most important to them. Knowledge seems to be scarce on adolescents’ views on parenthood and family life, and, in this study, we did not just listen to young people but also included them in planning and accomplishing the work.

Aims

This study aims at giving voice to adolescent girls’ and boys’ perceptions of how parents and families should be.

Methods

The study has a descriptive design, and qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) is employed.
This study is characterised by a participatory approach in that it uses young people as partners. In the summer before the interviews were conducted, four students, 16 years of age, were invited to join the research program as part of their summer-vacation work. The students performed some pilot interviews on what young people feel about parenthood and parental support. Their conclusions were used when planning the study and its interview guide.

The participants were 19 adolescents (9 girls and 10 boys), 16–17 years old, from two relatively small towns in mid-Sweden. The principals in two schools were contacted, and gave their consent to information being given at the school. All the pupils in one school who attended the last year of compulsory school were informed and invited to participate in the study. The pupils, who were interested in participating, wrote down their names and addresses, and a letter of consent was sent to them (which their parents were also invited to see). Five girls and six boys participated in the study. Four girls and four boys in their first year of high school also participated, and were invited in a similar way. The pupils at compulsory school were interviewed in school by two young students from the public health program at Örebro University as part of their academic assignments. The eight pupils from high school were interviewed by one member of the research team (JJ). The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide had one main request: Please describe how you think a good family should be. Follow-up items focused on how a good mother, father and sibling should be, what the adolescents thought is difficult for parents, and how to be a good parent.

Analysis of the 19 interviews followed the steps described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). One interview at a time was analysed by choosing meaning units, which were then condensed and coded. Thereafter, subcategories, categories and themes were created. Two persons in the research team, JJ and AT, each analysed three interviews inductively, while the rest of the interviews were analysed deductively in accordance with the categories previously established. The categories were discussed in the research team, and consensus was reached.

After the preliminary analysis, the research team held a dialogue seminar, where the four pupils who participated in creating the interview guide and planning the study discussed results with the research team. Also, four parents and four municipal representatives took part in the discussions.

The Ethics Committee in Uppsala (Dnr 2011/211) approved the study.

Findings
The results are described under two themes: family and parents. In their responses and the discussions, the adolescents differed considerably in their perceptions of what was important in the family as a unit, and what was important in parents (Table 1).

Family
Adolescents see the family as a unit and think that all members of the family have a common responsibility. Families may look different, but what is most important is a feeling of solidarity and ‘doing family’.

Family composition
Most of the adolescents stated that a family consisting of a mother, a father and children is the most natural and desirable, although what comprises the family is not so important.
Both girls and boys would like their parents to live together, and that the whole family is kept together.

Well, I think it’s simpler to have, well, a rather better family, if there’s both mother and father in the family (Jonathan, 17 years old).

However, it is not very important what the family comprises; there can be step-parents, and it can be enough with just one parent. In such case, the single mother or father has to adopt the roles of both parents. One of our informants also referred to cousins as part of the family.

It really doesn’t matter, as long as you have parents who care (Gabriella, 16 years old).

Siblings are very important people to adolescents. They can be good friends, and people to have fun with. It is important that siblings are treated equally, and are not compared with each other by their parents. No one should be their favourite. Older brothers and sisters have more experience and should help younger siblings. Siblings have to show respect, and be nice to each other.

Although then, then I know there are many who have siblings who confide a lot in their fellow siblings; they talk about things, they help each other. Then, there are the others, the opposites, who are always fighting, always messing each other about. Somewhere in-between, that’s what I think is best, having someone you can have fun with but still be serious with, who understands your situation (Gabriel, 16 years old).

**Doing family**

What is really important in the family, according to the adolescents in this study, is a feeling of solidarity. That means doing things and spending time together, and having a common value system. It also means communication between parents and children. Altogether, it is a matter of ‘doing family’.

It is important to meet and to do things together in the family. They do not have to be any special things; it is enough to have dinner or to watch television together. Other examples are cooking and doing the housework together. Parents and siblings can help

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Family composition</td>
<td>What comprises the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relations between siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doing family</td>
<td>Doing things together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Common value system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents’ active communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adolescents’ desire for communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Parental role</td>
<td>Mother and father the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother and father different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Showing love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental responsibility</td>
<td>Raising the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental behaviour</td>
<td>Parents’ responsibility for the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wanted behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unwanted behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of adolescents’ perspectives on what is a desirable family.
each other with the housework. The adolescents also want to have fun with the rest of the family, and maybe travel. It is important to feel happy at home.

... Like every little thing is something, you can do whatever you like together; you can do the cleaning together, wash the dishes, do whatsoever at home; it goes really quickly, and then you have still done something together (Isabelle, 16 years old).

A *common value system* in the family is something that can be relied upon, and it ties the family together. According to the adolescents, it is important to have a strong relationship in the family, to have a feeling of solidarity. They also say that everyone in the family has a responsibility for it. Everybody has to support each other, show respect and take care of each other. You should also protect your family. Everyone is as important as anyone else, and discussions should be held in the spirit of equality. Everybody should be included in decision-making. Trust is important, and adults should trust their children. The family is important.

So, the family is the most important thing you have, so it’s obvious you have to treat each other with the greatest respect ... like, just think about it ... you can have loads of friends, but you’ve only got one family. If you lose a friend, you may still have fifteen left, but if you lose a family, you don’t have one any more ... so you should take care of your family ... (Felix, 15 years old).

The adolescents wanted to communicate with their parents, and they wanted their parents to take an *active part in that communication*. Parents should be helpful, listen, and give support and advice. They should both act when problems arise at school, and both should support their children. They should do everything they can for their children.

A good mother ... She must be ... Helpful ... She shall be there when you need her. You must be able to talk with her about things ... well ... and so on (Albert, 15 years-old).

That he supports me and helps me, when, well, with schoolwork and things like that. And, if I got into any tough situation, then he would help me (Hannah, 16 years old).

The adolescents had a *desire for communication*, to be able to talk with their parents about most things, about feelings, friends, school. There are some differences in what they want to talk about with their mother and father. It is good if parents can complement each other, then you can talk to your mother or your father.

I think you should be able to talk with your mother about everything, but there may be some things you don’t want to talk to her about ... (Alice, 15 years old).

**Parents**

The adolescents had a lot of views on how they wanted a parent to be. The parental role is very important, and parents have a responsibility for their children and for the family as a unit. There are behaviours that adolescent want to see in their parents, and also behaviours they do not want to see.

**Parental role**

According to the responding adolescents, mothers and fathers should be alike in some ways, but there are also some differences between what the mother and the father should be like. Both parents should show love, and both can be a role model for adolescents. Very often, but not in all respects, the adolescents in this study thought that their own parents were just as they should be.

In many ways, *mothers and fathers have the same* roles and responsibilities. They should raise their children alike, they should react to the same issues and they should have
the same opinions on a variety of issues. If their parents are divorced, adolescents want to be able to talk with both their parents. It is important to adolescents that parents should act in the same way when conflicts arise.

For, despite everything, they both have the children, so they should bring them up equally as much. That’s what I think (Isabelle, 16 years-old).

But there should be some differences between mothers and fathers. Parents can complement each other. Parents should teach things — mothers about feelings, about cleaning the house and how to behave. One girl said that the bond can be stronger to the mother than to the father. The boys said that they wanted to talk about feelings with their mother, in relation to relationships or personal matters. But talking about girls can be difficult. The girls also regarded their mother as the one to talk with if you were sad, or if you had a problem. ‘Girls’ stuff’ is also something to talk to your mother about. But one girl said that she did not want to talk with her mother about sex or alcohol. It is better to talk with your father about practical things and about things that mothers do not understand (Albert, 15 years old). Maybe, fathers can give advice when there is a problem with boys, some of the girls said, but they do not want to talk about sex with them. There can be a special relationship between sons and fathers; they can do ‘boyish’ things together. Fathers should teach sports and ‘life knowledge’. Fathers should push and motivate you, and they are the ones to have fun with.

A mother must always be open and smiling, so if you have problems, you can always talk with her. And ... Yes ... She must be, like, cuddly, so you get lots of hugs, that’s a good mother (Erica, 15 years old).

With a father, it’s more ... how do you put it ... it’s like more about academic things that you talk with each other about, a bit about society, the school, the future, things like that (Gabriel, 16 years old).

Parents can show love in different ways. It can be shown in the way they behave, or be done with hugs. In any case, it is an important part of parenthood. The word ‘love’ was used by plenty of the interviewees, by girls as well as boys. It was important for the adolescents to feel that their parents wanted the best for them. It is important to feel loved and to feel safe. Most of the adolescents thought that parents should just ‘be there’.

Also, he shall always be there too. They love me for what I am ... I don’t ask for any more ... (Erica, 15 years old).

Also, parents should be role models. They have to admit what they have done wrong, and they should not break any rules. Adolescents want to be able to trust their parents, and parents can be like friends and should be true to themselves.

He shall be his son’s idol, I think. Yes, a role model (Harry, 16 years old).

Parental responsibility

According to the adolescents, parents have the major responsibility of ensuring that their children have a good life. They should bring up their children well, they should teach them rules, and also should have responsibility for the family as a unit.

When raising the children, parents should watch out for them so that they do not get into trouble. Parents should monitor their children and teach them good behaviour. Parents are allowed to get angry sometimes, but should not to be too strict. Fathers have a little more responsibility than mothers in this matter, according to the adolescents. They can be stricter.

Responsibility! Although not so far that it gets overprotective; I think there’s a fine line between them (Gabriel, 16 years old).
It is necessary to have *rules*, and parents need to mark where the limits lie. They have to say no sometimes, but there should be no punishment.

It is like, well I don’t think that any parent has any particularly special role, but it is, like, both of them shall take responsibility and set the rules if they think that’s needed (Jonathan, 17 years old).

Parents have *responsibility* for the family, so that it holds together. But they also have responsibility for the practical things in a household. Here, our adolescents divided responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Mothers should cook, and look after smaller children; fathers should take care of the practical things. But, they have a joint overall responsibility.

**Parental behaviour**

The adolescents gave examples of wanted and unwanted parental behaviours.

**Wanted behaviour** is parents being kind, nice and having a good sense of humour. Parents should be kind and happy; mothers should smile and have an open mind. Mothers can be ‘soft’, and fathers ‘hard’

Open. You should, like, be able to talk to her about anything. Happy and nice, pleasant. So, looks after the family. Yes (Hannah, 16 years old).

Think that he shall keep calm and not get angry, and like, look at things from both sides, how both feel or think. And, yes. Respect. Obviously, they must respect each other (Isabelle, 16 years old).

Some *behaviours are unwanted*. Parents should not use harsh words, fight, exaggerate, be mean, be too strict or act too youthfully. Parents should not be drug addicts or have alcohol problems, and, best of all, they should not have any problems at all.

**Discussion**

The adolescents in this study perceived the family to be very important to children and adolescents. They talked about the family as a unit, and about their special wishes with regard to their parents. As main threads, there are the adolescents’ views on their own parts in, and mutual responsibility for, the family. They express the desires to do things together, to share responsibility for mutually respectful behaviours, and to communicate with their mother and their father. The adolescents want a family composed of a mother and a father, and maybe siblings, even though they also say that relations in the family are the most important things, irrespective of how the family is composed.

The adolescents also see parents as important to them. From the analysis, it appears that adolescents distinguish between parents and family. In this study, the responding adolescents stated how important it is actually to spend time together. ‘Doing family’ is a common responsibility. The adolescents gave examples of travelling together and other fun things to do, but, more importantly, they were very clear that there must be daily-life situations that they share. One of the girls gave the example of dishwashing as something important to do together. The relation between the child and her or his parents provides the most important basis for support (Werner & Johnson, 2004), and has a great impact on the child’s health (Waylen et al., 2008), which obviously the adolescents understand. Disagreements take place in families, and it is very important for adolescents to make their views known to their parents, in order to get them to understand their importance.

The adolescents in this study seemed to be content with their parents. Indeed, several of them referred to their own parents and family when discussing what a family and parent
should be like. In a recent study (Trifan, Stattin, & Tilton-Weaver, 2014), where three generations of young people and their perceptions of their parents were compared, the young people of today were found to be quite content with their parents. Adolescents want to raise their own children in the same way as they have been raised themselves. In this study, we asked adolescents about the ‘good family’, i.e., the kind of family they would wish to have. The issue is addressed from a positive perspective, which may make for ‘self-confirmation’ (Ghaye et al., 2008). Still, the adolescents supported their parents’ actions when they tried to prevent smoking (Nilsson et al., 2009), and in this study the adolescents thought that it was the parents’ responsibility to set rules and to ensure that their children had a good life and good future prospects.

According to the adolescents, mothers and fathers should basically have the same role in the family. They should share equally in child upbringing, show love, be good role models and provide both emotional and practical support. But differences in the adolescents’ views on mothers and fathers are still apparent. The adolescents expressed traditional views on the mother as the smiling, emotionally supportive person, and the father as the practical helper and the person to talk about sports with. These views are supported in research (Hwang, 2005; Miller-Day, 2002; Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2011), but they are interesting in that there may be a difference between how adolescents think things should be and what they actually experience. The adolescents in this study had entered puberty and were developing an identity, as either a woman or a man (Bailey, 2006). It seems that they want gender equality, but have to balance it against traditional roles. Young people want to talk about everything with their parents, but say that there are some differences between what they want to talk about with each one. With the mother, talks are often related to emotions and relationships, and they can feel more personal. When it comes to practical things, such as school and social issues, young people would rather talk to their father. In an ongoing study, female youths say that their mother and female friends are the ones they prefer to talk with about problems, and their father is only their sixth preference (Larsson, Pettersson, Skoog, & Eriksson, in preparation). But children’s mental health and social adaptation are promoted if the father is engaged in the child’s upbringing (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Being engaged may include different ways in which parents encounter their child, and the adolescents in this study declared that fathers are as important as mothers. They also wished their fathers to take as great a responsibility for the whole family as mothers do. Despite this, it seems to be more difficult to engage fathers in efforts to support their children, e.g., on programs to reduce alcohol consumption at a young age (Pettersson, 2010). It may be important to encourage fathers to step into areas that have been regarded as mother-specific.

The adolescents in this study believed that parents have a responsibility to ensure a good future for their children, and that they should teach them to distinguish between right and wrong. Parents should also set rules, but must not be too strict or overprotective. Adolescents want good communication with their parents. Parents’ active communication should include encouragement, listening, and providing support and advice. Also, when talking to professionals, e.g., in school, or to other adults, adolescents say that what is most important is trust and that the person really listens (Johansson & Ehnfors, 2006; Larsson et al., in preparation). All adults who meet young people should be aware of the importance young people attach to them.

The adolescents mentioned unwanted parental behaviours, e.g., parents having alcohol problems. But they only mentioned them ‘in passing’. Possibly, this was because most of our questions were positively angled (Ghaye et al., 2008). But we know that growing up in a family with alcohol problems is very common; according to an estimate made in Sweden, one in five children lives under these circumstances (Swedish National Institute
Many of them are abused and/or neglected, and there are often other problems in the family, such as mental health problems (Hjern & Manhica, 2013). The adolescents in this study may have been recruited from families with whom adolescents are generally content. Or, adolescents in different circumstances may have genuinely reported their views on what a good family is, which would make them representative. In our group of recruited adolescents, we expected, of course, that some of them would have problems in their family. We know that the children of alcoholics are loyal to their parents, and treat their problems as a family secret (Tinnfält, Eriksson, & Brunnberg, 2011), partly because they fear that they may be taken away from their family. It can be expected that all adolescents, regardless of their family situation, find the family, and a feeling of solidarity in the family, to be important. Parents are very important to children, even when they engage in unwanted behaviours.

This study is based on interviews with adolescents. Some adolescents have also written short essays, which were analysed in accordance with grounded theory (Linderborg, 2013). It appears that a good family, according to Linderborg’s 50 teenagers, is characterised by the following: involved parental roles, joint family life, good atmosphere, an intact family and good standards. These results are in line with those from our interviews. Moreover, our preliminary results were presented locally at a seminar, which offered both a validity check and a form of dissemination to participants, including municipal professionals, politicians and parents.

In the societal ecosystem, the dyad between parent and child is key to the development and health of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The adolescents in this study agreed. To support the dyad, and the development and health of children and adolescents, parents need the support of society. Parents say that meeting places to facilitate networking are very important to them (Pettersson, Tinnfält, & Eriksson, in preparation). Supporting parents during their parenthood is important for promoting children’s and adolescents’ well-being and for preventing health problems among them (Wai Chu, Farruggia, Sanders & Ralph, 2012). The voices of parents have also been heard in our research program, through in-depth interviews and a survey to parents with teenagers (Eriksson et al., 2014).

Ever more adolescents are experiencing poorer mental health. In recent Swedish studies (Örebro Country Council, 2014), almost 25% of girls aged 15–17 years have stated that they often feel depressed. Around 5% of adolescents say that they feel bad or very bad, and that they are unhappy with their lives. By listening to how young people look upon parents and their families, we can obtain an indication of how future parenting support should be developed so as best to benefit the family and young people.

A strength of this study is that adolescents have been given an opportunity to express their wishes with regard to parents and family life. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children must be allowed to express their views on matters concerning them. Still, children and adolescents are not included to the extent that we might expect. For example, we have not been able to find similar studies in the previous research literature. The study also has some limitations. The number of interviewees is fairly small, and therefore we cannot be sure to have covered all the perspectives of children in different types of families and life situations. Accordingly, this study needs to be succeeded by further studies giving voice to different groups of adolescents.

Conclusion
Adolescents think that their parents and family are very important to them. Everybody in the family has a shared responsibility for it. It is important to spend time together, i.e., to
‘do family’. Moreover, parents have special obligations; in particular, they have a responsibility to ensure a good future for their children.

Acknowledgements
Our special thanks go to Malin Lindgren and Diana Spens for conducting parts of the interviews.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding
The study was supported by a grant to the Empowering Families with Teenagers – Ideals and Reality in Karlskoga and Degerfors project from the Swedish National Institute of Public Health [Dnr HFA 2010/94].

Notes on contributors

References


Linderborg, C. (2013). Det viktigaste I en familj är kärlek och att vara snälla mot varandra – en kvalitativa analys av vad en bra familj är enligt tioningar och föräldrar [‘The most important in a family is love and to be kind toward each others’ – A qualitative analysis of what a good family is according to teenagers and parents]. Örebro University.


Pettersson, C. (2010). *Parent’s possibility to prevent underaged drinking – Studies of parents, a parental support program, and adolescents in the context of a national program to support NGOs* (PhD). Örebro University, Örebro.


