

Whose Involved?

Some of the parents in The Family Life Project have asked us about the composition of the participants in terms of school affiliation. Here's how it looks regarding the youth who completed the school questionnaire. Just a reminder that 6th grade youth attending Bearden and Karns participated in 2001 and 2002 – so the numbers for these schools will be higher. The percentage is the proportion of youth in our sample who attend the school.

Bearden	15%
Cedar Bluff	5%
Farragut	8%
Gresham	5%
Halls	7%
Holston	5%
Karns	18%
Northwest	6%
Powell	7%
South Doyle	8%
Vine	3%
Whittle Springs	3%
West Valley	10%
Berean Christian (1 family)	

Here's the breakdown for the part of the project that involves parents and a home visit (based on 368 families):

Bearden	17%
Cedar Bluff	8%
Farragut	11%
Gresham	3%
Halls	5%
Holston	5%
Karns	17%
Northwest	3%
Powell	9%
South Doyle	7%
Vine	2%
Whittle Springs	2%
West Valley	10%
Berean Christian (1 family)	■

Early Maturation

As you might remember, we asked a brief series of questions on the school survey about physical development. One of the reasons we asked these questions was to see how relationship factors affect children as they grow up, separate from physical changes.

Two of the undergraduate students who work on the project are investigating the influence of maturing early on youth's relationships with parents and peers. We are defining early maturation for this group of sixth graders as having these physical changes "well underway." Our group of youth is similar to other youth in the general population in that the girls are maturing sooner than the boys. The arrival of puberty was "well underway" for about 19% of the girls and for about 4% of the boys.

Kristy McRiffey is looking at how early maturation is related to youth adjustment. It is related to how youth are doing but the magnitude of the effect is small (as often is true with biological factors). Daughters and sons who matured early were a bit more likely to have problems with aggression, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and academics (measured using grades). Parents can help developing children deal with these changes by reducing hostile interactions (for example, yelling) and by learning more about the youths activities and behavior during free time.

Bridget Lisle is looking at how early maturation is related to peer relationships. She is finding that daughters who mature early are a bit more likely to have friends who

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Pets in Families

There is a close link between children and animals not only because of the love and interest that children naturally display towards animals, but also because of the dependence and freedom of spirit that both children and animals share. Companion animals are believed to be good for teaching children responsibility, instilling empathy, for encouraging cognitive development, and for providing an unconditional source of love.

It is estimated that 58.2 million households have one or more companion animals. The two most common companion animal species owned are dogs (31.6 %) and cats (27.3%), followed by birds, horses, fish, ferrets, rabbits, snakes, lizards, and others animals (AVMA, 1997).

Children consider their pets to be an important part of the family. Sometimes children even want to have their pets in the family photo or to buy a Christmas present for the family pet.



Children's relationships with their pets are different depending on the child's age. For instance, a very young child might enjoy the sensory feel of the fur on her hands and giggle at a kitten's pounce. A pre-teen child might tell many secrets to her pet and show her pet love by taking good care of her. A late adolescent may just enjoy the comfort she feels when cuddling with her pet after being out with her group of friends (Cain, 1983).

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Puberty – It's Not Just Physical

When asked to define what puberty means, most people talk about the physical changes that take place in a young person's body. Puberty, in reality, is accompanied by cognitive and social changes in addition to the physical changes. Currently, researchers consider puberty as multiple, overlapping events that affect how children develop into adults.

The physical changes that take place in adolescence are better known than are the other changes; breast budding, increased height, growth of underarm hair and pubic hair, genital growth, voice change, and production of testosterone in boys. An adolescent's feelings about these changes can be affected by when these changes occur. Boys and girls who develop very early or very late have a more difficult time than those who are developing at about the same time as their peers. The changes in physical appearance can make a teenager feel self-conscious if they make them look different than their friends. Hormonal fluctuations might create a more emotional young person who reacts more often to his surroundings, causing some of the disagreements between young people and their parents.

Recent research shows that the brain continues maturing into the teen years, and possibly even into the 20s, because the corpus callosum, the cable of nerves that connects the right half of the brain with the left, continues growing into the 20s. New findings show that the frontal lobes, responsible for such "executive" functions as self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization, and planning, undergo the greatest changes between puberty and young adulthood. This explains why many young teenagers have trouble reading some cues, such as emotions in parent's faces and body language

This may help us to understand why our teens sometimes seem to act like children.

The third difference we see in puberty is social change. Many parents of teens have seen the shift from reliance on parents to reliance on peers. In early adolescence, the teenager is still very much anchored to the family. By middle adolescence, the teen becomes less anchored to the family and more drawn to peer group functions. This is an important time for teens to test the loyalty and security of peers and to find the kind of powerful relationships they have experienced in their own family. Therefore, peer relationships can be seen as building on family relationships, and parents can feel they have done a good job if their teenagers are building relationships outside the family. Parents often worry about their children's peers, but research has shown that most teenagers stay true to the values and beliefs parents have instilled in them. As parents, we need to allow our teenagers to establish friendships. At the same time we need to remain open and willing to spend time with them, and knowledgeable about our children's friends.

In conclusion, we as parents can help teens by being flexible, understanding, and open, while maintaining the standards that are important to us ■

Begley, S. (2000). Getting inside a teenage brain. *Newsweek*, New York, Feb. 28, 2000.

Holmes, G.R. (1995). *Helping teenagers into adulthood: A guide for the next generation*. Praeger Publishers: Westport CT.

Paikoff, R. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1991). Do parent-child relationships change during puberty? *American Psychological Association.*, 110(1), 47-66.

Wallace, S. (1991). Questions about Puberty Parent Magazine. April 1999.

(...from page 1)

are more aggressive and are more likely to engage in negative behaviors (like cheating on a test, starting fights in school). Girls who are maturing early also were more likely to feel disliked by their peers.

On the other hand, sons who are maturing early are participating in more out-of-school activities and feel more popular. However, like girls, they too are more likely to have friends who are more aggressive and are more likely to engage in negative behaviors. Although this last finding was not significant.

The work that Bridget and Kristy are doing is highlighting some of the risks that accompany early physical maturation. Youth who mature early will need support from their parents to help them deal with the experiences they are having that are not yet shared by their friends and peers. Parents can help by being attentive, accepting, and even-tempered ■



*** Please check our website for research findings (school report) from the Family Life Project.

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Pets in Families, continued...

Pets might serve as “sibling like” for an only child or for the younger of two children. Likewise, only children or children with one sibling are more likely to identify as the sole owner of a pet than children with more than one sibling. As the number of siblings decreases, the number of pets increases. Caring for a pet and being identified as the pet’s “sole owner” can give children a chance to guide a younger, more inexperienced being in a way that is similar to being a big brother or big sister (Fifield & Forsyth, 1999). They can feel like a caretaker.

There are some differences between the way boys and girls relate to and bond with their pets. Six to twelve month old boys show more attachment behaviors towards pets (smiling, crawling after, petting) than do girls the same age. This difference disappears by the time the children are about two (Kidd & Kidd, 1987). Both elementary and high school girls report that they miss their pets when they are at school more often than do boys, but 76% of all children miss pets while at school. This is another indicator of how important pets are to most children. Girls with employed mothers are perceived by their parents to engage in activities with pets more often than are boys with employed mothers, but boys seem to show more general interest in pets. Parents of girls feel that the

loss of a pet would be more difficult for their child than do the parents of boys (Melson, Peet, & Sparks, 1991).

Lastly, how parents feel about their pets tends to mirror how their children also feel about the family pets. Parents who are very attached to their pets also say their children are strongly attached to the family pet. There is some evidence that children who report stronger bonds with their pets also report closer family relationships (Bonas, McNicholas, Collis, 2000). Positive attitudes toward pets seem to be transmitted across generations. Regarding pets, the positive attitudes of grandparents were present in second generation parents and third generation children ■

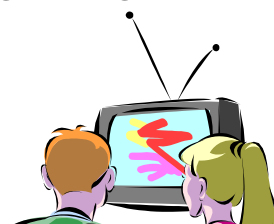
American Veterinary Medical Association. Veterinary Economic Statistics August, 1997.

Bonas, S., McNicholas, J., & Collis, G. M. (2000). Pets in the network of family relationships: An empirical study. In A. L. Podbrescek, E. S. Paul, & J. A. Serpell (Eds.), *Companion Animals and Us: Exploring the Relationship Between People and Pets*. (pp. 209-236). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cain, A. O. (1983). A study of pets in the family system. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Our lives with Companion Animals*. (pp. 72-81). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fifield, S., & Forsyth, D. K. (1999). A pet for the children: Factors related to family pet ownership. *Anthrozoos*, 12(1), 24-32.

STATS CORNER



- Percentage of children age 5-17 that have a TV in their bedroom: 52.
- Hours per day the TV is on in U.S. homes: 7 hours, 12 minutes.
- Percentage of teens 13-17, who know where you can find the zip code 90210: 75
- Number of minutes per week that parents spend in meaningful conversation with their children: 38.5.

Kidd, A. H. & Kidd, R. M. (1987). Reaction of infants and toddlers to lie and toy animals. *Psychological Reports*, 61(2) 455-464.

Melson, G.F., Peet, S. & Sparks, C. (1991). Children’s attachment to their pets: Links to socio-emotional development. *Children’s Environments Quarterly*, 8(2), 55-65.

Article by Elizabeth B. Strand. (former home visiting team leader)

PURPOSE OF THE FAMILY LIFE PROJECT

The Family Life Project is a study of the transition from childhood into adolescence. The study is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and will last through 2006. The first part of the study includes about 2300 youth from 13 middle schools in Knox County. These youth completed questionnaires during school and then had a pizza party. The second part involves 420 of these youth who presently live with two parents. We focus on several aspects of youth adjustment:

behavior at home and school, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. We ask youth, parents, and teachers to give us their thoughts about the youth’s adjustment. We also ask parents and youth to complete questionnaires that ask about various aspects of family life – parenting, the marital relationship and how parents share parenting tasks, and parent’s emotional well-being. We also ask for information about the youth’s friendships and their feelings about school. In addition to completing questionnaires, families

in the study also complete a discussion activity that involves parents and the youth discussing various issues about family life. These discussions are videotaped and then coded using a system developed at Iowa State called the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales. One of the major contributions of this project will be a greater understanding of how youth change as they move through middle school and what affects these changes.

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More about our staff... Statistician and newest team leaders!



Gary Cuddeback is a doctoral student in the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee. He received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Furman University and master's degree in social work and public health from the University of South Florida. Upon completion of his doctorate he will also have received a minor in statistics from the University of Tennessee's Intercollegiate Graduate Studies Program.

Currently, Gary's research interest includes kinship family foster care and the application and dissemination of statistical methods. He is a graduate research assistant with two different projects, The University of Tennessee Family Foster Care Project and the Family Life Project. The Family Foster Care Project is working in collaboration with Casey Family Programs (<http://utcmhsrc.csw.utk.edu/caseproject/>) to develop and test standardized assessment tools to evaluate family foster care applicants. The Family Life Project is a longitudinal study of family life and adolescent development.

Gary is married and enjoys hiking, reading, and spending time with his wife and dog.

Bridget Lisle is one of the project's home visiting team leaders. She is a native of Nashville, Tennessee. She will graduate in May with a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a minor Child Development. Bridget also is

working on a project for the Honors Research Fair at UT that investigates pubertal onset and how that affects peer and family relations. After graduation she wants to take a year off of school and travel around the world by working on a cruise line. Then she plans to return to school and pursue a PhD in Industrial Organization Psychology.

In her spare time, Bridget likes to hike in the Smoky Mountains, workout, go to movies, and shop. She loves animals and can't wait until she lives someplace where they will let her have one.

Maria Cianciolo also is one of the project's home visiting team leaders. She is a senior majoring in Psychology, with a minor in Child and Family Studies. She plans to graduate in May, 2003. Maria is in the process of joining Psi Chi, The National Honor Society in Psychology. Upon graduation she wants to take some time off from school and work. She plans to attend graduate school the following Spring in Memphis, concentrating on Counseling. Maria loves working with people and enjoys learning more about the research process through the Family Life Project.

Maria's hobbies include journal writing, volleyball, and school work! She also enjoys working out and being around her family and friends as much as possible. She wants to find a job where she can be around people and help them in some way. Something unique about Maria is that she is a twin.

April is another of the project's home visiting team leaders. She is a native of Memphis, Tennessee. April has a bachelor's degree in Agriculture, with a concentration in animal science. She will graduate in May, 2003 with a master's degree in Social Work. Her research interests

include the conservation and preservation of animals, criminal and forensic psychology, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. April is single. She enjoys animals, sports, music, singing and she plays the violin.

Mamosa Foster is our newest team leader. She is retired from the Knox County Schools after 28 years of service as a teacher, evaluator, curriculum facilitator, assistant principal, and principal. Mamosa has experience as assessment coordinator with Westat for the NAEP Project, collecting data for the nation's Report Card.

Mamosa is married the John, who teacher at Farragut High and ahs 3 children. She is a metropolitan Planning Commissioner and has served in several capacities on the local, district and national level at her church.

Please direct comments and questions to
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