This study examined how parents experienced their first child’s transition to adolescence. A multiple-case qualitative research design was chosen to examine parents’ experiences. Family systems theory and family stress and coping theory provided a theoretical starting point. Participants were recruited who had adolescents between ages 13 and 16 and saw their family as normally stressed, indicated in part by an absence of court involvement, substance abuse issues, school failure, and participation in therapy. Ten families were selected: parents from eight of these families participated in focus groups, and five sets of parents were interviewed in their homes. The grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry developed by Glaser and Strauss guided data collection and analysis.

This study identified a complex array of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors involved in parents’ experience of this transition. A theoretical model was developed to illustrate how specific components of parents’ experiences might be interrelated. The process seemed to be initiated when the parents noticed a physical, social/emotional, or relational change in their teenager. Parents responded to the perceived change through their affect, cognition, and behavior. They interpreted what was happening by processes of evaluation, reorientation, and frame. These three components—perception, response, and interpretation—were seen to interact with elements of past and current family context, such as expectations, family dynamics, family of origin influences, and sociocultural change. The overall process involved parents’ attempts to regain family equilibrium at different levels of adolescent autonomy and progress toward anticipated future teen changes in ways that either enhance or diminish family cohesion.