

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

In this study I explored how parents experience and interpret their oldest, or only, child's transition to adolescence. The ten mothers and five fathers who participated seemed to share in common a strong commitment to parenting, and appeared to take an engaged, authoritative stance with their teens. Focus group participants said they appreciated the opportunity to "network" with one another. Parents interviewed in their homes discussed a wide range of personal reactions to the process of raising an adolescent, characterized by one father as "a walk through the jungle at twilight." I appreciated the variety of views I heard from these parents, as well as their problem-solving abilities, their openness and self-reflection, and the high regard they hold for their children during an often frustrating, unpredictable time. "I'm sort of hanging out there over uncharted water," one mother remarked. She then admired several traits about her daughter, and said that having a teenager in the family added vibrancy and fun to their lives.

As I reviewed my interview transcripts, I began to see these families' experiences occurring around an iterative set of process components, informed by a number of past and current aspects of family context. I called this a "rebalancing process" and pictured it as a model (see Figure 1) that begins with a parent's perception of change in the child. I labeled this initial perception **Apple-Cart Experience**, based on one participant's use of a metaphor. In some families, this is a gradual shift; in others it is sudden, but all ten families who participated could recall one incident or set of behaviors that signaled they had entered new territory.

Following this perception, there is a **Response** by the parents, in terms of affect, cognition, and behavior. Many parents felt thrown off balance at first, but this tended to give way to thought processes moving in a direction of accepting and accommodating the teen's maturation. Parents' actions include what these parents were doing to keep in step with their changing teens. The parents in this study were notably active in this process.

Parental responses seemed to interact with their **Interpretation**, which occurred as parents made sense of what was happening in their families. Theoretically, this part of the

process may be viewed as orienting the parents toward their next “apple-cart experience”—a future perception of change, such as, when the adolescent begins driving or plans to leave home.

All three components of this model are pictured as interacting reciprocally with aspects of current and past **Family Context**. Current factors include expectations, individual characteristics of the parent and the child, and family dynamics (including emotional process and structure). Past contextual factors include family of origin influences, what the parent was like as a teen, and what life was like when the parent grew up, in contrast with today’s sociocultural influences.

In this chapter, I include a brief, generic description of the “story” this study examined, a discussion and definition of core categories and subcategories identified through open and axial coding, and case studies of each of the five families interviewed in their homes. Responses of focus group participants who were not interviewed at home are included in many of the examples I use to illustrate the core categories. The case studies integrate the core categories with each family’s narrative, using the words of the parents themselves from interview transcripts.

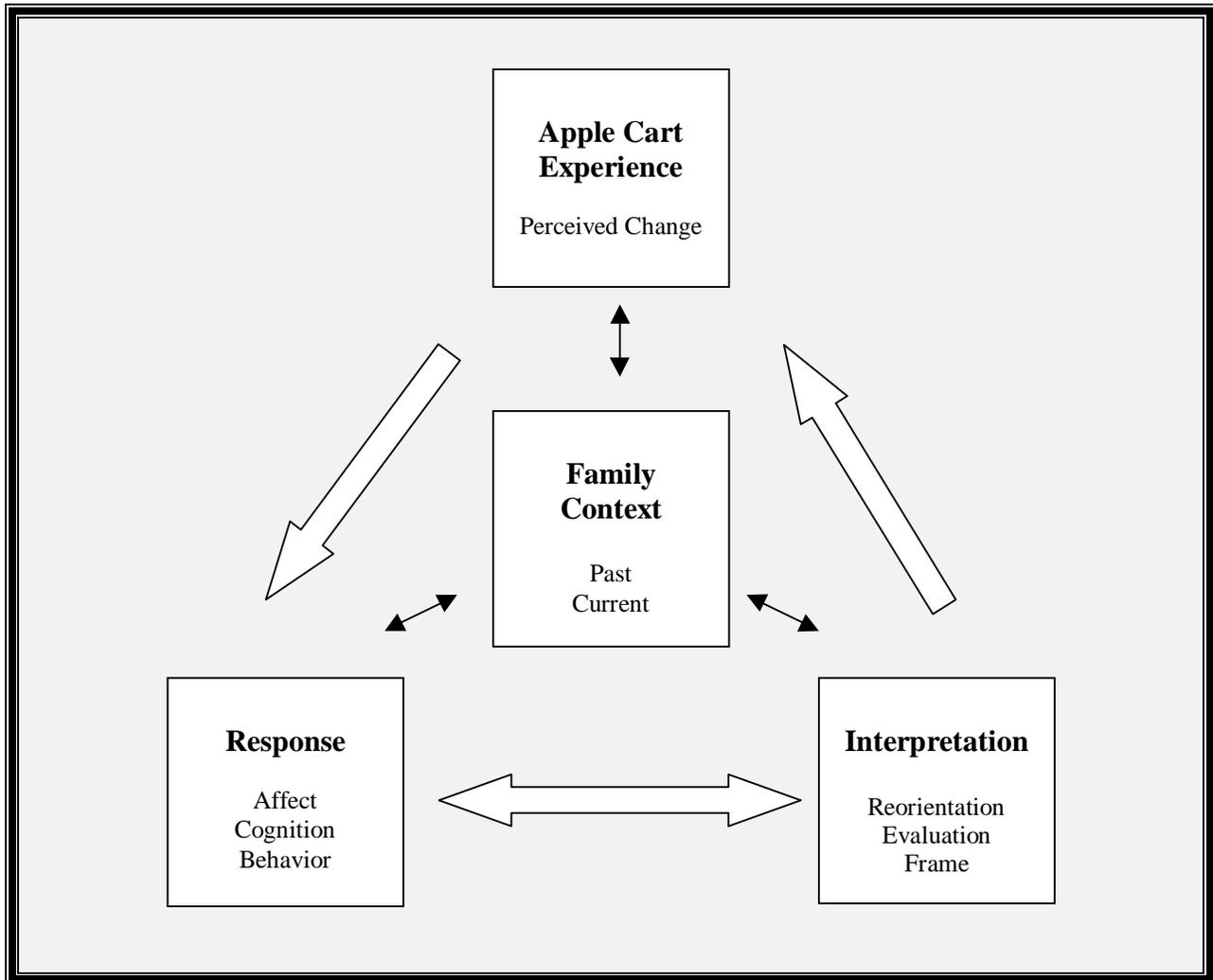


Figure 1. A proposed rebalancing process model for parents experiencing their oldest child’s transition to adolescence. Parents **perceive** change in the child (labeled apple-cart experience); they **respond** (with feelings, thoughts, and actions); and they **interpret**, or assign meaning, by reorienting to the future, evaluating themselves and their child, and framing their family’s experience. Each component interacts with aspects of past context (family of origin influences, life as a teen, and what the parent was like as a teen) and current context (expectations, parent characteristics, and family dynamics).

The “Story”

The story is about how selected parents perceive, respond to, and interpret their oldest child’s normal transition to adolescence. By definition, adolescence is a time of rapid developmental change. In families where the transition to adolescence is not accompanied by severe stress (e.g., teen drug use, delinquency, or family break-up), this stage offers a unique window into processes of adjusting to change, drawing on family resources, and incorporating new realities into an ongoing family narrative. The parents in this study all seemed to perceive, respond to, and interpret their teen’s changes in unique ways shaped by current and past contextual factors. They shared in common, however, a theme of moving with, not against, what they saw as the teen’s appropriate bids for independence and individuation, and their actions appeared to be guided more by cognitive strategies than by emotional reactivity. This appeared to happen consistently whether or not developmental changes evoked high anxiety or other unpleasant feelings. By and large, they thought before they acted, even when changes took them by surprise. These parents also tended to take a preventive approach to parenting, attuning themselves to anticipated change in their young teen before it happened. In some ways, they seemed paradoxical: they were vigilant parents who nonetheless wanted their children to take risks, and they avidly sought support from other parents and outside resources, yet they viewed themselves as capable parents. However, what seemed at first to be paradoxical is more likely evidence of complexity and self-efficacy: these parents had ready access to a rich, diverse trove of personal, familial, and societal resources, and they tended to be confident about doing what works for them. To me, these parents seemed to display particular skill at coordinating and refining their responses to teenage “trial balloons.” They interpreted family system change in ways that seem consistent with healthy growth and differentiation for each family member.

Core Categories

Major themes that emerged from this research project are drawn from elements of the model described above. They include four core categories that combine to describe parents’ experiences and interpretations of their oldest child’s transition to adolescence in a circular manner, repeating themselves as parents move to different levels of adaptation (or “rebalance”)

in response to their teen's changes. The four core categories are: **Apple-Cart Experience, Response, Interpretation, and Family Context.**

Apple-Cart Experience

The process of a family's transition to adolescence, according to the parents in this study, often began when changes in the child were experienced by parents as a sudden disequilibrium. The name of this core category came from a mother in the study, who said: "It's like the apple cart has been upset and you're trying to put things back the way they were." For her and for most of the other parents, an **apple-cart experience** coincided with the child's transition out of elementary school, viewed by parents as a safe, protective environment with which they felt comfortable and familiar. This experience of disequilibrium was not always a one-time occurrence; for several families, there were multiple interactions with a young adolescent that evoked a sense of the parents being thrown off balance. These varied in intensity, frequency, and consequences for the parent and child.

By design, the families in this study were experiencing a transition that had not been marked by extreme stress. Because of this control factor, it was possible to observe family processes operating in "normal" ranges and not skewed by crisis management or cut-off. Only a few of these adolescents, according to their parents, had acted out in terms of serious misbehavior at school or breaking rules and lying. The parents reported that none of their children had engaged in high-risk behaviors such as drug use, sexual activity, or running away.

What brought on the apple-cart experience were the ways in which young adolescents exhibited various **physical, social/emotional, and relational** changes. In terms of **physical** changes, a single mom described how she felt when her son shaved for the first time when she was not home, and how this served as a declaration of his emerging independence. A dad spoke with deep feeling about his 13-year-old daughter's advanced physical maturity, and how he wanted to "stop time" when he saw older boys and men eyeing her. Several parents commented on how the teen's physical changes evoked disequilibrium for the child as well as the parents. One mom described how she watched her 13-year-old daughter, an accomplished diver, tumble awkwardly off the board and into the pool one day. As she surfaced, the daughter burst into tears

and said, “I hit my hips. Make them stop growing.” At a focus group session, this girl’s mother said, “It was a very big demarcation.... She wasn’t a little kid anymore, and she realized it.”

Social and emotional development precipitated a number of apple-cart experiences, particularly because of heightened peer influence that evoked considerable parental anxiety. Several parents spoke of a sudden “escalation” of their teen’s interest in the opposite gender, requests to go to the mall with friends, and “parties” at homes unknown to the parents. Increased time on the phone with friends, and telling parents that a friend is allowed to have more independence seemed to reflect new social awareness for young teens. “With girls, the telephone is surgically implanted,” one mom said. For some families, new social interests among their teens coincided with plummeting grades, presenting a double challenge.

Parents in the study noticed a number of **relational** changes that seemed to signal a transition. Their early adolescents began to “talk back” and express opinions at variance with the parents. “Ornery, irritable, a pest” is how one mom described her son when he did not get his way. A dad observed, “If I give (my son) any suggestions, forget it. It’s like the kiss of death. If somebody else tells him, he might listen, but me? Forget it.” Mood swings and demands for more privacy seemed to alter interactions significantly, often in marked contrast to when the child was younger. One dad said his son’s room has become an “unknown world” where his son retreats for hours on end. Another described her daughter’s room as the repository of “an unholy amount of stuff.” Several parents in this study said they welcomed teen assertiveness and had worried previously about overly “compliant” children. For others, however, changes in interactions meant sparks began to fly.

Response

The second core category examines parents’ affective, cognitive, and behavioral **responses** to an “apple-cart experience.” The second part of the mother’s metaphor about the apple cart being upset reflected the initial response that often surfaced: she wanted to “put things back the way they were.” For the parents in this study, that response did not seem to stay in place very long, and in some cases appeared as only a fleeting sense of loss. It generally gave way to other affective responses and led to cognitive strategies, such as assigning cause and

effect, that seemed to inform the parent's actions. In this section, I consider affect and cognition and then describe how these components seemed to interact as the parents decided what to do.

Affect. The main theme in the area of parents' feelings involved **worry and concern**. Parents spoke of feeling as if they were "on the brink, never knowing what will happen next" or suddenly feeling as if the teen had moved "one step ahead." Strong affect seemed more evident in mothers of daughters than in mothers of sons or fathers of either. Mothers of daughters expressed a wide range of concerned reactions to apple-cart events, from strong irritation to sadness to shock and surprise. "She just gets me wound up so tight," one mother commented about her 13-year-old daughter. "I'm a wreck," said another mom whose daughter had just begun to drive. In contrast, most mothers of sons seemed more easy going about early indicators of their children's transition. One mom said of her son, "Even though we butt heads occasionally, he's a really good kid. I feel like we may get through this." Some mothers of sons expressed concern that they tend to overfunction, at the expense of the teen developing appropriate independence.

Fathers seemed more reticent to discuss their feelings, but when they did they made insightful links to other domains such as sociocultural change and self-perceptions. One father spoke of feeling "knotted up inside" whenever he believed his son performed poorly in school or sports. He explained what this was like, and how he sought to balance feelings and thoughts:

You tend to live your life through your kid. So as I see him getting ready for college and struggling, I see myself, and the thing I have to keep in mind is in many ways he's doing better than I did. It's hard to keep that in perspective. I still try to urge him on to do more.

Cognition. Cognitive responses among these parents were complex and well articulated. These parents were able to make generous **attributions** (assign cause and effect) about teen behavior. This was evident in two ways. First, these parents often credited both themselves and their child for positive outcomes. One dad identified as a family strength his emphasis, "right from the beginning," on teaching his son to avoid peer pressure. As he saw him do so, he said approvingly of his son, "He's got a mind of his own." Second, they chalked up negative

outcomes to situational, external factors (e.g., passing curiosity or temporary peer influence). They also perceived themselves as effective parents who **influence** their children, either directly or indirectly. A single mom who was distressed about difficulties with her daughter acknowledged a perception of indirect influence by saying:

I was caught off guard a while back and overheard one of my children using my very words about one of those things that you say over and over again like a broken record. They do hear it. My daughter just is very good about hiding the fact that she knows or understands or could possibly agree with anything I've said, but I have evidence that they do hear it.

These parents also appeared to use a cognitive skill of **regulating their influence** over their children as needed. One father expressed this by saying, "We would take a stronger influence if we saw her making bad decisions." A mom spoke of "worming her way in" to influence her son when she felt it was necessary.

Cognitive and affective reactions to the apple-cart event seemed to interact in similar ways among all the participant families interviewed in their homes. For the most part, these parents held reactive responses in check and overrode them with more measured, cognitively based responses. At times when this did not happen (e.g., when a dad yelled "like I never yelled before" after learning his daughter had lied), it was a marked, memorable occasion that seemed to stand in sharp contrast to usual patterns. So when these parents took action—or responded behaviorally—they were usually led by thoughts, not feelings. According to Bowen's definition of family emotional process, this is a marker of differentiation, which appeared to be evident in all of these families (Papero, 1990). Using cognitive strategies instead of emotional reactions seems to fit a description offered by Preto (1989), noting "parents with a strong sense of self can be expected to be less reactive to adolescent challenges. This is not to say that they will not experience confusion or fear, but they may personalize their reactions less" (p. 261).

Behavior. The behavioral choices made by parents in this study offered evidence of flexibility and fine-tuning over time as they encouraged individuation and participated in their

teen's unpredictable movement toward independence. These early teens may be changing rapidly, but their parents seemed to make concerted efforts to keep in step in a rebalancing process. One mother's description of herself seemed to capture this process behaviorally:

I do this dance, it seems. I don't rush in and rescue, but I rush in and I harangue when I see things falling apart.... I'll do that, and then alternately I'll back off and say, 'She needs to learn this for herself. She's stubborn; it may just take a long time.'"

Action responses included identifying and accessing **sources of support**. For two-parent families, spousal support was particularly important, and participants acknowledged gratefully how partners balanced one another. One man said of his wife, "she drags me over to the feelings side." The wife agreed and pointed out how the husband offers perspective that calms her anxiety down. Networking with other parents to get information and manage anxiety is another key source of support that is intentionally pursued, particularly by mothers. One mom immediately responded, when asked how she was managing this transition, "I formed a network." Several participants said they attended a focus group because they hoped to use the occasion to network with other parents.

Another parent behavior in response to early teen changes was to exercise a wide range of **parenting practices**, including communication skills ("I sat her down and we had a talk," one dad said). Much as a musical score is orchestrated for interpretation by a symphony, these parents appeared to have access to many different ways of responding and staying attuned to the teen's changes. One key practice involved monitoring children (knowing where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing). One mother said, "I watch her as closely now at 16 as I did at 6." Another practice consisted of making and enforcing appropriate rules. Parents seemed able to re-evaluate and adapt their parenting practices flexibly as their teen continued to change and the relationship began shifting toward more equally shared power. In one case, a mom described a pressing need to balance extensive monitoring and rule enforcement with more time for herself, saying:

I don't want the responsibility anymore. Everyone in my family is capable of taking care of what they have to take care of, without my having to direct them. They still want me to direct them.... I find it a little frustrating that they still want to keep me in that role, whereas I'm ready to relax a little bit and not think about what everybody has to do.

One common theme that illustrated a finely tuned balancing process by these parents involved **risk-taking**. Many of them described ways they encouraged their children to move past their comfort zones and reach a higher level of maturity. In several cases, this involved driving. One mother described her daughter's reluctance to take the test to get her learner's permit. She told her daughter they would plan to go the following Saturday, and the daughter seemed relieved to have the decision made for her. The mom seemed to demonstrate empathy and regard for her daughter as she explained, "She was really getting herself into 'I can't do this,' which was not going to be helpful."

Interpretation

Parent **interpretation**, or the ways in which they make meaning of this transition, is the third core category. It is considered here in terms of three themes: first, parents' **evaluation** of themselves and their teen as the teen matures. One mom said, "I think where I get my strength from is I firmly believe I'm in control. They are not." She illustrated one way in which this self-evaluation makes a difference in her parenting:

My son will say that I treat him completely differently from my daughter, and I'll say "You bet I do, because she's a different kid, her judgment is impeccable.... You are much more impulsive, your judgment is nowhere near as good, and you have lied to me. Therefore, I treat the two of you differently." I don't believe in equal treatment.

Second, parents made sense of this time in their lives through a **reorientation** toward the future, when their child is expected to leave home and function as an independent adult. This process elicited surprise and yearning in these parents, and their thoughts about an "empty nest"

ranged from eagerness to dread. A single mom of an only son said she finds herself thinking about when her son “gets serious” with someone. She said:

I don’t know what I’m going to do. I would probably want to tell him, “Do this and do that,” but you can’t. I would hope that he would come to me if he has questions. Who knows?

The reorientation seemed like an adaptation to the apple-cart experience component of wanting to “put things back the way they were.” One father articulated this clearly:

It’s a process of letting go. At some point you have to get used to these changes and recognize they’re normal. Eventually he’s going to be on his own and I’ve got to get used to that. There’s no retrieving, no sense in trying to retrieve the way things used to be. You have to make the most of the relationship you have now and keep it gradually going toward this person developing into an adult.

A third aspect of interpretation is the **frame** in which the parents viewed their families at this time of transition. Among the families that participated, I detected a sense of uniqueness and resilience that framed most of their experiences. Several parents quoted “scare stories” they had heard about adolescence and went on to say that their experience has not conformed—nor do they expect it to. Most of these parents readily catalogued a list of hopes and dreams for their teens, and these future possibilities framed a view of their teens as individuals with unlimited potential, and cherished family members held in high regard by the parents. These interpretations seemed to orient parents toward responding to future apple-cart experiences in a context of connection and adaptability.

Family Context

Parental perceptions, responses, and interpretations each appeared to interact with particular aspects of past and current **family context**. These moderators may clarify why and how this proposed sequence plays out differently in each family. The family context is defined as two interactive sets of factors: **past** and **current**. Past context includes **family of origin**

influences, memories of the **parent as a teenager**, and memories of **life as a teenager** and how it differs from today (sociocultural factors). Subcategories of the current context include parents' **expectations, individual characteristics, and family dynamics**.

Past context. The parents in this study seemed to be aware of **family of origin** influences and drew on these actively both to guide and interpret their experience of raising adolescents. They identified parts of their family legacies they hoped to convey to their children. This informed their interpretations in terms of affirming their family's uniqueness and evaluating how their experience fits with a bigger picture of intergenerational themes and values. For several families in this study, family of origin factors also influenced the cognitive and behavioral response, as parents intentionally did the opposite of what their parents did. These memories also seemed to have a direct impact on parents' affective response. Study participants whose parents lied to them, for instance, spoke passionately about teaching their children not to lie.

What the **parent** was like **as a teenager** is another key subcategory. Parents who perceived themselves as "wild" or rebellious tended to have more tolerance for risk-taking behavior, and even to encourage it. In contrast, parents who recalled themselves being "perfect" children seemed to struggle when their teens took risks. One mother explained how this affected her:

It never occurred to me to misbehave. I was the perfect one. I didn't give my parents reason to worry or discipline, so I have nothing in the back of my head to tell me what you do when there are problems.

What **life was like as a teen**, or the sociocultural context in which these parents grew up, also seemed to moderate present-day perceptions, responses, and interpretations. Memories and comparisons of "how things used to be" were pervasive in these parents' discussions of raising teenagers. Fears centered around ordinary activities such as driving, as well as high-risk behaviors including unprotected sex, substance use, and violence. Two dads independently mentioned "Kansas" as a metaphor for a simpler place and time (a place with "straight roads," a place where parents don't have to "stalk" their kids). To me, it also called to mind Dorothy's

line in the Wizard of Oz: “We aren’t in Kansas anymore.” The world is perceived by most of these parents as a more dangerous place for teens today than it was a generation ago.

At the first focus group, when I asked parents “How much harder or easier do you think it is to be a teenager today than when you were young?” I received a barrage of responses all at once saying, “Thousands of times harder...orders of magnitude harder.” At the second focus group, the response was subdued. Several parents pointed out increased opportunities for adolescents today, and said they consider life as a teen to be more exciting and more rewarding today. The first focus group was comprised mainly of parents of girls, while the second included all parents of boys except one. Their responses to this question made me wonder whether gender differences might account for different parental perspectives on sociocultural change.

Current context. Parents in this study clearly articulated **expectations** about adolescence in general and their children in particular, and tended to have a clear sense about what direction their teen’s life should take. These expectations were shaped by elements of past context, described above, as well as present-day networking with other parents and popular media portrayals of adolescence. Some of these parents said they expected this transition to be worse than it was, while others believed they were not in for any big surprises. On one occasion, both these responses came from one set of parents. The mother said she expected worse from her son based on the reading and talking she had done in anticipation of his adolescence. Her husband took a different view based on what his son was like as a child, saying, “When he wasn’t a ‘terrible two,’ there wasn’t any indication that there were going to be any significant problems.”

Individual characteristics of the parent and the teen also contextualize the experience of this transition. These parents tended to be very self-aware, characterizing themselves in such terms as “the heavy” (meaning a stricter disciplinarian than the spouse), a “black-and-white kind of guy” (in terms of responding to teen misbehavior), and “the emotional barometer of the house.” Parents’ traits seemed to affect their perceptions of their changing teens. One couple expressed different experiences related to several apple-cart incidents. They agreed the mom is a “recovering perfectionist” who has difficulty picking her battles, and the dad is a “peacemaker” who defuses conflict and very intentionally picks battles. Intrapsychic parental characteristics,

including self-perceptions and self-efficacy, seemed to emerge as important contexts for understanding parent experiences, as well as extrapsychic factors such as work role orientation.

All the parents in this study were at the life-cycle stage of midlife transition, and some perceived themselves to be experiencing midlife issues (such as career reassessment) while others did not. However, all the parents in this sample clearly articulated ways in which they balance their paid work role with their parenting role, and they appeared to invest the parenting role with equal or greater significance. One father remarked, “My lasting legacy will not be what I do at work; it will be what I leave in a child’s mind.” Another spent several years being an at-home parent while his wife worked an evening shift. While fathers may have sacrificed career *advancement* to spend more time as parents, mothers seemed more likely to have sacrificed career *paths*. For example, one abandoned specialized training in education and took a job in day care; another got a degree in psychology but is working in retail sales, and said she “made her peace” with that decision because it gave her more time to be with her children.

The pre-existing parent-child relationship, as well as what the teen was like as a child, also influenced parent perceptions of change in their teen. Most of these parents appeared to share in common a longstanding harmonious relationship with their children. A single mom in one focus group, however, spoke of having a difficult relationship with her daughter all along, and noted that this daughter’s transition to adolescence seemed to “accentuate her negative traits.” One father seemed to speak for most of the other participants when he said:

If you’ve had a good relationship with your kids up to this point, I think chances are that good relationship is going to continue. It may be more challenging (but) it doesn’t have to be horrible.

These parents tended to view their teens in light of what the teens were like when they were younger, and most of them used positive terms to describe their children.

Certain elements of **family dynamics** seemed influential, including number of children, marital adjustment, and cohesion. Four out of the ten participant families had only children, and the two who were interviewed in their homes said they believed their focus on just one child made a difference in their parenting experience. One said they treat their only son as “almost a peer” in terms of dinnertime conversation because there is no younger sibling around.

Aspects of family organization seemed important as well. Several parents mentioned routines, such as sitting down to dinner together, as a priority for their family. Active participation in the life of a religious community mattered to most of these parents. Six of the ten participant families structured their schedules so one spouse was at home with the children for some time, and they credit this decision for helping maintain continuity across the transition to adolescence.

The four sets of married parents interviewed at home for this study contributed insights into how the transition to adolescence may affect marital adjustment. These parents appeared to share a commitment to egalitarian partnerships that seemed open, trusting, and mutually appreciative. Both spouses in these four families described their relationships as complementary, and credited “balance” and “perspective” from their spouses for making the shared parenting task more manageable. Three of the four described in detail how they see themselves sacrificing marital satisfaction (e.g., not going out as a couple) due to raising an adolescent.

A final aspect of family dynamics that seemed to characterize these parents is cohesion, or the degree to which family members are connected and function in a healthy range that is neither disengaged nor enmeshed, using the terminology defined by Olson (1993). Balanced family cohesion is characterized by relatively equal parts of separateness and togetherness, allowing family members to experience appropriate independence and connection. This trait seemed abundantly evident in numerous comments these parents made. I came to see cohesion in these families operating as a stabilizer throughout the process of perceiving, responding to, and interpreting an apple cart event. These parents may frequently feel as if they are walking

through a jungle at twilight, but their cohesion and other strengths appear to help keep them on a path that leads in directions they want to go.

Case Study: Pete and Alice Donohue

This mother and father are in their mid-forties and have been married for 22 years. They both attended the first focus group. Pete was the only father present, yet he seemed relaxed and participated avidly with the mothers in the group. About one month after the focus group, I met with Pete and Alice in their home for two hours. They live in a comfortable, older home surrounded by a large yard filled with flower and vegetable gardens they both enjoy tending. Their son, Michael, is a 13-year-old boy who was adopted as an infant. He is their only child

During our interview, Alice spoke of severe job difficulties that led her to resign several months ago from her position as a nurse practitioner at a health maintenance organization. She also experienced the sudden death of her father this year, and Pete was diagnosed with a chronic illness. Alice clearly expressed a recognition that she is coping with a lot of stress. “We’ve gotten clobbered,” she said. More so than other parents I interviewed, Alice seemed to look to her young adolescent son as a source of support and to view his presence in their lives as “a plus” during her own struggles. No one in the family had ever participated in therapy. The Donohues are active in their local Catholic church and view their faith as an important anchor and source of strength when difficult transitions occur.

Pete seemed slightly more reticent during the home interview than he did at the focus group. He spoke very softly so the tape sometimes did not pick up all of his comments. I wondered if this was because Michael was in the house during the interview, wandering in and out of the living room several times. There were two or three times during the interview when Pete seemed to drop his guard and express emotion about the parenting experience. Each time, he then retreated into humor when I tried to explore this further. Nonetheless, his engaged participation in the interview indicated that being a father is an important part of his identity.

Similar to other fathers who participated, Pete gave a low-key answer when I asked about his work, suggesting that he was not strongly driven to get ahead and generally did not work

overtime. He works in marketing for a large, high-tech firm. He mentioned a sense of frustration about corporate restructuring, but seemed essentially content with his middle-management job. The Donohue's combined income is over \$80,000 annually.

Pete and Alice sat next to one another on their living room sofa during the interview. Like other couples I interviewed, they shared a comfortable rapport and frequently finished one another's sentences. They appeared to be open with each other, particularly when each one critiqued an aspect of the other's parenting style. This was done humorously and with mutual acknowledgments that they're not perfect parents. They appear to appreciate each other and to hold their son in high regard.

Michael, a tall, reed-thin boy who is starting ninth grade, walked through the house several times, talking on a cordless telephone. He had short, curly blond hair and wore fashionably baggy blue jeans. At one point he played music on a stereo in his room, not too loudly. The music did not evoke any particular response from Pete or Alice, except for a comment that they never planned on letting their son have a computer, TV, and stereo in his room, but had done so to accommodate both his desire and theirs for more privacy.

Summary of Findings

Pete and Alice vividly described a series of **apple-cart experiences** that occurred when Michael entered sixth grade. "He got more mouthy, just being disrespectful toward me," Alice recalled. In addition, he began getting phone calls from what his parents described as "very aggressive girls," and his social behavior changed in ways that took Alice by surprise:

All of a sudden he was asking to go to the mall on the weekend, and I found that a little scary. He was real big on wanting me to drop them off, and I hadn't done that before. It just happened real fast. I thought, wow, if it's escalated this fast from fifth grade, what's it going to do from sixth to seventh?

Alice and Pete both felt thrown off balance by this and were unsure how to respond. Similar to other parents in this study, the Donohue's **response** indicated that they acted on cognitive strategies, and not their initial feelings. Alice described what they did:

We kind of made a compromise. As I thought about it, I actually called some other parents to ask, "What do you think I should do about this?" because it just kind of hit me in the face. We said, "Okay, I will drop you off at this time, and I will pick you up at this time, and you'd better be there." And he did that a couple of times and then it was like he didn't want to do that anymore.... As far as the mall stuff, it's not as big a deal now.

This response involved seeking **support** from other parents, and it indicated how these parents engage certain **practices** such as reevaluating and adapting their rules. Contextual factors are at work here as well. Pete pointed out that he had an **expectation** that there would be few difficulties with Michael because of what Michael was like as a child. Even though Alice initially worried about what might happen next, she felt reassured when Michael's demands for more social independence did not escalate. Pete's cognitive response was to **attribute** this positive outcome to an internal, stable trait of Michael's, saying "He's got a mind of his own." Both parents also attributed a good outcome to their own efforts: their fears were allayed, they said, "because we dealt with it and nothing bad happened, and also we saw him making good decisions."

Alice said she believed the process of rebalancing is going smoothly for them partly because Michael is an only child, to whom they relate as "almost a peer." She said this is particularly true in the area of communication.

We just sort of discuss everything. I think that if he had a younger sibling, we would be a lot more careful about what adult subjects get discussed. ... But because there's only one of him and because he's growing up...we discuss pretty much everything. It just sort of started naturally.

A similar episode proved to be a more challenging apple-cart experience, but Pete and Alice dealt with it in a way that reinforced both their own and their son's efficacy. In sixth grade, Michael was invited to a holiday party at the home of a friend Pete and Alice did not know. Alice felt uneasy about the situation, so she sought support by calling several other moms. She found out a friend of Michael's would be allowed to go if Michael went with him. Alice monitored the situation by driving the boys there, and her anxiety increased when she found no adult supervision—just a nanny in charge who appeared to be not much older than the party-goers. “I didn't like the arrangement, but I left them anyway, and I didn't feel real good about it,” Alice recalled. She told Michael she would call him there in an hour to find out what was going on. Before the hour was up, Michael called her and asked to be picked up. “He and his friend weren't happy with what was going on,” Alice said. “Apparently things were out of control.” In a situation that had all the ingredients of potential conflict, the Donohue family experienced just the opposite: the son's bid for independence was supported by the parents in spite of their deep misgivings, and his choice to get out of a troubling situation increased his parents' already high regard for him.

Pete's attribution process, mentioned earlier in the context of positive outcomes, also seemed to maintain family connectedness in problem situations. Both in the focus group session and the in-home interview, Pete explained how most of his parenting practices are grounded in rules. He placed considerable emphasis on the value of honesty, saying he has consistently taught Michael:

“Don't lie—you can get away with anything, but don't lie about it.” That's sort of been the one thing I've tried to make inflexible. If you tell the truth you're going to get in less trouble no matter what it is. I've caught him testing me a few times, and I've come down strongly.

Pete observed that this value is informed by **family of origin** influences. “I think one of the reasons I'm so sensitive to lying is that my dad lied...so that was the one thing I didn't want my son to do, because I saw the consequences of that as far as my dad's relationships.” Pete put this family rule to a test one day when he realized Michael and a friend had been surfing the

Internet, visiting forbidden sites. Pete retrieved a list of those sites, then asked Michael if he had looked at anything he shouldn't have. Michael confessed that he had. Because he was honest about this, Pete did not impose any consequences. Further, his attribution process appeared to maintain family connectedness:

I wrote that off as curiosity, and I made the assumption it was the influence of his good buddy, because I hadn't seen any previous visits to those sites.

A cognitive response here seemed to be an unspoken assumption of parental **influence**, either direct or indirect. When Alice said, "we dealt with it," or Pete said "we've just kind of set it up that way" with regard to a rule against lying, this implied they were exercising influence over their teen. They seemed to regulate their influence when they adapted rules and gave him leeway to attend parties or go to the mall, within defined limits. Speaking more generally about peer influence, Alice said she paid a lot of attention to whom Michael chooses to hang out with, but raised the issue in a way that suggests sensitively attuned attempts at influence:

I can't really go in there and say, "I don't want you with this kid." You have to kind of try to maneuver and influence and say, "Well, what about this kid?" I'll say to him, "Why do you want to hang out with this kid? It doesn't seem like he's too interested in school."

During the interview, I asked them about how they perceived their level of influence over Michael on a scale of 1 to 10. "It's different on different days," Alice said. She and Pete pondered this question for a moment, and both agreed their influence is at a 7 or 8, down from a 9 when he was younger. Alice explained, "He's always saying 'Oh, mom, that's so stupid,' but he still listens." This parental sense of underlying influence seemed to be a pervasive theme among all the families who participated. It may also be an important component of the adaptation process, because it could give the parents a higher degree of confidence in themselves and in their child so they might be more likely to take risks as parents or tolerate risks from their children. Alice described what difference it makes to be aware of that underlying influence, which in her case is grounded in the context of a pre-existing close relationship with her son:

What I would say is a strength is having that rapport and that relationship from before. We have our spats and our problems, but we have a rapport. I feel like he comes and discusses important things all the time. It might start out really trivial and then it transitions into something really important, and you never know when that's going to happen. It might be when they're heading out the door.

Elements of **past family context** seemed evident in these parents. A strong link with family of origin was mentioned by Alice as a source of strength, particularly as she grieved her father's recent death. When she attended her dad's funeral, she said:

I realized, and am still realizing, what strength I have in my family and from my parents and siblings and how that strength helps you get through adversity and helps you raise your kids, and how you pass that strength on to your kids even if you don't think you are. It's something I feel blessed to have. It's given me a solid grounding. When I think back on my parents and how they parented, I always thought it was catch-as-catch can, it just seemed that way because it was a really big family and something was always happening.... Yet now as I'm older I really see how my parents worked very hard to raise us to be moral, upstanding people. They prayed a lot for us, and I see what a strength that is.

What **life was like** when Pete and Alice were young, as opposed to today's sociocultural realities, contextualized their parenting perceptions, responses, and interpretations as well. Both parents said they see the world as a more dangerous place today. Their family is unique among study participants in terms of the extent to which violent incidents have touched their lives. "Michael has had a friend shot point blank in the head," Pete said, his voice still echoing the shock of it. Alice sorrowfully described the three funerals Michael has attended, of two friends shot to death and one who died suddenly of an illness. These events, as well as Michael's grandfather's death, seemed to serve as catalysts for discussion and a reaffirmation of cohesion within the Donohue family. "You have to deal with it," Pete observed. "Get it out in the open and talk about it. I think that's where a lot of parents get in trouble, they don't talk about things."

Pete and Alice's marital adjustment was an aspect of current context that resembled the other two-parent families interviewed at home. They appeared to share power in their marriage, describing times when one parent made a unilateral decision about enforcing rules or limiting behavior, and checked it out later with the other. They seemed to view themselves as complementary, with Pete describing himself as "the heavy" (meaning a stricter disciplinarian) and Alice as the "sweet mom." A comment Pete made seemed particularly enlightening in terms of how their couple dynamics affect the rebalancing process at this stage. He described how he made it a priority to talk with Michael about peer pressure, and he noted that Alice would always "push in the same direction." Another indication of a healthy marital relationship was the way in which they critiqued each other's parenting without becoming defensive. Alice pointed out that Pete "barks" when he's angry, meaning he raises his voice and yells. Pete owned this behavior and said it only happens after he's asked Michael repeatedly to do something. Pete critiqued Alice for overfunctioning, for example, by "buttering Michael's toast." They laughed about this, and like her husband, Alice took responsibility for doing too much for her son at times. Their humor and nonreactive stance seemed to define a key family strength.

How Pete and Alice **interpreted** the transition to adolescence seemed significant. Alice commented on the apple-cart experiences described above in a way that sounded like **self-evaluation**, noting "When something like that happens, then you think, 'Wow, that's a good decision,' and so then you're not as scared anymore." Pete expressed an **evaluation** of his son, saying "He's not afraid to say, 'I don't like this situation, I'm going home,' which is what a lot of kids would not do; they'd be afraid or there would be peer pressure." The two "apple-cart" incidents and the Donohue's response to them appeared to contribute to an overall **frame** in which these parents viewed themselves and their family as unique and successful. Alice observed:

I always heard people talk about adolescence like you wake up one morning and all of a sudden you have this bizarre person that you don't recognize, and I guess I just have never, that has not happened to us.

At the same time, Alice and Pete did not seem smug or self-congratulatory, nor were they unaware of hazards other parents face. Alice reflected on long-time friends of theirs whose child became deeply involved in the drug scene:

It's heartbreaking. I don't know what I'd do if that was my kid. It just tears me up inside. I feel so blessed that I don't have to deal with that, and to tell you the truth, I don't think I will ever have to deal with it.

Another interpretive part of the rebalancing process seemed to involve how these parents **reorient** themselves to a not-too-distant future when their teen will leave home. Pete expressed this in terms of a vivid metaphor: "Don Quixote, riding off into the sunset. I say that because I'm thinking, I'm starting to notice, it's only a few more years." At this point, Pete had a wistful expression on his face and he broke eye contact. When I probed by asking what this was like for him, he retreated from the emotion of the moment into humor. "I'll have to mow the lawn again," he said. "I just got him started." Alice cast a critical eye toward her husband and returned to his train of thought, expressing what she thought about reorienting to her son's emerging maturity:

I think the teenage years are neat, exciting years because your kid's becoming this person, they're becoming like another adult in your family. They're taking interesting things at school that they can come home and talk to you about. They have these interesting and scary things that are happening with their friends.

Pete and Alice appeared to be engaged in a rebalancing process that moved in the direction of differentiation for each individual in their family, including their adolescent son. Their combined enthusiasm and realistic concern for seeing him through a maturing process conveyed abundant family strengths in a context of cohesion that became perturbed only slightly by apple-cart experiences.

Case Study: Paul and Janice Lantos

This couple welcomed me to their suburban home on a weekend afternoon when their 14-year-old daughter was watching their 2-year-old nephew. The daughter, Susan, is tall and attractive, appearing perhaps two or three years older than she is. While I interviewed Paul and Janice around their dining room table, we watched through a window as Susan played in the backyard with her young cousin. She entertained him energetically, and they laughed together frequently. From the outset, some of the Lantos's strengths were evident. Paul and Janice told me they were watching their nephew because they swap children occasionally with relatives, so the parents can enjoy a day to themselves. Janice teased Paul, as we observed Susan and the toddler, for his inclination to lecture Susan about teen pregnancy whenever she commented on the challenges of keeping up with a 2-year-old. As the interview began, I felt comfortable and relaxed in the Lantos home. Their other two children, ages 11 and 7, were not at home.

Janice, a 39-year-old social worker, had attended my first focus group session and participated enthusiastically in it. I was slightly concerned that Paul might be less engaged in the in-home interview because he was not able to attend the group session, so my initial questions were directed toward him. He proved to be a talkative and insightful participant, and seemed to be on Janice's "wavelength" throughout my two hours with them. He is 42, and works for a large office supply firm. Their combined income is over \$80,000 annually. Janice is a college graduate, and Paul is not.

For six years, while the children were little, Paul shared child-care responsibilities equally with Janice, because she worked from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. at a county social service agency. Similar to other fathers I interviewed, Paul views his job as a means to an end. His identity as a father, he said, matters as much or more to him than career advancement. As a parent, he described himself as a "black and white kind of guy" (meaning, he said, that when there is a problem, he wants to deal with it openly and right away) and he has a lot of determination to guide his new teen in positive directions. He was also warm, quick to make a humorous observation, and enjoyed a comfortable rapport with his wife. She assessed their parenting toward the end of the interview with a teasing remark about his balding head, by

observing that they are “making it through, some of us with hair, some without.” He laughed with her and responded, “Low blow!”

Janice seemed to resemble other mothers of daughters by expressing strong emotion. For example, even though things were generally going well for this family, Janice’s response to a variety of “apple-cart experiences” had been strongly emotional. She described her feelings vividly, as “a constant sick feeling in the pit of my stomach” and later as a sense of being “on the brink—never knowing what’s going to happen next.”

As the interview progressed, I was impressed with how the two of them shared equally in managing interruptions and maintaining an environment conducive to a sensitive conversation that was being taped. When the nephew went down for a nap, Janice taped a note to the front door requesting quiet. When Susan needed a snack for the toddler, Paul monitored that activity. Similar to other couples in this study, they displayed a well-developed coordination between the two of them, verbally and in terms of movement. Their household seemed to operate like a well-oiled machine. It was easy to imagine these parents maintaining routines and ensuring continuity for their children, while making it appear almost effortless.

Summary of Findings

Paul and Janice described a number of **apple-cart experiences** that occurred around the time Susan started middle school, at seventh grade. Janice noticed a marked change in terms of family interactions on two fronts. First, she perceived that Susan “started keeping her thoughts to herself.” In contrast, when she was a child, Susan would “spill her guts at every opportunity,” Janice recalled. Second, Susan began to express opinions that differed from her parents, and to stand her ground more emphatically. Janice said her initial **response** was to feel sad and nostalgic about her daughter’s new need for privacy, missing the closeness they shared earlier. When her daughter argued back, Janice felt thrown off balance by this, but not particularly surprised. A contextual factor, what Janice was **like as a teen**, shaped her expectations for this transition. “I was ready for anything,” Janice said, “because I was a very rebellious teenager and I put my parents through a lot.”

In both instances, Janice's response to the upset relational "apple cart" emerged from **cognitive** resources. She recalled:

She always has been and still is very eager to please me in particular. I was almost worried about that. I wanted her to stand up on her own. I remember thinking as she was screaming at me about something, "Oh, here we are, this is good, she's standing up for her own opinions." It wasn't good that she was screaming at me, but I felt this is healthier in a certain sense than just living to please someone.

Janice's rebalancing process in this example appeared nearly effortless, in terms of how she stayed "in synch" with her changing daughter. She said she "didn't take it personally" when her daughter screamed. She **attributed** the behavior to the normal process of maturing, and perceived the incident as an expected, welcome step toward individuation, rather than an attack.

For Paul, a significant "apple-cart experience" did not evoke such an effortless response. The context that shaped Paul's **expectations** about this had to do with how he viewed himself (**individual characteristics**) as well as his pre-existing relationship with Susan. He described himself as a person who forms his own opinions and is not a "trend follower." He had heard from friends and family that he should beware of the teen years: "The biggest thing I kept hearing...was, 'She's going to stop talking to you,' and I thought, I find that hard to believe because we've always had such an open relationship, and that hasn't taken place." What did throw him off balance, however, was the peer influence of a particular friend, whom Paul described disparagingly:

She dressed like a ... I was calling her "ho-ho." She looked like she put on eyeliner with a whisk broom, and the hip hugger pants! Susan's attitude started going downhill. This girl treated her parents like shit, and some of that was starting to come back here.

Paul elaborated, saying he felt irritated when he drove his daughter and this friend to an activity and the friend's attitude seemed surly and disrespectful. He grew pensive as he discussed his initial, **affective** response to his daughter's change in behavior:

I don't know, there's just this fine line. I see my daughter all young and pure and cute, and I see all these other girls that are out there who just look like they don't care how they dress or act. I just don't want her in that block and I'll do everything I can to keep her out of that block. You know, you just can't keep them in there forever, and you try to fight the big battles and let the little ones go by the wayside. You have to pick and choose, that's for sure.

This particular apple-cart experience provoked a battle Paul was willing to fight, because Susan's friend appeared to be on the wrong side of the "fine line" Paul did not want his daughter to cross. His intentional choice of this incident was a **cognitive** strategy that guided his actions:

I basically sat her down one day and said, "She's pulling you along, and whether you realize it or not, you're starting to treat us differently. You're not going to treat us like that, there's no way." And finally we were on her hard enough that the relationship fell apart. They're not friends anymore.

In terms of **behavior**, he used the parenting practices of communication and monitoring to address what he saw as Susan's poor choice of friends. His response also reflected his perceived **influence** over his daughter, and a certain level of confidence in exercising that influence. I asked Paul and Janice where they would place their current level of influence in Susan's life on a 1 to 10 scale. Paul replied that he viewed it as a 7 or 8, and Janice chose 8. "I think for all of them, it's been there all along," Paul said. Janice drew a comparison of their parenting style with that of Paul's sister, whom they perceive as "overbearing." Janice echoed Paul's cognitive strategy of picking his battles when she observed, "Looking at (his sister) has made us a lot more cautious about just focusing on a few things and trying to let them express their individual opinions and pick their own clothes."

Both of the apple-cart experiences described here—involving relational incidents with the mother and a confrontation about peer influence with the father—illustrated how Paul and Janice led with cognitive strategies instead of their feelings. Another way to consider this theme is to look at what happens when one parent does respond reactively. Paul and Janice provided an example when they told me of a recent incident in which Susan lied to them. They have a longstanding family rule that no friends can be in the house unless a parent is present. A neighbor told Janice that he saw Susan let four older boys into the house for about half an hour after school one day. Janice recalled:

When I confronted her she lied through her teeth. “They didn’t come in.” But I know, I know. Sometimes knowing where the line is doesn’t mean they won’t just cross over it if they want to.... I was livid, because I thought, “She knows this rule, we’ve always had this rule, we talk about this.... Her thing was, she felt bad because it was cold outside. Well, boo-hoo. There were consequences for that, lots of consequences.

In this instance, Janice’s behavior seemed to be led by her feelings. She told Paul about the incident as soon as he walked in the door that evening. He picked up on his wife’s strong affect, and described what happened next by saying, “I yelled like I’ve never yelled before, and it really scared me. I didn’t really want to do that, but I just went off. It’s the Italian in me.” For Paul, this was a marked exception to his usual parenting practice, and he recalled it with a sense of astonishment and some embarrassment. Janice, in rethinking the incident, said she now believed, “I didn’t choose the right time and place to tell my husband.... In retrospect, I should have waited a day.”

In families where the rebalancing process leads to parental perceptions of a teen’s good judgment or enhanced maturity, it seemed as if they took a fairly smooth trajectory building gradually toward greater trust and gradual independence for the teen. In cases where the teen did not win the parents’ trust, such as Susan’s peer incident, the trajectory appeared to be in place but perhaps had more twists and turns in it. Parents like Paul and Janice seem to experience the rebalancing process as one that involves a return to stricter rules after a sequence in which more

leeway was granted, the parents had second thoughts, and the teen's behavior did not seem to warrant greater trust. Parents such as the Donohues may be pictured as taking a stairstep progression toward new levels of the teen's individuation and autonomy. The Lantos parents, in contrast, appeared to be experiencing a progression that more nearly resembled a game of "Chutes and Ladders," where steps up to a new level arrived unpredictably and progress may be undone unexpectedly.

Paul described a situation with his daughter that seemed to illustrate this phenomenon. Susan asked to be dropped off at a local shopping mall where several friends planned to meet. Paul and Janice agreed and took her there, then they began having second thoughts about this. Paul explained:

We really didn't check with the parent who was supposed to be bringing her back. And we found out there really wasn't a plan, that they were just going to call, so I went there looking for her. There were dozens of kids milling all over the place, and I'm like, "Never again." So that place is off limits.

One of the **individual characteristics** that made Paul an engaged parent ironically appeared to make the rebalancing process more difficult for him. He seemed to be unusually clear and direct about what he expected of his daughter and about how he dealt with any problem, whether at work or at home. "I'm a black and white kind of guy, everything's up front. If I've got a problem I want it out in the open." Because of this, Paul said, he recognized his own tendency to "just get in a mindset where you do things the same, over and over and over." Only when the teen pushed hard against Paul's entrenched pattern, Paul explained, did he realize the family had reached "the next level." He appeared to respond to this flexibly, pointing out, "They (teenagers) need to do that, to say 'treat me different'" to initiate change in the family. When Susan began pushing, then Paul said he realized he needed to "do something different (because) we're in a different place now." Practically, he said this meant putting Susan more "in charge" of taking responsibility and pointing out consequences that flow from poor choices. In the process of rebalancing, he indicated he and Janice both regulated their influence over their daughter, based on what she does. "Here's the consequence if you don't do what you're

supposed to do and fine, you're in charge of it," Paul said. "If you don't do it, then *we're going to have to step in* and give you some adult things to deal with."

Another key aspect of their rebalancing process involved identifying and accessing **support**. Both Paul and Janice relied on each other for support, and readily acknowledge this. This is a strength they have built since the early days of their marriage, when their children were young and Janice worked an evening shift for six years. "He experienced the full joys and sorrows of parenting," Janice said as they both laughed. "Yeah," agreed Paul, "I had little girls at a sleepover throwing up on me." Paul said this experience gave him a deep appreciation for Janice's role as a mother, and he observed that this is different from what he experienced in his **family of origin**:

I think one of the things that's changed since we were growing up is that through all this I was always there helping as well. It wasn't as if it was the wife's job and she did it all.

Janice agreed emphatically, and spoke of Paul's support with strong emotion:

I couldn't go on without that, I just couldn't. I look at single parents and I think, 'How can you do this? How hard is it?' Because we're each other's perspective a lot of the time. Depending on what's going on in other areas of your life, you may have no perspective at all, you just can't see the big picture, but you have someone else who can do that. Sometimes we talk about that, what it would be like to do it by ourselves, and I'm horrified.

The ways in which Paul and Janice supported each other by providing perspective appeared to be an important part of their rebalancing process. Paul observed that his wife "drags me over to the feelings side...and says 'Look at this, look at that.'" Similarly, Janice pointed out that when she feels uncomfortable or uncertain about agreeing to a request Susan has made, Paul will say "What's the big deal?" or "She can't grow up in a box."

Along with marital support, the Lantos family looks to outside resources as well. Janice usually volunteers to drive when Susan makes plans with friends, “so I can see what’s going on and meet other parents.” She commented on how encouraging it feels to her when she talks with other parents who are experiencing similar incidents with their children. These connections also make it easier for her to monitor Susan by checking up with other moms. Again, Janice led with her cognitive beliefs instead of her feelings, noting she feels that it is “uncomfortable” to check up on what’s going on in other households, but necessary. Janice also “networks” with Susan’s peers:

One thing I’ve tried to do is to do something with the oldest kid’s age group. It’s very easy to become intimidated by your child’s peers because you don’t really understand them or know what’s going on. It’s really hard to do at first, but if you make yourself do it...then it gets a little bit easier. You don’t ever want to let yourself become uncomfortable with your children’s peer group, because then you withdraw, and that’s bad.

In many aspect of their rebalancing process, it appeared that the context of **individual characteristics** of these parents, such as self-efficacy, confidence, and determination, shaped the family’s interactions. Paul and Janice seemed to express their expectations clearly and to share a detailed internal “portrait” of how they hope their daughter will turn out.

As they perceived and responded to “apple-cart experiences,” Paul and Janice **interpreted** (made sense of) what was happening in their family. One key marker of this meaning-making process for the Lantoses seemed to involve a **reorientation** toward the remaining time they have with Susan before she leaves home. Paul seemed deeply emotional as he described this reorientation:

If I could freeze them where they’re at, I mean agewise, right now is kind of the ideal time. They can all stay the age they’re at right now....They’re self-sufficient, they haven’t gotten their wings yet. In a year or two, once the driver’s

license comes, that's going to be the next stage, so if I could stop time, it would be right now.

Janice's reorientation reflected some rebalancing of earlier expectations. She pointed out that she and Paul always assumed Susan would go to college, and saved money for this purpose. "But I've had misgivings about that," Janice said. "What if it's not the right thing?" So Janice has assured her daughter of their support whether or not she goes to college. Janice's reorientation involved reconciling herself to not knowing what will happen, because she recognized that increasingly, as Susan matures, she will make her own choices.

How these parents **evaluated** themselves and their teen in the midst of this process seemed to add to the meaning they made of their life and family. Paul and Janice tend to take a pragmatic, one-step-at-a-time approach to their parenting choices—"we just deal with it as it comes up," Paul remarked. But rather than being haphazard or inconsistent, the Lantos's approach seemed to be just the opposite because it was grounded in a context of parental efficacy, a strong pre-existing parent-child relationship, and family of origin values. These factors help explain why Paul reacted so angrily when his daughter broke a longstanding rule about having friends inside when no parent is home. Even though his reaction was a departure from his usual style (dominated by thinking not feeling), he construed the outcome positively:

It's over, we've dealt with it, let's move on. I think in retrospect we did the right thing, brought everything out in the open, let her know where we were at and what we expected of her.

Paul also said he recognized that his reactivity was triggered not just by what Susan did—and lied about—but also by sociocultural realities that require more of him as a parent, compared to his own parents. "Things have changed so much," Paul commented. "They know so much more than we did at their age." When I asked him for an example, Paul said "Sex, sex is the first one." With reference to several "apple-cart experiences," Paul spoke with deep emotional intensity about how this affected him, and it was in this context that he wished they could live in a simpler place, like "Kansas," where kids could have more freedom:

I hate it just because of what I call ‘stalking,’ we have to stalk them every minute, where they are, what they’re doing, and I get tired of it, I don’t feel I should have to do it.

Janice’s evaluation of their parenting emphasized a sense of balance between confidence and realism, and her assessment of their “work in progress” was also pragmatic:

We’re confident because what we did worked. We might not be feeling that way if it didn’t work, and for another kid it might not have worked. We’re fortunate, and I don’t really know why, in some respects, why what we did worked because those very things we did would make another kid run away. You’re never at a point where you can pat yourself on the back because it could all go down the toilet next week.

Realism, intentional parenting, and being centered in the present seemed to comprise the **frame** in which these parents understood themselves in terms of a bigger picture. Janice commented:

I think it’s real important to just keep your eyes open. I’m so afraid of just being complacent and thinking everything’s okay. You see parents sometimes who just see what they want to see, and I don’t want to be like that. I want to see what’s there and go with what I have. I don’t want to create some sort of fantasy where I think I am and it’s just a joke because I’m not. I at least want to be living in the present.

The **frame** that Paul suggested echoed the generous attribution process described earlier, in which parents take credit for good outcomes and also credit their children for those good outcomes. Paul spoke about family routines that were valued in his family of origin and that are central to the Lantos family today, including a regular dinner hour at which they all sit down together, as well as regular church attendance and participation. In this context, Paul framed his

sense of the experience of parenting an adolescent confidently, by saying, “You give them the tools to work with, and if they’re good enough tools, they’ll use them.”

Case Study: Maria Grant

Maria Grant is a single mother living in a small, single family house near the city. The house was sparsely furnished—there was no dining room table, for example, just a small wooden table in the kitchen. Maria’s walls were covered with framed family photographs and wall hangings showing the importance of her Catholic faith. She introduced me to her 13-year-old son, Aaron, who was watching television. He is attractive, with curly dark hair and a friendly smile. Maria and I sat at her kitchen table, and she apologized for the clutter perfunctorily, indicating that being neat was not her top priority.

Of all the parents I interviewed, Maria is the youngest, at age 33. She earns less than half the other families in the study, listing her annual income as between \$20,000 and \$40,000. In May 1998, she graduated with her bachelor’s degree from a local college and beamed with pride about this achievement and the promotion it earned her at her corporate accounting job. Maria grew up in the United States after her parents moved here from Costa Rica. Conveying more of her Hispanic culture to Aaron is a goal of Maria’s, but she said it is difficult to do so because they both feel thoroughly “Americanized.”

Like other parents in this study, Maria seemed deeply engaged in her role as a mother and closely connected to her son. She shared some of her worries and difficulties openly, but rarely showed strong emotion, in contrast to the mothers of daughters. Maria participated in my second focus group, where she seemed reticent to speak unless I asked her a question directly. In our home interview, she opened up more comfortably and expressed curiosity about both my focus groups—something no other parent displayed any interest in. On her family information form, completed before the focus group session, she indicated she chose to participate “in order to evaluate where I stand in relation to others in raising an adolescent.” I asked how that evaluation turned out, and she said being in the group made her feel as if she’s on the right track. She expressed appreciation for the opportunity and indicated her response to a newspaper ad about the group was consistent with her personality trait of wanting to interact with different people.

I enjoyed my two hours with Maria. For a busy mom she seemed relaxed and unhurried as we talked. Maria contributed unique data to this study because of her single status, her ethnic roots, and the financial challenges she faces. Perhaps the most striking aspect of my interview with her involved the theme of sacrifice, mentioned in the Core Categories section under Current Family Context. To varying degrees, all the parents I interviewed at home and in the focus groups spoke of ways in which they have made sacrifices in order to be available to their children or to fulfill their own goals as parents. For some, this meant less time to invest in their marital relationship; for others, it involved career decisions that they viewed as compromises, such as lower pay or part-time instead of full-time work. For Maria, the concept of “sacrifice” was different. Rather than being a choice to enhance her parenting, sacrifice for Maria meant being reconciled to a number of hard realities in terms of balancing between her needs and her son’s needs. She has sacrificed opportunities to date and meet a potential marriage partner, because she felt it was unfair to leave Aaron alone beyond her work and class hours. Financial sacrifice in this family is pronounced, due to Maria’s choice to send Aaron to private, Catholic schools even though her income is modest.

Even in these more pronounced circumstances, however, the theme of sacrifice did not necessarily connote hardship or severe stress. On the contrary, Maria, and other parents who discussed this theme, construed it as a mark of their own resilience and an indication they were putting the interests of their children first.

Summary of Findings

For Maria and Aaron, a close, connected relationship built throughout his childhood appeared to be continuing into his early teens. At the time of this interview, Aaron was about to enter high school (ninth grade). As she anticipated this new experience, Maria said she had made an effort to discuss physical changes that Aaron probably will begin noticing in the next few years. In this context, the **apple-cart experience** that told Maria she had entered new territory occurred one day when she came home and found that Aaron had shaved for the first time. She recalled:

He looked a little different, and I said, ‘Did you take a bath?’ And it turned out he had shaved off his little mustache. And that was a real big thing for him. I was a little upset, because I didn’t help him with it, you know, I came home and he had done it.

Maria’s “upset” brought an initial **response** of feeling left out, and at least momentarily wishing things were back the way they had been before he shaved. Several aspects of the Grant family’s **context** informed this apple-cart experience. Maria is the youngest girl in a family of four sisters and no brothers, so her **family of origin** experiences do not provide much information about raising a son. Also, gender roles were strictly defined and adhered to as Maria matured. She recalled her older sisters trying on mini-skirts, and her father “taking a tape measure and saying, ‘they’re too short.’” He enforced strict rules about dating, not allowing boys to call and making his daughters wait until they were 16 or 17 before they could go out.

Maria was divorced from Aaron’s father when Aaron was a toddler, so her **current context** involved “just the two of us.” She said she regretted the lack of “male influence” in Aaron’s life, and compensated for this by building relationships with co-workers and staying closely connected to her father, her sisters, and their families. Because Maria grew up in a family with culturally defined gender roles and no brothers, she is acutely aware of gender differences in her parenting. She said she has made a particular effort, outside her comfort zone, to discuss physical changes with Aaron and prepare him for puberty.

With these contextual factors in mind, it did not seem surprising that the time Aaron shaved on his own was a “real big thing” for both of them. After Maria’s careful efforts to stay in synch with her son in terms of discussing physical changes, she had an **affective** reaction (“a little upset”) to the shaving incident. The incident seemed to convey a message about teen development (that Aaron had reached a certain marker of maturity), and also a message about interacting with his mother (that he did not need her to help him as he did in the past).

Maria's **behavior** in this instance seemed to resemble that of other parents in this study because it occurred more on the basis of thinking rather than feeling. Instead of expressing her "upset" to Aaron, or being angry with him, she asked him questions out of curiosity:

So I said, "Since I wasn't able to show you, let me ask you, what did you do and how did you know what to do?" And he said he remembered my dad, his grandfather, shaving. And I said, "Were you scared?" and he said "a little." He said it took him half an hour. So now he does it pretty quickly whenever he wants to—trying out new things, I think, before school starts.

In this exchange, even though Aaron seemed to push his mother away with one hand (by shaving when she wasn't home), he embraced his family ties with the other by recalling Maria's father and his good memories of that relationship. This seemed to mean a lot to Maria, who spoke thoughtfully about the "presence" Aaron gained from being with his grandfather, who is now in his late 80s and in poor health. Maria said that when she and Aaron talk about the grandfather, Aaron will mention "certain things about the way his eyebrows were or his voice, the way he did one thing or another." This grandfather seemed to serve as an important source of **support** for Maria and male influence for Aaron.

Maria's **cognitive** response to the shaving episode also seemed to reflect generous **attributions**. She did not take it personally when he made a bid for individuation, nor did she view it as an affront that he left her out. Instead, she normalized it and attributed it to one of several examples of how he is "trying new things" in anticipation of high school.

Maria characterized Aaron's impending move into high school as another "real big thing." Again, Maria overruled an emotional response with a cognitive one. When I conducted the interview, Aaron was two months away from starting high school—his first school transition since he and Maria moved here when he entered fourth grade. Maria's concern about high school had her wishing she could drive him to school the first day and walk him to class, just as she did in elementary school. Even as she described this sense of yearning to "put things back

the way they were,” she laughed at the idea. “I’m sure he wouldn’t go for it,” she said, “so I’ve put it out of my mind.”

Aaron’s academic achievement was a major **concern** of Maria’s, and a key area in which her rebalancing process has played out. This seemed to occur in a context of clear parental **expectations** and goals, as well as a close, connected relationship. Maria defined her hopes for Aaron quite specifically:

Well, I’m hoping he’s going to stick his nose in his books, definitely. I’ve been thinking about that, because he definitely wants to try out for football.... I’m hoping that he will keep up with his assignments and pay attention, get everything right.... I really see him maturing and being responsible, and I hope that’s the way it turns out.

At the focus group session she attended, Maria spelled out similar **expectations** in terms of her son’s “motivation.” When asked what it would mean to her if he were motivated, she said with deep feeling, “It would mean I could start breathing again.” This was a concern for her, because in sixth and seventh grades, Aaron occasionally let his grades slide and then worked hard when teachers got after him. “He has the potential and the ability,” Maria remarked, “but sometimes he just says ‘why’ or doesn’t feel like doing it.”

Maria said she believed school success was important and felt strongly about her son’s efforts toward it. She explained how she acted on her feelings and beliefs:

The first couple years, sixth and seventh grades, I would say “You can’t do this, you can’t do that.” The last year, eighth grade, I said, “It’s an important year, it’s up to you.” So he let one of his grades go down pretty low. And I said, “You know what? It’s up to you to fix it, and if you can’t get into (Catholic) high school, don’t come crying to me.” I think he now sees his potential; he sees himself differently now, I think, as to what his abilities are, what he feels, what he thinks. He knows he’s changing.

Maria used a range of **parenting practices** here, including enforcing rules, communication, and adapting rules in ways that reinforced her son's emerging independence ("it's up to you") while increasing her own empathy and regard for him. Minor conflict over grades thus appeared to occur in a context of balanced family cohesion and adaptability.

Interactions involving school expectations also reflected Maria's perceived **influence** over her son. On a 1 to 10 scale, she placed her influence at a 7 or 8, saying "I wouldn't say that I control him, but I would say I have a strong influence on him.... I'm not suffocating him, but he knows that what I say goes." Maria observed that Aaron "seems to block it out a bit more" now that he is going to high school. She noticed this, she said, in his body language (turning his head away), when he ignored her, and when he used a sarcastic tone ("Yeah, yeah") to respond to her. Even though he blocked her out at times, Maria said, "I still worm my way in if I feel it's real important.... I just keep at it." When telling him did not seem to work, then Maria still used consequences such as restricting television time or video games. She said the best incentive she found involved sports team practice:

You don't behave, you don't do your homework, whatever, you don't go to sports. And if you don't show up for practice, that means you don't get to play the game.

As a single parent of an opposite-gender child, Maria also brought to this process several intentional ways of identifying and accessing **support**. She did this primarily through her extended family. Even though she lives far away from her parents and sisters, she has consistently built ties with them so that Aaron feels closely connected to relatives. Similarly, Maria described in detail how her sisters sponsor Aaron for various school and sports projects, and how Aaron calls, writes to them, and sends them faxes regularly. Also, Maria has built relationships with male co-workers who can sit down with Aaron and "talk about sports or whatever comes to his mind." Maria's participation in a focus group session, she said, was motivated by her desire to interact with other parents and to see how she measured up.

The ways in which Maria described her experiences with an adolescent son seemed to point toward a number of relevant contextual factors. Among her **individual characteristics**, Maria appeared to have a high level of efficacy, believing she can do what she intends to do as a parent. Efficacy seemed evident in other domains of her life as well, such as adjusting to her divorce as a young woman. “For us it’s been pretty rugged,” Maria noted, but she did not dwell on this aspect of her family narrative. Instead, she expressed gratitude for her parents, who let her and Aaron move in with them until she was prepared to live independently. Similarly, Maria had struggled with financial difficulties but seemed almost to shrug them off, particularly as they affect her relationship to Aaron:

It’s hard because you want to be able to give them everything you had and more, but you can only give them so much, so you can’t beat yourself over the head. You know that you’re trying and you’re doing good, and that’s what we’ve got. ...I try to tell him, we have what we have, and there’s nothing wrong with it.

She then said “things are looking better for both of us” now that she has completed her undergraduate degree and is working in a career-track job.

Another important part of the context involves the relationship she and Aaron developed when he was younger. Again, instead of blaming difficult circumstances for making her life miserable, Maria displayed resilience and optimism:

The struggles we had when he was younger, I think that kind of helped us build a ...supportive relationship, where he needs to be cooperative in order to help me, and that in order for me to help him, I need to give him the time I have.

Aaron had to learn to exercise personal responsibility early on, while his mother attended college classes at night. Even though Aaron was in elementary school at the time, Maria left him home alone because she could not afford to pay a sitter. A “bottom line” for Maria and Aaron was that “he’s had to be responsible for his behavior when he’s home alone.”

The salience of Maria's work role is noteworthy, particularly in comparison with other mothers in this study, because for her it was a matter of survival. Moving up the ladder at her job, and being promoted for earning her college degree, seemed to reinforce Maria's self-esteem and improve her self-perception. Maria said it seemed there was "a light at the end of the tunnel," referring to her hope that she and her son will have a better future because of the career opportunity she gained.

In the process of perceiving and responding to adolescent changes in Aaron, Maria also **interpreted** this transition as a coherent part of a bigger picture. Ways in which she **reoriented** to the future and **evaluated** herself seemed particularly vivid:

I guess I just never realized we'd be here. He's always been "little Aaron," and now he's going off to high school. That means I'm getting older. It's making me enter a different phase in my life. ... It feels—already I can feel the emptiness, and I feel relieved, well, not relieved but glad that, okay, I've done my duty and now I can go live my life that I haven't lived before. ... I love being in school, so I could be one of those lifetime college students. ... And dating, because there's more to life than just being a mom, definitely.

Maria's approach to the transition to adolescence seemed balanced by positive experiences at work and a focus on interests other than parenting. Perhaps to a greater extent than other parents in this study, her reorientation to the future appeared equally focused on herself and her son, rather than being focused primarily on Aaron. Maria made profound sacrifices in the course of raising Aaron, and she appeared to construe meaning from those sacrifices both in terms of how he is turning out and what she now feels entitled to pursue as an individual. On the subject of dating, for example, she pointed out:

I think I would have felt bad if I got into a relationship that didn't work out, and put him through that. I think I'm doing all right. I'm still young enough to...go out and meet people.

Thoughts about her own hopes related to dating led Maria to evaluate her son in terms of his own dating interests, and to reorient toward a different future relationship in which she anticipates taking a back seat to Aaron's partner:

I wonder what kind of mother am I going to be? I'll be glad when he does go (on a date). (I'll) make sure he knows how to open doors and treat his friend nice, whoever he goes out with. I'll remind him that he has to treat them nice all the way around, he can't just go out with them and dump them. We've spoken briefly about that. ... I do hope he participates in all the proms, homecoming dances, stuff like that, even if it's just with a friend, not necessarily a girlfriend. And I've thought about, what's it going to be like if he gets serious about someone? I don't know what I'm going to do. I would probably want to tell him, "Do this and do that," but you can't. I would hope that he would come to me if he has questions. Who knows?

As Maria spoke about this, it seemed as if she were giving herself a pep talk about how she wants things to go, and almost rehearsing an anticipated role that would seem to call for additional "rebalancing."

Finally, the **frame** in which Maria made sense of her son's transition to adolescence seemed to emerge out of the continuity of her connected relationship with him as well as her response to apple-cart experiences, which so far do not appear to have thrown her very far off center. Because she is a single mom, Maria said she's frequently wondered what life would have been like without Aaron. Her conclusion illuminated both her regard for him and the positive frame at the core of her experience as a mother:

I think about it sometimes, because I am a single parent. I think, "If I didn't have him, what would my life be like? And I can't imagine what it would be like without him. It's been great. He's a good kid, that's what makes it enjoyable.

Case Study: Stan and Rebecca Phelps

This couple welcomed me to their home on a weekend afternoon when both their sons, ages 14 and 8, were at the community swimming pool. Stan and Rebecca were the oldest participants in this study, both in their late 40s. They have been married for 24 years and they both work full time, earning more than \$80,000 per year. Rebecca is a director of development for a small local college, and Stan is a lawyer with the government.

Prominent in their living room are framed portraits of their two sons, Zach and Josh. Both appeared to be very attractive boys, with engaging smiles and friendly faces. Both parents seemed strongly connected with their sons, and held them in high regard. At one point during our two-hour interview, Rebecca motioned toward the portraits and said of her older son, “he’s a really beautiful child.” She went on to explain how her parenting was sometimes affected by this: “He’s got this really angelic face, these killer eyes, and I think it’s hard to really clamp down on a kid who’s so beautiful looking.”

Rebecca and the two boys are active in a local Jewish temple, and Zach’s bar mitzvah one year ago served as a marker for this family of when the transition to adolescence began. It also appeared to anchor them in a community and a legacy of faith that is meaningful to all of them. Stan grew up in a Protestant home, and said he attends temple services occasionally.

Stan and Rebecca resembled the other married couples I interviewed in terms of sharing a seemingly equal commitment to parenting and shared power in their relationship. They mentioned seeking therapy for marital issues in the past, and said some of those stresses still affect their lives. They did not want to elaborate on this, preferring to keep the focus on their experience as parents.

To perhaps a greater extent than other parents in the study, Stan and Rebecca articulated a detailed set of goals for their oldest son. As they did so, it seemed less like a projection (e.g., living their lives through their son) and more like an indication of their connectedness to him and their appreciation of his uniqueness. When asked about goals for her son, Rebecca said:

For me at this point, it's to try to get him to push himself and really test himself. One of the issues is that he really likes to stay in his comfort zone. ... Also to learn to take disappointment and to keep moving, and to be just a good, thinking, contributing member of our society. I also want him to understand that there are just so many opportunities out there, and I'd like him to see what's out there and be a little bit more adventurous.

Stan framed his goals for Zach in terms of how Zach might one day look back on his parents. He said:

I would like for him to think that we helped him become a balanced person who was intellectually curious, who was compassionate, looked for the positive instead of the negative.

Neither Stan nor Rebecca participated in a focus group, so when I went to their home I had to review the consent and information forms as well as introduce myself and my topic. I felt as if they were slightly more reserved than the other couples I interviewed at home. Stan, in particular, held back from speaking at the beginning of our interview and then opened up later. Even so, I felt welcomed and comfortable in their home, and I experienced our dialogue as being open and reflective.

Summary of Findings

When Zach turned 13, according to his parents, he showed a keen interest in girls and dating, and this precipitated an **apple-cart experience** for Stan and Rebecca. Rebecca described what this was like:

The phone, all of a sudden in 7th grade, started ringing off the hook. Mostly it's girls, it's boys too. He's always been a well-adjusted, friendly sort of kid, he likes his friends, he's always had good social skills, but it's just reached a whole new level.

Rebecca said Zach began spending a lot more time with friends and asking to go on movie dates. At the same time, Rebecca said, “his grades really took a dive.” Partly, she said, the poor grades may have resulted from a whole-family let down after his bar mitzvah, which was a big event requiring a lot of energy. She also saw the low grades as being directly related to Zach’s new social interests. Rebecca and Stan’s initial **response** seemed to be moderated by two aspects of their **family context**: what Rebecca recalled from her **life as a teenager**, and what they both **expected**. Rebecca said this change in her son took her completely by surprise:

I’ve been struggling with where he is. I just expected this at 15. I thought that we would see this more in ninth grade. All of this stuff seems like ninth grade stuff, and maybe it’s because he’s where I felt I was at ninth grade.

Stan’s initial response involved feeling thrown off balance as well, even though he claimed his son’s changes were basically in line with what he expected:

We had our kids a little later on, so a lot of people our age have kids that are already in high school. So just talking about being parents and what it’s like to have teenagers, they said “Get ready, here it comes.” But I did not feel I was ready for that suddenness. It may not have been what was going on at all, but it was how it felt.

Another contextual element involved Stan and Rebecca’s pre-existing relationship with Zach, and what he was like as a younger boy. They both recalled Zach as a “compliant” child who had a very close relationship with both of them, and especially with his father. Also, he had been a consistent A-B student in school, and the report card that came home after he turned 13 had three Cs on it. “He just does not make Cs,” Rebecca said. The upset of the apple-cart experience made her want to put things back the way they were in terms of holding him to academic standards they knew he could achieve, and finding an appropriate balance between maintaining closeness with him and allowing more independence by letting him spend time with peers. Stan approached the upset apple cart from the basis of a belief:

I think if you have a good relationship with them, and you've had a good relationship with your kids up to that point, I think chances are that good relationship is going to continue. It may be more challenging, but...it doesn't have to be horrible. I just think it's going to be different and more complex.

Rebecca experienced an **affective** response, which she described as “rumblings of concern.” Both she and Stan, she said, “are actively struggling with how to parent him during this transition. We're talking a lot about it.” As she defined herself as concerned and struggling, however, Rebecca did not appear to be as intensely focused on her relationship with her son, compared with the mothers of daughters in this study who used vivid images to express their worry and concern. As both parents responded to their son's changes, their behavioral response featured a range of **parenting practices** including communication (with regard to social changes) and monitoring (in terms of school work). Similar to other parents I interviewed, Stan and Rebecca's actions appeared to be guided more by the ways they thought about the changes they perceived than by emotional reactivity.

Rebecca made it a point to have “frank conversations” with Zach about what she saw him doing socially. She recalled telling him:

“Zach, I'm really concerned about this focus on girls. I'm not going to tell you that you can't get on the phone, I'm happy you're social, but it's the wrong direction, it's too early. I'm concerned about it escalating. ... I don't know where you're heading with girls, and I don't think you're there yet, but I just want to say right now I don't want to see you escalating into sex at this point.”

When they had this conversation, Rebecca recalled that Zach “didn't really look at me.” She said she **interpreted** this as meaning that he felt uncomfortable with his mother speaking so openly to him. It did not feel comfortable to her either, but cognitively she thought it was the right time to raise the issue and get it out in the open. An element of **context** is suggested here, in terms of efficacy, or the sense that a parent is capable of accomplishing certain goals. Her use

of communication as a way to influence Zach came from a “strong respect for our kids,” she said, adding, “I think it just comes from who we are as people.”

Rebecca also seemed self-reflective about how to rebalance a changing relationship with her son:

We are really close with him in some ways, and we have to work to pull back a little bit from him. We tend to be really involved in our kids’ activities, sort of watching them really closely. A lot of our energy has been directed toward them. I think one of the things I’ve been talking to my husband about, and I’ve been meaning to do, is back off, give him more space.

The context for this thought process is related to Rebecca’s family of origin, which she described as being “on the other end of the continuum.” She recalled her parents as being disengaged, or as Rebecca put it, “not tuned in at all.”

Stan’s behavior in response to Zach’s sudden interest in peer affiliation took a similar track. One evening when Rebecca was out of town, Stan took Zach to a pizza restaurant in a local mall where Zach likes to go to the movies with friends. Stan did this hoping to talk with Zach alone, because, he said, “When they’re a certain age you take your chances to have a conversation, a real conversation, when you get it, other than a one-word answer.” As they arrived, four girls from Zach’s school came up and greeted him. When Stan and Zach were alone in the restaurant, Stan used the encounter to explore (communication) his son’s emerging feelings about peers and choices. He asked Zach questions about the girls, and Zach said they hang out at the mall almost every day, from the time school ends until the stores close. Stan reported a strong affective reaction to this (“Give me a break! Where are the parents?”), but he kept this to himself. Instead, he used questions to draw his son out. He asked:

“Does the fact that we encourage you to go do things, be involved in soccer, mean you prefer doing activities to hanging out in the mall?” And he said, absolutely. So it told me that he has already made some value judgments about what’s a good

thing for him to be doing versus something that's pretty lame and unproductive. ... I felt, wow, maybe there's a connection here, maybe we're getting through to this kid.

Like other parents, Stan **attributed** his son's good choice in this instance to an internal trait (the ability to make value judgments) and to the **parenting practice** of building connectedness and encouraging him to get involved in activities. Stan elaborated on what he believes about the importance of teens staying active:

I just think the more things you expose them to, the more activities you get them involved with, you're going to find a couple things hopefully that they will spark to. Even though it might seem like you're loading them up, considering the alternative, I don't think there's much of a choice when you get right down to it.

Stan framed this belief in the **context** of how times have changed since he was young:

I think it's a way more dangerous world now than it was 20, 25, 30 years ago, no doubt.... I think there are so many people out there who have very little concern for other people other than preying on them. I remember when I was a kid we used to leave, get on our bikes on a Saturday morning and take off and be gone all day.... That's just not all that possible today.

The second aspect of the Phelps' "apple-cart experience" involved Zach's plummeting grades. In response to this, Stan and Rebecca acted together to monitor the situation and enforce rules. They detected that something might be wrong at school because Zach kept telling them, "I have no homework," but they did not believe him. The two of them visited the school and met with his teachers, and they discovered that Zach was in detention for poor grades and had not brought his report card home. "It was a complete eye-opener for us," Rebecca noted. "That is very different behavior for him." This seemed to illustrate the family's cohesion, because the parents were attentive to signals from their son that something was wrong, even when he protested that there was not. They responded by restricting his social activities and talking with

him about what it would take to get him more focused on school work. In this process, they appear to empathize with their son. Rebecca observed:

I knew he felt terrible about it; he said it and I could just tell. Then he sort of got on the stick. ... There's still an element of that, we're still having to tussle with him.

Stan and Rebecca also discussed between themselves whether to put Zach in a different school, and they threatened him with this possibility. So far, they said, he seems more motivated so they are not planning to carry out this threat. For Stan, one aspect of this process was to re-evaluate his parenting practices and adapt them. For most of the other families in this study, the adaptation process with regard to rules and discipline generally moved in the direction of greater permissiveness as the teen matured. In this case, however, the process went in the other direction. Stan explained:

The thing about it is, we really haven't had to set boundaries on him because he limited himself, he had a pretty good sense of how far he could go and he would rarely go any further. Now I think we're having to start setting a lot more boundaries.

Rebecca processed the school incident cognitively by making **attributions** about her son's behavior. Similar to other parents, she assigned transient, external causes to her son's areas of difficulty. For example, she pointed out that he just missed the testing cut-off for the public school's "gifted and talented" program, and most of his friends had been accepted. "I think it's been pretty upsetting to him," she said, "something he has laid on himself; it's hurt his self-concept." Further, Rebecca pointed out that after Zach's bar mitzvah, "all of us kind of took a dive." Because his drop in grades coincided with this, she chalked it up partly to the family's shared sense of let-down. Rebecca also credited marital stress for making herself and her husband less attentive to Zach's school work around the time of the bar mitzvah.

Marital adjustment was an important contextual factor for this couple, but in a way that seemed to differ from other couples interviewed at home. The others did not mention marital difficulties and had not sought therapy for themselves; most of them appeared closely connected in terms of finding time for themselves as a couple. In contrast, Stan and Rebecca seemed strongly connected around parenting, but less so with one another. Stan explained how having a new adolescent contributed to their marital strain and how they believe they have sacrificed marital closeness. Both of them agreed that a rebalancing process with their adolescent meant less time for themselves. Stan observed, “It’s a need we both feel. It’s been sort of unmet for some period of time.” Rebecca added:

It actually has felt more acute with all this stuff going on, it’s almost like it’s harder if you don’t take the time out now. It just feels worse. ... Ultimately we need to get away by ourselves on a weekend. I have friends who do that all the time, and I’m mad at them all the time because I feel like they’re neglecting their kids, but I feel like we’re neglecting ourselves.

Despite their acknowledged challenges in the area of marital satisfaction, Stan and Rebecca showed evidence of mutual appreciation in terms of providing balance for one another, similar to other couples in this study. Rebecca pointed out that she has a tendency to “overimpugn things,” meaning that she reads too much into variations in Zach’s behavior, making interpretations that are not always warranted. She credited Stan for balancing this tendency and helping her realize that “somewhere in the middle is the truth.”

Stan and Rebecca seemed to **interpret** this transitional time in their lives by reorienting toward the reality of Zach leaving home in a few more years and what this will mean to her. As she spoke about this, her deep feelings for her son and close attachment to him were evident. Rebecca seemed energized by imagining what she will do differently, now that she is focused on how few years remain for her son to live at home:

The feelings I’m feeling the most are, I can really see him leaving to go off. It’s really come up to me this year. My own feelings are that I ...have dropped a lot

of other activities to try to spend more time and focus on him, because I feel I've got a really short amount of time left to continue to influence him and to keep his motivation up, keep him directed. I kind of worry, because I tend to be a worrier, ...that there's a whole new range of things I need to keep him focused on, that I need to provide for him, and I worry that I don't know exactly what that is or how to do it.

Rebecca said she planned to act on this sense of reorientation by introducing Zach to friends in various workplace settings, so he can consider career choices and plan for college. When Stan discussed his reorientation to the future, he spoke in terms that seemed to reframe the "apple-cart experience" of Zach's drop in grades. Stan's reorientation gave him a different perspective on Zach's school difficulties, which he described as a temporary detour, "a bump in the road." In light of what he views as Zach's potential, Stan said, he used the occasion of Zach's drop in grades to impress on his son that grades matter, in terms of future choices. Stan noted, "I want (Zach) to think, and I think Rebecca agrees, that going to a top college and getting scholarships is not outside the realm of possibility for him."

For Stan in particular, motivating his son to achieve appeared to mean a lot to him because it represents **family of origin** influences. He is making a conscious choice to do things differently than his parents did:

What I'm thinking of in this regard is helping him to avoid some of the mistakes I made in terms of just not putting forth the kind of effort that really gets the job done. ...If I'd had a little more guidance when I was going into high school, in a good way as opposed to the classic parental, "You will do this," which I rebelled a lot about. I'm trying to figure out how to challenge him, motivate him, without stimulating a rebellion. ... My parents had a lot of expectations for me, I was expected to go on to college. They laid out the expectations but didn't do a whole heck of a lot to provide me the tools I could have used at a certain point.

For Stan, this aspect of rebalancing seemed to have a direct bearing on how he evaluated himself as a father. He spelled out a goal for himself in relation to Zach, through his son's high school years and into college: to guide him in such a way that he does not feel limited in "anything he wanted to do, whether it's physical or intellectual or moral. That all things are possible. If he feels that way, then I'll feel that I was a good dad to him." Being able to make a positive **self-evaluation** of this sort, based on Zach's future choices and direction, appeared to mean a lot to Stan.

For Rebecca, the reorientation she is experiencing also **frames** her sense of herself as a parent. She observed that it represents an opportunity to change her relationships, both with her two sons and her husband. It is also, she said, an opportunity to consider what aspects of the family an adolescent will choose to keep and incorporate into his or her life: "It's time to start thinking about another part of your legacy to your child."

Case Study: John and Carol Atkinson

When I visited the Atkinson's home, their 14-year-old daughter, Melissa, was vacationing with a friend's family for one week. During the course of our two-hour interview, the phone rang three times with calls for Melissa. John and Carol took turns answering it, and they joked about putting a message on their answering machine about Melissa's absence. They made it clear their daughter routinely receives more calls than the two of them combined.

The Atkinsons have a 10-year-old son, Dan, who was at home during the interview. Part of the reason they were interested in participating, they noted on their family information form, was "to gain more insight into our transition to adolescence" because their son is only a couple years away from it. They did not participate in a focus group, but I sent them my interview questions in advance. They are both in their mid-40s and have been married for 19 years. Their income is more than \$80,000 per year.

During the interview, Carol was warm, lively, and eager to discuss her views and experiences. Her demeanor seemed intense to me, and her responses appeared to be "all over the map" emotionally, ranging from despondency about certain behaviors of her daughter, to confusion about parenting, to elation and enthusiasm for her role as a mother. She resembled the other mother of a daughter I interviewed at home, more so than the mothers of sons. She is the study participant who used the "apple-cart" phrase that defines my first core category, and she used many other vivid images in her answers.

John was quiet at first, but when he answered he tended to speak at some length. He was particularly interested in discussing what he values in life apart from his employment, as a personnel manager for a large high-tech firm. He said he viewed his job as a "means to an end," while his participation in Boy Scouts and as a soccer coach brought him lasting meaning and satisfaction.

The Atkinsons resembled the other married parents in this study in terms of marital dynamics and family cohesion. They agreed that they balance one another in terms of their

parenting styles, and they seemed to appreciate the different qualities each one brings to the family. John and Carol both characterized Carol as the front-line parent—the one who is at home the most and deals with day-to-day issues of discipline and rules. Because of this, and because of Carol’s intensity, she reported that she and Melissa “lock horns” frequently. John, in contrast, is seen by both of them as a “peacemaker” who gets between mother and daughter and resolves conflict.

Evidence of cohesion, or the extent to which the Atkinson parents display connectedness to each other and to their children, seemed abundant in this family as it was in all my study participants. Carol and John readily identified their hopes and dreams for their daughter, and both of them expressed avid appreciation for particular traits they see in Melissa, such as her sociability. These parents made a choice to have Carol stay home for several years with her young children. She returned to school for a master’s degree just before her son was born, and she currently works part time in a job unrelated to her training. She said she had “made her peace” with her current sacrifice of a career path.

My interview with the Atkinsons seemed to fly by very quickly, and I found myself wishing I could have more time to talk with them. They would have made a good addition to either focus group. Finding out about the processes in their family at this time of change seemed to offer a realistic and detailed glimpse into what parents experience in a “normal” transition to adolescence.

Summary of Findings

For the Atkinsons, a particular **apple-cart experience** seemed to illustrate how the rebalancing process began to unfold for them. The incident coincided with Melissa’s transition into middle school, when she began sixth grade. Toward the end of that school year, she asked to go to a rock concert with several new friends. Carol recalled:

She was always one step ahead of me, in terms of things she wanted to do. ... She claimed that some friend was getting tickets. And I said “No way! No way are you even

thinking of going—you're only 12!" It seems like that began it. Always one step ahead. A world had opened up with hundreds of new friends.

It was this incident, Carol said, that caused her to feel "like the apple cart has been upset and you're trying to put things back the way they were." Seeing her young daughter advance socially before Carol expected it felt "awful," she said, because her initial **response** was a sense of not knowing what to do next. As Carol described it, her response—perhaps more so than other parents in this study—involved almost desperately wanting to put the "apples" back in the upset cart, or to restore family interactions to the way they were before Melissa entered sixth grade. So Carol dug in her heels: "I'm pretty stubborn," Carol commented, "and I wasn't picking battles." When an idea like the rock concert came up, Melissa would first approach Carol with her request, and then, according to Carol, "the battle would ensue." When John came home from work, he would see the two of them fighting, and "step in to mollify," Carol said.

John described how he viewed this apple-cart experience from a different perspective, seeing it as a fairly typical example of how he believed young teens "feed off of each other." He saw it as a pattern of behavior in which teens come up with ideas, such as attending a concert, and then tell one set of parents the idea has been approved by a friend's parents. John remarked:

It's sort of devious, but often successful in getting a bit more independence, and gradually, I think, that's how we get used to allowing a bit more independence as time goes on.

For Carol, it seemed as if the apple-cart experience evoked a strong **affective** response marked by uncertainty as well as worry and concern. John appeared to take a less emotionally intense view of this event as the kick-off of a normal process. Their complementary ways of experiencing and perceiving an apple-cart event reflected certain aspects of **context** that appeared to inform this incident. Both of them recognized that their **expectations** of Melissa, and of adolescence in general, were shaped by the **past family context** of what they were like as teens. Carol described herself as a "goody-two-shoes" when she was a girl, meaning she tried very hard to behave and to do everything perfectly. Carol attributed some of her strong affective

reaction to her view that when she was young, she would never have taken risks like Melissa does. Referring to another incident with Melissa, in which she asked to go white-water rafting with friends, Carol said, “I admire her courage.... You wouldn’t catch me dead doing that. She definitely has an adventurous spirit.”

Individual characteristics and **family of origin** influences also appeared to significantly shape Carol’s parenting context. Describing herself as a “recovering perfectionist,” Carol referred to “tapes in the back of my head” that nag her about “what other people will think” if her daughter acts up or gets in trouble. This kicked in when Melissa was in eighth grade and was disciplined for skipping classes one day with friends. Even though Carol described herself as responding reactively, it seemed as if her response nonetheless reinforced her strong connection with her daughter and did not alienate Melissa. Carol lectured her daughter sternly about the incident and questioned her about why she skipped classes. Melissa said it was because friends talked her into it. When Carol heard this, she affirmed Melissa’s “gut instinct” that skipping school is wrong, and urged her daughter to “please listen to your gut” the next time.

For John, **expectations** were shaped by a different type of upbringing marked by some dangerous risk-taking. He recalled:

I was drinking in high school, I had a fake ID... and I would take it down to the bars downtown and drink. There were incidents where I got very intoxicated, and thank God never wrecked the car. But I don’t remember the wrath of my parents coming down. ... But looking back, I was not a wild child, I was in the middle of my peers. And I’m sure they do it today. There is no doubt in my mind.

Another context that seemed relevant was what Melissa was like as a child. Unlike the reports of some parents in this study, Carol and John viewed Melissa’s transition to adolescence as gradual, not sudden. “She had the typical teenager type of independent attitude before I really considered her to be an adolescent,” John recalled. This primarily took the form of arguments between Melissa and Carol. In contrast to the “compliant” children described by some parents, Melissa took strong stands with her parents even during her elementary school years. One of the

qualities both parents said they admire about Melissa is her wide circle of friends. At the same time, this orientation toward peers contributed to Carol's and John's sense of feeling thrown off balance, and it has been a continuing theme throughout their rebalancing process.

Even though Carol and John seemed to differ quite a bit in terms of their tolerance for risk, they reported that they usually agree about issues related to their children. In the case of the rock concert, both of them agreed that Melissa should not go, so they did not let her. They also demonstrated flexibility, it seemed. In terms of their daughter's request to go white-water rafting, for example, it was Carol who said "yes" and John who felt more hesitant.

The **cognitive strategies** they used seemed to include generous **attributions**, both in terms of how they viewed each other and how they assigned cause and effect with respect to their daughter's demands. For example, instead of feeling hurt or offended when John opposed the white-water rafting expedition, Carol attributed John's different view to his memory of a tragic rafting accident. When the two of them disagreed on a parenting decision like this, they seemed to recognize this could create friction between them, but they said it rarely did, because they talked about their differences. They appeared to respect each other's opinions.

Carol also seemed to use attribution to rebalance her emotions. Melissa's transition to adolescence involved not only escalating bids for independence, but also rapid physical development and emotional ups and downs. Carol described what this was like for her, and how she made sense of it by attributing it not to personal pique but to temporary forces beyond her daughter's control:

She's in my face. The awful part is the angry, in my face, times. Also, during this time she is sprouting up and she is now as big as I am. I think back to the beginning stages when I wasn't as aware as I am now that the hormones are really raging and driving a lot of that trigger anger, out of control anger.... Some of that just gets fueled by stuff they're not aware of.

A prominent theme among most families in this study was that they tend to act on their thoughts, not their feelings. This seemed to be less the case with Carol, who readily defined herself as acting on her feelings. Recognizing that she does so, it seemed Carol intentionally sought to combat her reactivity by using cognitive strategies, such as increasing her awareness of teen development and by networking with other parents. Carol said she valued opportunities to talk with other parents and to learn “this is fairly classic stuff; she’s absolutely normal.” How she viewed her own **behavior**, in response to Melissa, seemed to reflect the tug-of-war going on between thoughts and feelings. Carol explained:

I do this dance, it seems. I don’t rush in and rescue, but I rush in and I harangue when I see things falling apart, the harangue being, “I like to see you put school first, school comes before social activities.” I’ll do that, and then alternately I’ll back off and say, “She needs to learn this for herself. She’s stubborn; it may just take a long time.”

For John, an important **cognitive** response seemed to involve his sense of **influence** over his daughter. When I asked the Atkinsons to rate their influence on a 1 to 10 scale, their answers were quite different from other parents interviewed at home, who identified their influence at a 7 or 8. In contrast, John said, “Based on the kid that she is, I would put my influence at a 4. I would put Carol more at a 6.5.” Carol reacted to her husband’s comment with a little shriek, indicating surprise. She responded to the scaling question in a way that humorously reflected a sense of waning influence: “My first cut was, well, not a 10 or a 9, about an 8. Well, okay, maybe about a 7.” John added, “A lot of it is where she wants to be versus what it is.”

John did not view a low sense of influence as a problem, however. He explained certain nuances of his answer to the scaling question, emphasizing how he regulates parental **influence** as well as recognizes underlying influence. To me it suggested a strong sense of self-efficacy when he said:

We would tend to influence our child based on the decisions we see her make, so if she were making wrong decisions, and certainly she has gone through those periods, then we take a stronger influence.

John's sense of having an underlying influence with his teenage daughter also seemed to inform his approach to parenting, by assuring him that when his daughter takes risks, what she had learned in the past from him and from Carol will help her stay safe. He explained:

I guess you have to feel that you instill a lot of values in your child and expose them to things that allow them to make the right decisions, and to know what the impact of wrong decisions is. But they will certainly be confronted with those temptations. Personally, I want her to be exposed to those things. They have to have the opportunity to fail, and hopefully they'll make the right decision.

An illustration of how this has happened in their family seemed to echo the stories of other participants. Recently, John, Carol, and both their children attended a professional basketball game at a new sports arena with other families from a team the Atkinson's son plays on. When they arrived, Melissa announced that she and some friends were going to walk around on their own. John and Carol agreed that she could do so, and then Carol began to worry, beset by images of never seeing her daughter again and of feeling embarrassed if Melissa did not show up when the team bus had to leave. Toward the end of the game, Melissa wandered back to her seat, and Carol said she felt tremendously relieved. John said this incident showed him that Melissa had reached "a level of maturity, that she knows what's going on." The Atkinson's **interpretation** of this seemed to calm Carol's reactivity and set the family on a trajectory toward future apple-cart experiences. Carol offered an example of this when she said Melissa recently asked again to go to a concert with friends. This happened about two years after the first request that precipitated the apple-cart experience. Carol responded very differently this time, by saying "well, I might go along with that."

Carol seemed to **frame** this time in their lives as a catalyst for change in herself, away from perfectionism and toward flexibility. She said having a teenager is a "positive thing"

because “it gives you the opportunity to grow too.” The way she evaluated herself suggested a great deal of self-reflection and soul-searching. She spoke about working hard to change her perfectionistic tendencies, because she said they put her in a series of losing battles with her daughter. She explained:

I’ve lost a lot of that, let it go, because life is just not like that, it’s not black and white, and the more rigid you are, the more you’re going to lose—when everything is a battle.

Other aspects of **interpretation** for these parents seemed to involve how they **frame** what is important to them. For both John and Carol, their work role took a back seat to their parenting tasks. John said emphatically that his “lasting legacy” will have nothing to do with work, but depends instead on “what you leave in a child’s mind.” Recalling several sports coaches he knew as a boy, he said, “Those are fond memories. If I can shape children’s lives, that’s going to be my lasting legacy.” He said this priority in his life has meant staying in middle management instead of seeking promotions at work. “I’m not going to knock myself out at my job,” he said. “It’s a means to an end.”

Carol characterized herself as experiencing a midlife transition in terms of “making peace” with a decision to work part time in retail sales rather than pursue a career in psychology, in which she earned a master’s degree around the time her son was born. Being available to her children meant more to her, Carol said, than doing demanding work outside the home. Framing their parenting obligations in this way appeared to define what is most important to John and Carol and to link the two of them in a strong, mutual commitment to family.

The Atkinsons also seemed to assign meaning to their rebalancing process by **reorienting** toward the future, when Melissa, and eventually their son, would leave home. In one of the most poignant statements any of my participants made, John described what this is like for him:

There is a void that you can see looming, and Melissa is four years from that happening. They’re growing up. They are less dependent on you every day. It’s

sort of bittersweet. You certainly want them to become independent, be on their own, but for selfish reasons, you still want them around.... Their presence in your life is constant.

To me, this expression of reorientation by an engaged father seemed to capture the essence of a rebalancing process moving ahead in a context of parental connection with, and regard for, a young teenager.