

Effects of Communication Skills Training on Parents and Young Adolescents From Extreme Family Types

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PROBLEM. *What were the effects of a communication skills training intervention among a sample of young adolescents and parents who scored in the "extreme" range of the Circumplex Model of Family Systems?*

METHODS. *Thirty-seven young adolescents and a parent (intervention group) participated in communication skills training 2 hours/week for 6 weeks. Their responses on measures of satisfaction with the family system and perceptions of communication were compared with those of 47 young adolescents and a parent who scored in the extreme range but did not participate in the training (control group).*

FINDINGS. *Fathers and young adolescents demonstrated no change as a result of the program. Mothers who participated in skills training perceived communication with their young adolescent as more open than control mothers, but became increasingly dissatisfied with the family system.*

CONCLUSION. *This universal, community-based, family-focused intervention may not be indicated for extreme families.*

Search terms: *Family communication, parent-adolescent communication*

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The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a communication skill-training program, "Mission Possible: Parents and Kids Who Listen," on a sample of families who scored in the extreme range of the Circumplex Model of Family Systems (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983). The outcomes studied were perceptions of satisfaction and open communication. This article is based on further analysis of data from a larger study with balanced families who were trained in communication techniques and produced gains in perceived family satisfaction, open communication, and problem-solving skill (Riesch et al., 1993). Higher grade-point averages, fewer incidents of dropping out of school, less participation in health-risk behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999), and reduced family conflict and improved family bonding (Kosterman, Hawkins, Spoth, Haggerty, & Zhu, 1997) have been associated with improved family communication skill.

Background and Literature Review

The developmental period of adolescence is challenging to families. Some reasons include an increase in conflicts between parents and young adolescents (Hill, 1987; Noller, 1995), a decrease in satisfaction within the marital relationship (Robin & Koepke, 1990), and a general trend in health-risk behavior such as tobacco use and sexual activity historically associated with older ages appearing among increasingly younger teens (Benson, 1997; Blum & Rhinehart, 1998; Finke, Chorpenning, French, Leese, & Siegel, 1996; Loveland-Cherry, Ross, & Kaufman, 1999; Piffner, 1995).

Research has demonstrated that families function best during adolescent development when families are adaptable and cohesive (Gaughan, 1995; Green, Harris,

Forte, & Robinson, 1991; Henggler, Burr-Harris, Borduin, & McCallum, 1991; Olson, 1994). Adaptable refers to the family's ability to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to developmental demands. Cohesive refers to the family's emotional bonding toward one another. A sizeable minority of American families, including Amish (Winter & Ferreira, 1967) and Puerto Rican (Minuchin, 1974) families, however, have normative expectations that emphasize the extremes of the cohesion (very close emotionally) or adaptability (very rigid or traditional about rules and roles) levels. They function well as long as family members embrace the values and are satisfied with the expectations (Olson, 1986).

Communication

Families that communicate well achieve a sense of cohesion and adaptability. A number of investigators have demonstrated a link between the communication that occurs in the family and adolescent developmental outcomes. Positive developmental outcomes such as school achievement (Georgiou, 1995; Marta, 1997), self-esteem (Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987; Marta), ability to resolve difficult life issues (Hops, Tildesley, Lichenstein, Ary, & Sherman, 1990), beliefs and intentions regarding condom use (Strader, Beaman, & McSweeney, 1992), knowledge of HIV/AIDS (Crawford, Thoma, & Zoller, 1993), moral maturity (Walker, 1991), and taking an active role in coping with their stress (Day, Bosworth, Gustafson, Chewning, & Hawkins, 1985) have all been linked with communication that is perceived as open. Further, perceived open communication has been associated with the ability to express opinions and ideas (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983), an adaptive self (Bell & Bell, 1982), and development of loyalty, empathy, trust, and morality (Hunter & Youniss, 1982).

Conversely, research has demonstrated that detrimental adolescent outcomes such as delinquency (Clark & Shields, 1997), pregnancy (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996), self-harm (Tulloch, Blizzard, & Pinkus, 1997), rebelliousness (Skinner & Slater, 1995), alcohol and drug

experimentation (Norem-Hebeisen, Johnson, Anderson, & Johnson, 1984), and depression and suicide proneness (Stivers, 1988) are linked to communication that is perceived by the adolescent as closed, conflictual, emotional, one-sided, or devoid of certain topics. Training in communication skill was found to be effective for sixth-graders in resisting pressure to try cigarettes, alcohol, and other substances (Grady, Gersick, & Boratynski, 1985). Reflecting the theoretical stance of "bi-directional influences" (Cairns, 1979), training in communication skill should target parents and young adolescents simultaneously. One partner in a relationship cannot be expected to practice and master the desired skills if the other partner is not similarly trained.

Five studies have demonstrated that communication skills training can result in improved family relationships. Skills training was delivered as either a universal preventive or a selective intervention. Universal preventive interventions are those that target the general public or a whole population group that has not been identified on the basis of individual risk. The intervention is desirable for everyone in the group. Selective interventions are targeted to individuals or groups on the basis of a trait or risk (Institute of Medicine, 1994). Day et al. (1985) developed the Body Awareness Resource Network (BARN) computer system for families to learn how to pay more attention to one another. Programs were designed to introduce a variety of communication skills and strategies. Outcomes achieved were improved attention to one another's values, opinions, and concerns without criticism, blame, and negation. Outcomes of the Adolescent Social Skills Effectiveness Training (ASSET) program included improved social and reciprocal skill (Noble, Adams, & Openshaw, 1989; Serna, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon, 1991), and decreased loneliness (Adams, Openshaw, Bennion, Mills, & Noble, 1988) among adolescents.

Kosterman et al. (1997) sought to reduce risks and enhance protection against early substance use initiation by improving patterns of family communication. Their brief, selective intervention, "Preparing for Drug Free Years," was aimed at rural, economically stressed

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midwestern parents of children ages 8 to 14. Improved proactive communication, problem-solving interactions, and fewer negative interactions were attained.

The Iowa Strengthening Families Program (ISFP), a universal intervention, targets parents to enhance family processes. Kumpfer, Molgaard, and Spoth (1996) demonstrated that it led to improved outcomes related to family communication among community-dwelling families.

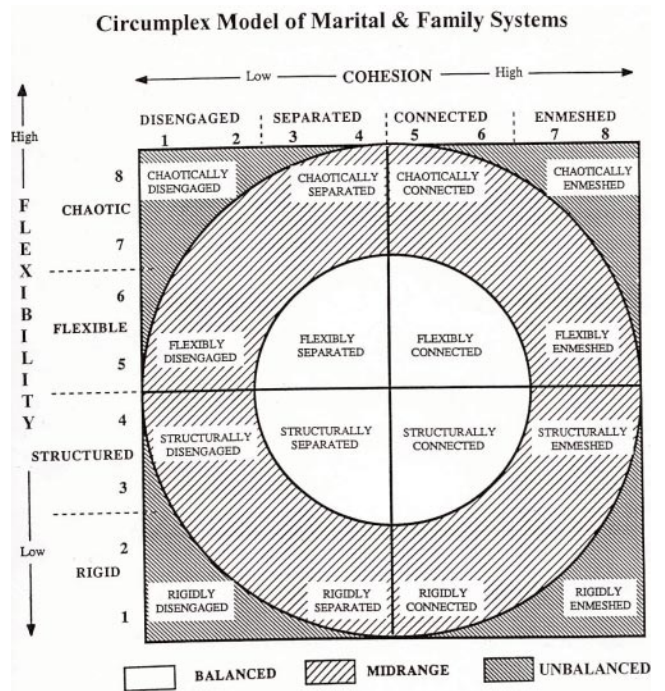
In the larger study from which the sample for this paper was taken, parents and young adolescents who participated in the Mission Possible program demonstrated increased satisfaction with the family system and more open communication and improved problem-solving skill while the young adolescents in the control group became increasingly dissatisfied and reported more problem communication (Riesch et al., 1993). The families in this larger study scored in the balanced and midrange areas of the Circumplex Model in contrast to the sample reported here who scored in the extreme range.

Taken together, these studies suggest that participation in communication training by families who are on the cusp of adolescence may improve family relationships and communication, which, in turn, may promote optimal developmental outcomes among adolescents. The training described in these studies, however, has been with nondistressed, nonclinic families. Considerable research has documented the effectiveness of therapist-derived communication strategies for distressed families seeking assistance with their relationships or for treatment of conduct disorder (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1997; Gaughan, 1995), delinquency (Martin, 1987; Robin, 1979; Shields & Clark, 1997), and substance-abusing youth (Noller, 1995; Piercy, Volk, Trepper, Sprenkle, & Lewis, 1991; Romig & Bakken, 1992). However, little research has been reported that examines communication among community-dwelling families who are not seeking professional help but who are considered extreme as a family type.

Theoretical Framework

The Circumplex Model of Family Systems guided this study (Figure 1). In this model, the concepts of adaptabil-

Figure 1. Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems



ity, cohesion, and communication constitute the dimensions of the family system. Adaptability is defined as the ability of the family to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to developmental demands. Flexible families are “balanced” in that they have developed a balance between “chaos” (too much flexibility) and “rigidity” (not enough flexibility) (Gaughan, 1995; Olson, 1994; Piercy et al. 1991; Romig & Bakken, 1992; Shields & Clark, 1997).

Cohesion is the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another. Families who have achieved the optimal levels of cohesion may be “separated” yet “connected” but not “enmeshed” (overly close) or “disengaged” (not close enough). Recent data have challenged the notion that optimal levels of cohe-

sion are curvilinear. When Olson et al. (1983) conceptualized cohesion, they considered the extremes of cohesion to be "unbalanced." A midrange level of cohesion was thought to be the optimal level of family cohesion that, in turn, would promote family functioning. Investigators have provided recent evidence that the concept of cohesion may be linear, meaning the greater the level of cohesion the greater the satisfaction with and the better the functioning of the family (Gaughan, 1995; Green et al., 1991; Henggler et al., 1991; Olson, 1991). Thus, families that score within an enmeshed range may function better than those in the connected or separate ranges.

The third dimension of the Circumplex Model, communication, is defined as the expression of ideas and feelings assertively but inoffensively, and the reception of ideas expressed by others attentively and accurately (Robin, 1979). Communication is considered critical to movement on the other two dimensions. Clear and congruent messages, empathy, reflective listening, supportive statements, and effective problemsolving characterize positive communication. It enables family members to share their changing needs and preferences as they relate to cohesion and adaptability. Negative communication includes sending incongruent and disqualifying messages, lack of empathy, nonsupportive messages, criticism, poor problem-solving skills, and paradoxical and double-binding messages. It minimizes the ability of family members to share feelings, thereby restricting movement on the dimensions. Good communication skills are crucial to satisfaction with family relationships.

Based on the literature reviewed and the theory, it was hypothesized that:

1. Parents and young adolescents from extreme family types who participate in communication training will demonstrate greater satisfaction with the family system when compared to nonparticipating extreme family types 1 week and 6 months after training.
2. Parents and young adolescents from extreme family types who participate in communication training will demonstrate increased open communication with one

another when compared to nonparticipating extreme family types 1 week and 6 months after training.

3. Parents and young adolescents from extreme family types will identify the extreme ranges of adaptability and cohesion as ideal.

Methods

A nonrandom, two-group, pre/posttest with follow-up study design (Table 1) was used. Participants in both the intervention and control groups each completed surveys regarding family communication style. The intervention group also participated in the Mission Possible program.

Sample

Public, private, and parochial middle schools in a large metropolitan area of a Midwestern state were approached to obtain the sample ($n = 45$). Letters inviting participation were sent to the homes of all seventh- and

Table 1. Description of Data Collection Procedures

	Control Group ($n = 47$)	Intervention Group ($n = 37$)
Time 1	<i>Intake</i> Demographic FACES III PACI	<i>Intake</i> Demographic FACES III PACI <i>6-week Mission Possible Communication Skill Training</i>
Time 2	<i>Posttest, 6 weeks post intake</i> FACES III PACI	<i>1 week post training</i> FACES III PACI
Time 3	<i>Follow-up, 8 months post intake</i> FACES III PACI	<i>6 months post training</i> FACES III PACI

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eighth-graders using mailing labels provided by 42 participating schools. School principals included a letter urging families to review the study procedures and consider participation. Families either returned a post card or telephoned the investigator to indicate interest in participation. Families then were screened for eligibility for the study and assigned to the intervention or control group based on their preference and availability to attend the training. Thus, a limitation of the study is that families were not chosen randomly for the study or assigned randomly to intervention and control conditions.

Eligibility criteria were that the families had a child between 11 and 14 years old, were English speaking, and were not seeking professional or marital therapy. The families that are the focus of this report were considered extreme on the Circumplex Model of Family Systems (Olson et al., 1983) based on the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale III (FACES III) score. Of the 681 families enrolled on the larger study, 222 were considered not within the balanced range. To be included in the analysis that is the focus of this paper, a parent and young adolescent each had to have completed a set of instruments at all three data collection points. There were 84 dyads that met these criteria. Of these, 47 were in the control group and 37 in the intervention group. The families were typically two-parent, white, well educated, and employed (Table 2). For all 84 families, English was the first language. About half (57%) of the families reported their income between \$20,000 and \$49,999, with 13% above \$50,000 and 30% below \$19,999. The mean number of children was 1.8, with a minimum of 1 and maximum of 6. Most mothers reported they were partnered and considered themselves to be in a stable, long-term relationship (71%). The mean length of that relationship was 13 years ($SD = 8.6$), with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 39 years. All but one father reported being partnered and all but one considered themselves to be in a stable, long-term relationship. The mean length of that relationship was 16.8 years ($SD = 6.4$), with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 27 years.

The young adolescents were typically in seventh grade, 13 years old, first born, and reported they had

four good friends. There were 28 boys and 43 girls who reported grades of mainly As and Bs and aspired to go to college. Comparing the control versus intervention groups, the in the control group tended to be employed in less prestigious occupations ($\chi^2 = 6.7, p = 0.03$), were more confident in their parenting ($\chi^2 = 7.7, p = .05$), and had larger families ($F(1,75) = 11.57, p = .001$) than those in the intervention group. These variables were treated as co-variables in the data analysis. The two groups were equivalent on father and young adolescent characteristics. This sample of 84 families did not differ significantly from the larger sample on any characteristic.

Measures

The FACES III (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale III), is a 20-item instrument that was standardized on large samples, with evidence of adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability, and two statistically independent dimensions: adaptability and cohesion (Olson et al., 1982). The FACES III was used in this study to determine whether families were balanced, midrange, or extreme in terms of adaptability and cohesion and to measure satisfaction with the family system. Alpha reliability co-efficients for the FACES III with the current sample were >0.82 for both subscales (Table 3).

Family members completed the scale twice; first to describe how the family functions currently and second to describe how they would like the family to function. An actual vs. ideal discrepancy score indicating the level of satisfaction with the family was obtained. The lower the discrepancy score, the greater the satisfaction with the family system. The scale required about 15 minutes to complete. The PACI (Parent Adolescent Communication Inventory) is a 20-item instrument that was standardized on large samples, with evidence of adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability, and two statistically independent dimensions: open and problem communication (Barnes & Olson, 1985). It was designed to measure both content and process issues related to communication between adolescents

Table 2. Description of the Sample

	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 72)	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 23)	Young Teen (<i>n</i> = 67)		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 72)	Fathers (<i>n</i> = 23)	Young Teen (<i>n</i> = 67)
Age				■ Minimum	2	3	
■ <i>M</i>	40	43	13	■ Maximum	5	5	
■ <i>SD</i>	5	5	0.7				
■ Minimum	31	35	11	DAS Score^a			
■ Maximum	58	53	14	■ <i>M</i>	95	101	
				■ <i>SD</i>	31	25	
Race				■ Minimum	33	4	
■ Euro American	84%	100%	75%	■ Maximum	144	135	
■ African American	13%		22%				
■ Asian American	3%		1%	Sex			
■ Hispanic American			2%	■ Male			40%
				■ Female			60%
Years of Schooling				Birth Order			
■ <i>M</i>	14.5	16.1	10% 6th grade	■ 1st			50%
■ <i>SD</i>	2.7	2.7	58% 7th grade	■ 2nd			33%
■ Minimum	9	12	32% 8th grade	■ 3rd–6th			17%
■ Maximum	2	20					
Hollingshead Rank				Number of Friends			
■ <i>M</i>	4.8	7.0		■ <i>M</i>			4.5
■ <i>SD</i>	2.7	1.8		■ <i>SD</i>			3.4
				■ Minimum			None
Employment				■ Maximum			17
■ Full-time	46%	97%		Reported Grades			
■ Part-time	30%	3%		■ A			23%
■ Not employed	24%			■ B			52%
				■ C			16%
Confidence as Parent				■ D			6%
■ <i>M</i>	3.9	4.0		■ F			3%
■ <i>SD</i>	0.8	0.8					

^aDAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale score, a measure of marital quality (Spanier, 1976). These scores indicate average marital relationship quality.

and their parents. Open communication is characterized by an emphasis on freedom and free-flowing exchange of information, both factual and emotional, as well as lack of constraint. Problem communication is characterized by hesitancy to share and negative styles of interaction. The PACI can be completed in about 10 minutes. Alpha reliability co-efficients for the PACI with the current sample were >0.76 for both subscales (Table 4).

Procedure

The intervention. The intervention, “Mission Possible: Parents and Kids Who Listen,” was a 12-hour, 6-session, skills-training program based on the concepts of the Circumplex Model and communication and developmental theory. It consisted of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies to improve the parents’ and children’s abilities to understand and communicate with

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Table 3. FACES III (Satisfaction) Scores by Group and Time

	Entire Sample <i>M (SD)</i>	Control <i>M (SD)</i>	Intervention <i>M (SD)</i>	Cronbach's Alpha
Mother^a	<i>n</i> = 57	<i>n</i> = 38	<i>n</i> = 19	
■ Pretest	15.1 (10.8)	15.1 (10.7)	15.2 (11.2)	.87
■ Posttest	13.9 (10.5)	12.4 (10.5)	17.3 (9.8)	.87
■ Follow-up	13.5 (10.9)	12.6 (8.8)	18.6 (14.5)	.88
Father	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 13	<i>n</i> = 10	
■ Pretest	12.5 (11.1)	14.2 (10.6)	10.4 (11.7)	.88
■ Posttest	11.1 (9.1)	13.1 (9.7)	8.9 (8.1)	.91
■ Follow-up	8.3 (9.0)	10.7 (9.1)	6.7 (8.8)	.89
Young adolescent	<i>n</i> = 67	<i>n</i> = 40	<i>n</i> = 27	
■ Pretest	15.6 (12.1)	14.6 (12.4)	17.1 (11.7)	.89
■ Posttest	15.8 (12.3)	15.3 (12.5)	17.0 (12.8)	.91
■ Follow-up	16.2 (14.5)	13.5 (11.6)	15.6 (11.3)	.82

^aSignificant at $p = .001$

Table 4. PACI (Perception of Communication) Scores by Group and Time

	Total Sample <i>M (SD)</i>	Control <i>M (SD)</i>	Intervention <i>M (SD)</i>	Cronbach's Alpha
Mother	<i>n</i> = 72	<i>n</i> = 39	<i>n</i> = 33	
■ Pretest ^a	73.8 (12.0)	74.7 (11.6)	73.1 (9.0)	.76
■ Posttest	74.5 (10.7)	74.5 (12.0)	75.6 (8.4)	
■ Follow-up	72.4 (12.0)	71.2 (13.4)	75.1 (9.4)	
Young adolescent with mother		<i>n</i> = 41	<i>n</i> = 33	
■ Pretest	68.6 (13.6)	69.8 (12.3)	66.7 (15.8)	.78
■ Posttest	67.3 (14.3)	69.3 (14.3)	65.8 (13.6)	
■ Follow-up	68.5 (14.3)	69.7 (15.4)	66.6 (12.7)	
Father^b	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 14	<i>n</i> = 12	
■ Pretest	69.6 (13.7)	69.1 (13.2)	72.5 (12.2)	.82
■ Posttest	71.4 (13.1)	71.5 (14.2)	74.3 (11.7)	
■ Follow-up ^b	76.1 (7.9)	77.4 (10.1)	74.9 (4.6)	
Young adolescent with father		<i>n</i> = 32	<i>n</i> = 27	
■ Pretest	62.1 (16.2)	64.3 (15.7)	60.0 (18.1)	.80
■ Posttest	61.1 (15.9)	64.3 (16.4)	60.8 (15.3)	
■ Follow-up	62.7 (16.1)	65.8 (15.3)	59.4 (17.2)	

^aSignificant at $p = .02$; ^bMain effect for time $p < .001$

one another. The content included increased awareness of child and adult growth and development; application of the principles of self-esteem; skill development in problem ownership, message sending, and confrontation; active listening; conflict resolution; and letting go. Emphasized throughout the training were the child's need for flexible family boundaries and emotional closeness. A session-by-session review is presented in Table 5.

Each session began with warm-up exercises, review of the prior weeks' lessons, and examination of successes and failures in trying the techniques. The didactic portion was presented using videotaped content. Demonstration and practice sessions ensued. When appropriate for the topic or exercise, children worked apart from parents. Role-playing with one's own parent or child or with another parent or child was used extensively. Each session closed with homework assignments.

The sessions were held in community centers and libraries in the metropolitan area. Group size was limited to 15 families per site. Developmentally appropriate strategies were implemented, as suggested by consultant groups of young adolescents, to encourage attendance and participation (Riesch, Tosi, & Thurston, 1999). Master's-prepared community nursing specialists facilitated sessions. To ensure fidelity with the intervention protocol, all facilitators underwent a 12-hour training session, used a step-by-step procedure manual, and completed a topic inventory for each session. The didactic content was professionally videotaped and the trainer observed 25% of the sessions.

The program was brief. However, other programs have achieved results after brief time periods. For example, Kosterman et al. (1997) in 10 hours of training over 5 weeks and Kumpfer et al. (1996) in 14 hours of training over 7 weeks with four booster sessions demonstrated significant outcomes related to family communication among community families.

Survey data collection. The parent and the young adolescent received separate packets and stamped addressed envelopes in which to return the surveys. Parents and young adolescents were paid \$5 at pretest and posttest and \$10 at follow-up. No remuneration was provided for attendance at the intervention sessions.

Data Analysis

The effects of communication training were examined by analyzing parents' and young adolescents' data separately using two-way repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). For these analyses, the between subjects variable was Group (Intervention/Control), and the within subjects variable was Time (1 week postintervention/6 months postintervention). Subjects' scores at Time 1 (preintervention) served as the co-variate in these ANCOVAs, thus, an intervention effect would be reflected in a main effect for group or a significant group by time interaction.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Satisfaction (FACES III) scores were examined using the ANCOVA procedures detailed above. As displayed in Table 2, fathers in both the intervention and control groups became more (but not at a statistically significant level) satisfied over time, and young adolescents demonstrated little variability in their scores. There were no significant main effects or interactions as a result of the intervention for fathers and young adolescents, all $F < 1.5$, *ns*.

Results for the mothers indicated that there was a significant effect for Group, $F(1,54) = 5.49$, $p = .02$. This was a result of greater dissatisfaction reported by mothers in the intervention group in contrast to mothers in the control group. The data for mothers were reexamined with occupation, confidence, and family size as co-variates because the groups differed significantly on these characteristics. The group effect was maintained $F(1,51) = 3.84$, $p = .05$. Thus, the hypothesis that the intervention would result in greater satisfaction was not supported.

Hypothesis 2

Parents' and young adolescents' communication scores (PACI) were examined with the ANCOVA

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Table 5. Content of the Mission Possible: Parents and Kids Who Listen Sessions

Session No./Title	Content	Session No./Title	Content
1: Developmental Changes	Addresses how developmental and situational changes influence and affect family adaptability with children about to enter adolescence. The goal is to enhance parents' and children's understanding of growth and development among themselves and others. Using the entire group, a parent and child role-play the parents as newly married, the addition of the child, the addition of siblings, the addition or loss of other adults through divorce, death, and remarriage, the power struggle of children trying to leave and parents wanting them to stay. Physical, emotional, social, and mental changes were addressed. How these changes have been found to affect communication, such as using data to argue points, use of emotion, talking back, and language 'fads' were emphasized.		was taught and return demonstrated. Methods for rechanneling feelings were explored. Communicating needs and wants was viewed as a life skill to be transferred to many situations.
		4: Listening to What the Other Wants	Aimed at active listening and avoiding roadblocks to communication. The goals of the session are to enhance parent's and children's awareness of open and closed communication and facilitate identification and feeling of blocked communication. Traditional communication theory of codes, feedback, and affirmation and denial was taught (Stamp et al., 1994). The idea of context was introduced. Exercises in confrontation were included.
2: Effects of Self-Esteem	Examined past and present situations that have positive and negative effects on self-esteem. The goal is to familiarize parents and children with the theory and concepts of self-esteem. Parent and child learn, through vignettes, how communication approaches and parenting styles affect family cohesion and can result in feeling good and bad about one's self. The self in relationship to another and the idea of not having just one real self was addressed. Fundamental issues of communication are introduced such as the transmission and reception of meaning, communication as behavior, and the relationship among behaviors of interacting individuals (Stamp, Vangelisti, & Knapp, 1994).	5: Solving Conflicts So Everyone Wins	Parents and children explored the 6 steps of conflict resolution, recalled their experience with conflict, and considered what unresolved conflict can do to family cohesion. Session goals are to facilitate parent's and children's awareness of their patterns of communicating during conflicts and enhance parents' and children's abilities to resolve conflicts. Negotiation, flexibility, autonomy, and connection were stressed.
3: Getting What You Want	Focused on learning the skill of clear and assertive expressions of expectations, feelings, and needs. The concept of problem ownership was demonstrated, the sensing-thinking-feeling-wanting-doing paradigm for becoming aware of one's part in a relationship	6: Celebrating and Letting Go	Examined the psychological needs for belonging, independence, and closeness in relationships. Session goals are to enhance parent's and children's abilities to be successful in their relationships, increase parent's and children's awareness of mutual psychosocial needs, and facilitate parent's and children's ability to allow the adolescent to connect and separate. Needs for achievement, satisfaction, and opportunities to follow and lead were addressed. Responsibility, relationships, and appreciation were emphasized within a paradigm of allowing experimentation with a number of roles.

procedure described above. Mothers in the intervention group reported increased open communication with their young adolescents at posttest (immediately after the program) and at follow-up (6 months postprogram) than did mothers in the control group. This group effect was statistically significant, $F(1,69) = 5.86, p = .02$. Examination of young adolescents' perceptions of communication with their mothers did not reveal any significant main effects or interactions, all $F < 2.1, ns$. Scores were consistent at all three points among both groups. Because of group differences on the variables, the data for mothers were reexamined with occupation, confidence, and family size as co-variables. The group effect was maintained $F(1,66) = 4.04, p = .05$.

For fathers, there was a main effect for time ($F[1, 23] = 47.18, p < .001$) but not for group ($F[1, 23] = .906, ns$). That is, fathers perceived their communication with their young adolescent as increasingly open from intake to conclusion of the study regardless of intervention group. Scores for young adolescents with their fathers and with their mothers did not reveal any significant main effects or interactions, all $F < 1.6, ns$. This hypothesis was supported only for mothers.

Hypothesis 3

Mothers', fathers', and young adolescents' perceptions of their families' functioning within the categories of current and ideal levels of adaptability and cohesion were computed (Table 6). Half the mothers, two thirds of the fathers, and three fourths of the young adolescents perceived their family to be functioning in the extreme areas of adaptability, that is, either chaotic or rigid. When asked to describe an *ideal* level of adaptability for their family, 82% of the mothers, 78% of fathers, and 76% of young adolescents reported scores in the chaotic level.

Turning to cohesion (see Table 4), 61% of mothers, 65% of fathers, and 67% of young adolescents scored within the extreme range for current perception of family functioning—that is, as disengaged or enmeshed. The disengaged typology was the most fre-

quently reported of all family types. When family members described how they would like their family to be, the connected and enmeshed categories drew the greatest response from mothers (77%), fathers (74%), and young adolescents (46%). Most family members described an ideal perception that, by the score, was increasingly cohesive, in contrast to their description of the current family system as disengaged. This hypothesis was supported.

Table 6. Number of Mothers, Fathers, and Young Adolescents who Scored Within Each Typology of the Circumplex Model at Time 1

	Mother (<i>n</i> = 57)		Father (<i>n</i> = 23)		Young Adolescent (<i>n</i> = 74)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Adaptability (Current)						
■ Chaotic	18	31	6	26	29	40
■ Flexible	12	21	8	35	8	12
■ Structured	16	28	6	26	13	15
■ Rigid	11	20	3	13	24	33
Adaptability (Ideal)						
■ Chaotic	46	81	18	78	56	75
■ Flexible	7	13	2	9	10	14
■ Structured	3	5	3	13	7	10
■ Rigid	1	1			1	1
Cohesion (Current)						
■ Disengaged	28	49	10	43	43	58
■ Separated	15	27	3	13	12	16
■ Connected	7	12	5	22	13	17
■ Enmeshed	7	12	5	22	6	9
Cohesion (Ideal)						
■ Disengaged	2	4	2	9	24	32
■ Separated	11	19	4	17	16	22
■ Connected	19	33	9	39	17	23
■ Enmeshed	25	44	8	35	17	23

Effects of Communication Skills Training on Parents and Young Adolescents From Extreme Family Types

Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if the Mission Possible program would improve satisfaction with the family and perception of communication among a sample of extreme family types. The intervention was not effective with this group. Mothers in the intervention group became increasingly *less* satisfied with their family over the period of study and were less satisfied with their family than mothers in the control group. There were no time or group effects for fathers or young adolescents.

Regarding perceptions of communication, mothers who participated in the intervention perceived their communication as more open with their young adolescent than did mothers in the control group. Regardless of study group, fathers perceived their communication as increasingly more open over the period of study. Young adolescents exhibited no change in perceptions of communication with either parent over the study period.

Mothers, fathers, and young adolescents were found to identify their ideal family functioning toward the increasingly cohesive and adaptive typologies.

Findings Within the Context of Prior Work

Why didn't the intervention work with this sample? We examined the theoretical framework, the research design, and our collective professional experience for explanations.

The theory. Olson et al. (1983) developed the Circumplex Model conceiving the concepts of adaptability and cohesion to be curvilinear. Work by other investigators has challenged the curvilinear nature of the adaptability and cohesion concepts (Green et al., 1991; Henggler et al., 1991). Cohesion is the variable that has received substantial attention in the literature. Olson now recommends the cohesion dimension be scored linearly (D. Olson, personal communication 10.18.99). In this study, mothers and fathers, but not young teens, overwhelmingly identified a connected or enmeshed family as an ideal family. More than half the young teens, on the other hand, chose

disengaged or separated as ideal. They may have viewed disengagement as moving toward independence.

From a theoretical perspective, the linearity versus curvilinearity property of the adaptability dimension is less clear. Respondents identified their current state of functioning in the extreme range, but were split between chaotic and rigid types. For ideal functioning, our respondents definitively chose the chaotic state. Apparently, family members desired to be tightly connected emotionally yet free to pursue their individual interests. Investigators continue to report the "balanced" range of adaptability as ideal for family functioning (Gaughan, 1995; Piercy et al., 1991; Romig & Bakken, 1992; Shields & Clark, 1997). It is entirely possible the families liked functioning in the extreme, that they perceived it as stable. This finding highlights the difficulty of influencing or changing aspects of family patterns, relationships, and interactions, particularly with a short-term intervention with extreme family types.

The research design. This sample of families responded to a call to participate in a study of family communication among families with young adolescents. These particular 84 families were found to be different from the majority of families in the larger study because they scored in the extreme range on the Circumplex Model. Demographically, the 84 families were comparable to the larger sample. The larger sample did make gains in communication openness and family satisfaction. The foci of the intervention may not have been specific, directed, or powerful enough to assist families from extreme family types. Further, it is unknown if skill learning actually occurred, because no manipulation check was employed. We have no reason to believe, however, that learning and skill acquisition would differ between this sample of extreme family types and the larger sample of balanced family types. The Mission Possible program facilitators did not know which families were extreme or balanced and reported no difficulty with any of the respondents comprehending the skill-training content.

Mothers in the intervention group of the current sample became increasingly dissatisfied with the family sys-

tem. At the same time, mothers' perceptions of open communication with their young adolescent grew. The correlation between maternal satisfaction with the family and perception of communication was essentially zero in the intervention group ($r = .05, p = .58$), whereas among control group mothers it was moderate and significant ($r = -.49, p = .002$). Intervention mothers may have developed new expectations about family functioning as a result of participating in communication skill building. If the family was not meeting those expectations, it would follow that mothers' satisfaction would decline.

The PACI and FACES III were self-report measures. The use of observed interactions would strengthen the design and subsequent results. In the larger study, skill at problem-solving ability was assessed by direct observation among a randomly selected subsample from the control and intervention groups. Significant improvement in problem-solving ability was demonstrated among fathers, sons, and daughters. However, only three of the extreme dyads participated in the observed problem-solving activity—too few to examine and draw further conclusions.

Two thirds of the extreme families from the larger sample did not complete the instrument at all three data collection points, a criterion for inclusion in this analysis. This fact suggests the intervention and study activities were not viewed as pertinent to the families or may be biased toward balanced families. Again, the nonrandom, self-selected nature of the control and intervention groups serves as a limitation in the design.

Professional experience. Our collective professional experience working with families leads us to the conclusion that families who responded to the call to participate may have been seeking assistance with their relationships. Members from extreme family types may need a more focused, selective intervention, beyond the scope of a universal, community-based communication skills training. They may need more intensive interventions such as family therapy and counseling to improve their processes and relationships.

Conclusion

Our findings lead us to advise researchers and clinicians that the Mission Possible series has potential for success with balanced family types, but not with extreme family types. Training extreme family types in communication skill needs further study and perhaps an approach that differs from balanced family types.

For care providers, this finding may serve as the impetus to assist the family, or at least the mother, to identify areas of dissatisfaction and to develop methods to address those aspects of family functioning. Perhaps being exposed to what is possible in terms of cohesion, adaptability, and communication precipitated mothers to realize their family could function better. This is fertile ground for further research.

We conclude that this particular program, while helpful for "balanced" families, was not helpful for extreme families as indicated by Circumplex Model measures. Innately, and consistent with Gottman's and Krokoff's (1989) findings about dissatisfied married couples, more communication may increase rather than abate negative feelings.

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