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The rising number of “beanpole” families in UK: A qualitative insight into the parent-adolescent relationship

Objective:

Nearly half of British families are classified as single-child families, showing a gradual but steady increase in this family type from the 1990s onwards. Despite this, research on relationships of only-children in the UK is scant. The aim of this paper was to explore parent-adolescent relationships in single-child families.

Design:

This study used qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore both parents’ and only-children’s perceptions of the parent-adolescent relationship.

Methods:

15 families with an only child and 15 families with multiple children were interviewed when children were aged 11-14 years. Families were recruited using advertising, convenience and snowballing sampling. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results:

Analysis of data from parents and adolescents of both groups revealed several common themes: the experience of a positive parent-child relationship, parental support and the impact of early adolescence on parent-child relationships. Closeness in parent-child relationship was also identified as a common theme amongst adolescents in both groups. However this theme differed in the views of parents: parents of an only-child reported a very close relationship with their child including a strong emotional connection in the form of parent-child bonding, while parents with multiple children reported less closeness. Parent gender seemed to influence the relationship. Adolescents in both groups felt closer to their mothers than fathers. However, this difference was much more prominent in single-child families. Some themes were specific to each family type. Adolescent only-children reported a strong emotional connection only with their mothers. They also reported positive differences in parent-child relationships from being an only-child. Adolescents with siblings mostly reported little differentiation in terms of how they perceived their relationship with each parent.

Conclusion:

This study revealed that adolescent only children share as positive a relationship with their parents as adolescents with siblings. More importantly, only-children seem to be at an advantage compared to non-only children with positive differences in parent-child relationship from both parents’ and adolescents’ perspectives. Gaining a first insight into the nature of parent-child relationship in single-child families and identifying specific aspects of the parent-child relationship which are unique to this family type has valuable implications in light of the growing number of single-child families.