

# Dependence and Independence: Perceptions and Management of Risk in respect of Children aged 12- 16 in Families with Working Parents

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## **Abstract**

The contributions that adult men and women make to households in terms of paid and unpaid work has undergone substantial change, particularly in respect of women's responsibility for income generation, and have been seen as part of the processes of individualisation. Recent contributions to the literature have suggested that children are now acquiring independence earlier as part of those same processes.

The paper uses qualitative methods to explore the way in which parents in two parent families, where both are employed, perceive the risks attaching to children's exercise of greater independence, how they seek to 'manage' those risks, and how far the perceptions of parents accord with those of children.

We find parents' perceptions of risk to be strong, but to have little to do with working patterns. In addition, they are often at odds with the actual behaviour of the child. Risks are managed by negotiation, in which children played an active part. We are also able to make some preliminary comments on the difficulties of interpreting scale measures in relation to interview evidence.

## **Dependence and Independence: Perceptions and Management of Risk in respect of Children aged 12-16 in Families with Working Parents [i]**

Social theorists who have focused on the notion of living in a 'risk society' have stressed the importance of processes of social change involving individualisation, whereby traditional family relationships based on 'a community of need' are increasingly becoming 'elective relationships' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1999, p.54; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1990, 1992). People's life stories become 'risk biographies' in the sense that 'everything (or nearly everything) is a matter for decision' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.47), and individuals have to negotiate their own way through these decisions and take more individual responsibility for planning their lives and evaluating risks. Fundamentally, it is assumed that individuals can exercise choice and shape their lives, a view that has been criticised for taking insufficient account of the context in which actors make their choices (e.g. Lasch, 1994). There has also been substantial criticism focused on the extent to which these theories have failed to consider the position of children. The intimate relationship between parent and child is seen by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995) as more and more prized in a world in which adults are being increasingly pulled apart by individualisation, but the perspective taken is that of the adult rather than the child.

Work on adolescence in Germany and The Netherlands has endeavoured to investigate the impact of individualisation on children, arguing that children too must now take more responsibility for themselves at an earlier age: 'The most prominent changing feature of an individualised childhood is probably the child's earlier acquisition of independence across an ever wider range of fields' (Büchner, 1995, p. 108) [iii]. But, as Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004) have pointed out in their work on how children (and their families) construct risk, the family context and the ways in which risk, safety and danger are negotiated between children and parents is crucial. The child's increasing move towards independence does not take place in a vacuum, and for parents the perception of the risks to be faced by

children in making this transition in terms of 'danger' is strong (Kelley et al, 1997) and may well have increased in recent years.

The child's move towards greater independence in thought and action has always been understood as a crucial marker of development, but the vast majority of children also remain, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on their family contexts. Pressure to take more responsibility for self and to become independent may well come at a younger age, but there is a good case for arguing that the most significant impact of individualisation on children is the increase in the tension between independence and dependence, especially for teenagers. As Brannen et al. (2000, p.7) have put it: 'One critical issue for children in later childhood is the negotiation of their continuing attachment to family in the context of the need to become competent'. For, as Edwards and Alldred (2000) have noted, the dependence of children on family and school has always been deemed to be necessary for their socialisation into independence. Giddens (1992) was optimistic that increasing individualisation was bringing more democratic family relationships between adults. Recent research has also focused on how far 'democratisation' extends to children, or as du Bois-Reymond (1995) put it, how far the traditional 'command-household' has given way to the 'modern negotiating household' (see also Brannen, 1996; Brannen et al., 2000; Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004; Livingstone, 2002).

Thus, children are faced with increased pressure to take responsibility for themselves and their life plans, but will also be affected by the perceptions of their carers as to the nature of the tension between dependence and independence, which in turn may have been influenced by changes in the lives of those carers. The contributions that men and women make to households has undergone substantial change, particularly in respect of women's responsibility for income generation (Lewis, 2001), and may be seen as part of the process of individualisation. These changes for adults would also seem to be an additional factor promoting children's greater self-responsibility and independence. For example, Solberg (1997) has suggested that children are taking possession of

houses vacated by parents, and by negotiating their use of domestic space, are also increasing their social age (see also Miller, 2005). However, there is also evidence of considerable 'risk anxiety' on the part of adults about children and childhood (Scott et al., 1998), which may work in the opposite direction. Indeed, parental absence from the home is also seen as the source of increased risk for children (Näsman, 2003). This will likely complicate the way in which parents feel about the transition of adolescents towards independence and how they handle it.

This paper uses qualitative methods to explore the way in which parents in two parent families, where both are employed, perceive the risks attaching to children's exercise of greater independence, and how those parents seek to 'manage' those risks. It also explores how far the perceptions of parents accord with those of children, and how far parents' efforts to exercise some control over the transition to independence is negotiated with the children.

## **Methods**

A total of twenty-six two-parent families were recruited to take part in the study by the PH recruitment agency. In each family, the mother, father and one child aged between 12 and 16 agreed to an in-depth interview. There were 14 male and 12 female children in the sample.iii Two interviewers visited each home, one interviewing the mother, and the other the father and the child separately. The families were located in the South of England, four in rural areas, six in London and the rest in towns in the Thames corridor. In all cases, both parents worked for at least 16 hours outside the home. Nine mothers worked full-time, 14 worked 20-34 hours per week, and three barely 16 hours [iv]. Seven of the mothers, all part-timers, worked school term-times only. All except one couple were owner-occupiers. Only four adults reported having no educational qualifications, 14 had GCSEs and 32 had further or higher educational qualifications; the women in the sample had higher educational qualifications than the men. In the majority of

families, the mothers and fathers were white British, two couples were both Asian and five couples had one white British partner and one ethnic minority partner.

The interview schedule for the parents covered the organisation of paid and unpaid work in the household; parenting activities, role and style; risks and risk taking on the part of the target child. In the case of the children, the interviewers asked about the regulation of their time and activities, networks, risks and risk taking and their perceptions of their families' work/life balance. In addition, both parents were asked to complete a five point scale to determine how much they worried about a list of personal behavioural risks (such as smoking, drinking and use of the internet), external risks (such as assault and abduction), and what we termed '21<sup>st</sup> century risks' (such as family conflict, environmental factors and consumerism). We refer to the results from this exercise in the text that follows as the parents' 'risk perception scores'. They were also asked to score the 'independence' of their child on a scale from one to ten. Both parents and children were asked to respond to vignettes outlining different kinds of risky behaviour on the part of teenage children. We are able to make some concluding comments about the difficulties of interpreting scale measures.

## **Findings**

### **Perceptions of Risk**

Parents' perceptions of risk, particularly those of mothers, were usually linked to the issue of children becoming more independent:

You have to move them to independence, you have to show them that there's a door and they've got to know how to cope with the wider world, and so yes, once you've pushed them out the door you always become anxious don't you?...the anxiety threshold goes up the more independence you give them (F4M) [v].

Or as another mother put it rather more succinctly: 'You've got to give them their freedom, but God it's hard' (F9M).

These comments show mothers' concern centring on the issue of independence in the world beyond the home, which meant that those with older children tended to stress that they worried more rather than less. The mother of a 16 year old boy who was almost 17 said: 'Seventeen, that's your worry, when they are going out and you have got to give them that bit of leeway and just let them go. Oh God I hate it' (F20M). Only one parent tended to an 'out of sight out of mind' approach. This was the mother of a 16 year old girl, who had been 'out of control' for most of the previous year, and who still engaged in binge drinking. Her mother insisted that she keep in touch via her mobile phone, but did not make any attempt to find out where she was going. Other parents did want to know, and set considerable store by being able to trust their children in this respect and thus to feel able 'to let go'.

However, when mothers and fathers were asked to score the independence level of their children on a scale from one to ten, mothers tended to score their children higher than fathers (in only two families did the parents offer the same score). It was clear that mothers were thinking largely in terms of how far the child could look after him/herself at home (in terms of cooking, washing clothes etc.), yet the burden of evidence from their interview transcripts and from their risk perception scores showed that they, like fathers, were much more concerned about 'external' risks.

Indeed, concern about risk was spatially determined in the first instance (see also Valentine, 2004 on parents' anxieties about public space). One of the parents living in a rural area was grateful that poor transport links made it difficult for her son to go into the nearest town and thus served as a barrier to more risky activities. There was very little anxiety about the child while at home. All families talked about the existence of some house rules, for example, in respect of answering the door, the telephone, the number of friends who could come round when the parents were not home, and using kitchen appliances and computers, again in the absence of the parents. These were usually age-related rules and seemed to cause relatively little friction. The responses of children showed that

they tended to accept their own house rules, even when they differed from those of their friends, not least because they could usually cite an instance of friends' parents who were more strict as well as less strict.

Most parents thought that children faced greater risks outside the home today than they themselves had done as children (see also Scott, 2000), there was only one father who felt that the risks were much the same, and had merely changed with changing circumstances, for example in respect of the risk of mobile phone theft. But this father had grown up in a very tough area and in tougher family circumstances than anyone else in the sample, and as Backett-Milburn et al. (2004) have observed, past experience is important for the way in which parents construct risk. A very few parents paused to reflect more deeply on what constituted risk over time. One mother was prompted to talk about the real meaning of risk, recalling that her own parents had not allowed her out of the house alone or to watch a film such as 'Grease', but had permitted her to get engaged at age 15 and to marry at 19. In this family, the father seemed more influenced by these experiences than the mother, in that he worried a lot about the possibility of teenage pregnancy, but neither mother nor father sought to impose major restrictions on the (14 year old) daughter's movements.

The main issue for most parents was how to strike a balance between permitting the child to go outside the home and exercising some control over the child's activities. Another mother of a 14 year old daughter worried that she had been overprotective and had compromised her daughter's self-reliance:

I think I pamper her too much, because of a lot of people, I don't want, although I do want her to be independent, I am more sort of, I want to know that she is sort of safe. I mean many a time she could have done more than what she has done, but I think I have tried to stop her because of the things [meaning the dangers that lurk] (F21M).

While this mother was more protective than most, a majority of parents tried to some extent to keep track of children outside the home by taxiing them around.

Many parents main fears centred on the harm that others might do to their children. About half the mothers and fathers, mentioned fears of assault and abduction and a significant minority referred to a specific case that was in the news at the time of the interview. Only one child mentioned such a case. It should be noted that some families had reason to be worried about external harm, almost a quarter of the children had experienced some form of bullying at school and four had been mugged. Rather more parents worried about the influence of other children on their own child's behaviour. The danger of "running with a bad crowd" was articulated by a majority of parents and was also acknowledged by a majority of children, especially in their responses to a vignette describing risky personal choices being made in association with peers. A few parents had jobs which sharpened their sense of anxiety, for example, in the cases of the father who was a part-time bouncer and the mother who was a criminal lawyer. Parents were also likely to relate the problem of peer group pressure to the personality of the child. They often compared the child who had been selected for interview to a younger or older sibling in this respect, usually declaring him or her to be more or less 'sensible'. Two sets of parents of boys who had already been in trouble largely as result of their friendship groups referred to their sons' wish to be liked and/or to be the centre of things as the source of many of their difficulties.

Nevertheless, the extent to which there was more often than not little relation between the child's actual behaviour (as reported by both the parents and the children) and one or both parents' perception of risk, is striking. This became particularly evident when the parents' risk perception scores on a five point scale were compared with their accounts of their children's day-to-day lives. The instructions given by the interviewer to respondents made it clear that they were being asked to scale their perceptions of different kinds of risk with the child we were interviewing in mind. However, in about one third of cases a parent reported having 'major' worries or worrying 'all the time' about a range of issues that bore no relation to the child's behaviour. It was often difficult to decide whether these parents were actually worrying more about the future rather than the present, the 'state of society', or whether they were just generally more 'risk aware'. Only a



tiny minority of mothers admitted that they were inclined to worry about all sorts of things and to fear the worst.

Often parents' who expressed extreme anxiety about risk according to their risk perception scores were remarkably abstract in their interviews about the dangers they feared. For example, a father referred to 'a sort of low lying fear, undercurrent, about what's going to happen, who is out there, you know, is he going to get into trouble...' (F22F). This wrapped up worries about a society that seemed more threatening than the respondent had experienced in his own childhood and about what might happen in the future. One mother had a high risk perception score and was a self-confessed 'worrier' about possible present and future dangers of all sorts and kinds, and yet (exceptionally) did not seem actually to know whether her 13 year old daughter walked home from school with friends or not. Another mother, who seemingly had no identifiable reason to worry about her 13 year old son, whose social life was entirely family based, reported that she and her husband were nevertheless building a pool room extension so that the son would not need to go out and face the dangers of the world beyond the home.

Parents' general orientation to risk seemed to be an important source of explanation for the discrepancy between the risk perception scores and the interview material. At the extreme, three parents said that they felt that taking any risk at all was "a bad thing" and all recorded high risk perception scores, notwithstanding that the children had thus far given very few grounds for concern. In the case of mothers, general orientation to risk was linked to a high risk perception score rather than the number of hours worked, which we had thought would be an important factor. While absence from the home has been linked to increased risk for children, the risks that worried parents most were external and ones over which they feared that they had little control. However, as we shall see, the majority of mothers in the sample had nevertheless sought to fit their working hours round around their children to a considerable extent.

The vast majority of parents felt that some risk was inevitable and “good”, the issue was again how to strike a balance and impose some limits. The need to learn from taking risks and making mistakes was widely acknowledged, even by parents who worried because they tended to be risk averse and, in the case of one mother, who would have preferred to wrap her daughter ‘in cotton wool and put her in a cupboard’ (F5M). As another mother put it: ‘It’s all a learning curve. They do need to grow up and find their own feet. Sometimes I suppose you think well, it wouldn’t be the way I’d do it, but they’ve got to learn by taking risks really’ (F3M). Some parents favoured allowing children to experiment – for example, with alcohol – in a ‘safe environment’ (their own home or a trusted friend’s house). Others stressed the importance of trying to ensure that children had the means – ‘the strategies’ – to deal with risks, although their practical advice on this score was often rather basic, most commonly, to walk away from ‘trouble’. Nevertheless, for a majority of parents risk was not simply equated with danger to be avoided. The problem was more that they were worried that their children did not have a very highly developed sense of risk and did not recognise the point at which taking risks became dangerous: ‘I think their age group are a bigger worry than the younger children because they are out there on their own, they don’t see dangers’ (F20M, with son aged 16). In fact a majority of children gave some evidence of internalising their parent’s ideas about risk, whether in respect of ‘stranger danger’ or ‘walking away from trouble’ (see also Backett-Milburn et al., 2004). A majority mentioned fears about particular areas and the dangers of walking home from school or in the evening alone.

Nevertheless many of the children, particularly those who were younger and those who had not begun to ‘push the boundaries’ revealed a certain naiveté about risk. One 14 year old girl talked non-stop in her interview about the peer group hierarchy at her school: the ‘dodgy’ crowd (popular and on top), the middle crowd (which she felt that she was now a part of), and the ‘boff’ (boffin) crowd. She described what the troublemakers ‘got up to’, but her mother felt that her judgements were immature and that she did not fully understand the risks that might be involved if she was invited to associate with them. However, this child was able clearly to describe a complicated hierarchy of social groups in her

school, and most children expressed firm views about 'risky places' - usually defined in terms of where the risky crowd gathered - and the need to avoid them (see also Kelley et al., 1997; Harden, 2000).

Among the older children, there was some evidence that they had thought about risk and knew what they were doing. This was most striking in the case of the 16 year old girl who had been beyond her parents' control for most of the previous year. Commenting on the vignettes, which portrayed teenagers on the brink of risky behaviour in the company of peers, she expressed the view that it was possible to take risks and still do well. The interviewer then asked:

So, do you think that you can do both, that you can take the risks and you can do well if you can just control it and balance it?

*Respondent:* If I get good in my GCSEs I would have proved that...I would have messed around at school, because I am not good in school...I am rude to the teachers sometimes. I do what I want at school. But then I do my work as well.

This teenager's behaviour was extreme. She drank to excess regularly, smoked and stayed out all night, but still thought that she was managing successfully to walk the tightrope between 'risk as buzz' and 'risk as out-and-out danger'. In fact she had a highly developed sense of risk and also realised that it was not impossible 'to slip too far', something she thought might happen to the teenagers in the vignettes.

Children's responses to the vignettes depicting teenagers about to embark on risky behaviours with peers emphasised the importance of what was morally right and wrong, and what was legal and illegal, and rather less on what was safe and dangerous (see also Abbott-Chapman and Denholm, 2001). The older boys in particular were more likely to respond in terms of what was illegal. Thus in the case of the boy who was depicted as being on the verge of joining a peer group who engaged in bullying, shoplifting, truanting and smoking, shoplifting was

highlighted by the older boys as a problem because it was illegal. Younger children, under 15, and most girls were more likely to comment on the rights and wrongs of a particular form of behaviour for others as well for themselves, which meant that they were more likely to condemn bullying [vi]. There was less inclination to comment openly on safety and danger (only two children admitted getting a ‘buzz’ from risk-taking themselves), nevertheless, the vast majority of respondents thought that the boy in the vignette should change his friends. In response to the vignette about a girl of 14 about to go to the pub in a car driven by a much older boy, only two children commented explicitly about the possibility of rape, although most thought that the girl should “think twice” about her actions, or tell someone where she was going, which may well also have constituted an implicit comment on safety and danger.

Parents responded at length in interviews to questions about perceptions of risk; children were often more monosyllabic, but recognised the issues that were being raised. External risks were the main concern of parents and children also made clear spatial divisions in their account of risks - linking risky peers with risky places – in a manner that reinforces previous research. Nevertheless, caution is required in interpreting what the parents were actually saying about risk, relying on their risk perception scores alone would have led to a rather different interpretation of their concerns about their children. In many respects, the differences between the perceptions of parents and children as to the nature of risk were not so great, although, unsurprisingly, parents expressed much more anxiety about risks. However, parents and children were engaged in a rather more complicated set of interactions when it came to ‘managing’ those risks.

### **Managing Risk in the Transition to greater Independence of Action beyond the Home**

Parents reported their strongest perceptions of risk in relation to either the threat of external harm, or the extent to which their children may get involved in risky personal behaviour as a result of the bad influences of a peer group. Yet the vast

majority were of the view that they could not stop children going out and taking risks, and indeed that it would be damaging to their development to do so. This meant that parents were most concerned about how to manage the process of 'letting go'. All wished that the transition to independence be 'controlled'[vii]. A variety of strategies were discussed by parents in their interview transcripts, involving monitoring, the regulation of time, and setting rules. For the vast majority of the parents, their strategies involved some negotiation with children, but the process of 'letting go' rested crucially on trust.

Monitoring their children's movements and behaviour was considered to be very important by parents. Mothers in particular felt that this required them to 'be there' as much as possible, especially when children came home from school. Nine mothers worked full-time, but two of these worked from home and in two further cases the fathers were working part-time. Only two fathers in these families worked more than 40 hours a week. In the remaining families, where mothers worked part-time, fourteen of the fathers worked more than 40 hours a week, and several mothers reported the need to 'balance' these long hours by working part-time themselves. While part-time work for women is anyway the norm for women in the UK, a majority of adult respondents in our sample had adopted what might be termed a 'family strategy' approach to the division of paid working hours between mothers and fathers. Fathers seemed for the most part to assume that this balance was 'normal', although one commented that he hoped that would be able to be around more for his grandchildren than he had managed for his son. It is usually assumed that women will increase their hours of employment as their children get older, which was indeed the case in three families, but two mothers in families where the father worked long and irregular hours had decided to decrease their hours of work when their children went to secondary school, in recognition of the difficulties the teenage years might bring.

The vast majority of mothers working part-time had tried to get hours compatible with their children's school day. In one case a mother had, in her own view, downgraded her job from university lecturer to (long part-time) secondary school

teacher in order to have more time to monitor her teenage children's behaviour. 'Regular flexibility' was considered crucial by mothers, particularly by those with husbands who worked long hours (see also Le Bihan and Martin, 2005). The 'informal flexibility' that was reported to exist in the vast majority of mothers' jobs was also highly prized; in an emergency they were permitted to be at home. Two women reported having changed jobs when such flexibility was denied.

The expression of a strong desire to 'be there' to monitor older children when the perceived risks to such children are mainly external seems paradoxical. However, the main purpose of 'presence' was to monitor mood and feelings, and to provide an opportunity for the child to talk. Six mothers referred to their own past experience, either in terms of having appreciated that fact that their mothers had always been there at the end of the school day, or, in two cases, their resentment that their mothers had not been there. One of the mothers who worked full-time worried that she was not around at this crucial point in the day and might not be 'picking up on any little indications that something is wrong', while a part-timer said:

...you lose sight of what is really going on and I like to think that I know roughly what is going on...I just feel that I would risk losing a focus that I have got with the children [if she worked full time] (F17M).

Bumpass et al. (1999) reported on the basis of US data that mothers' knowledge of children did not vary with the number of hours worked (whereas that of fathers did), however this was not the view taken by mothers in our sample. Mothers who wanted to be at home for their children also sought to exercise some control over their behaviour, making sure, for example, that they did not 'loiter' on the way home from school, or eat too much when they got home.

As Jensen and McKee (2003) have observed, children have no power over how long parents work. But in our sample the children's responses were in almost every case entirely neutral on the question of whether they liked parents to be at home when they came home from school. Several had between ten and 30

minutes to wait before their mothers arrived and spoke positively about having this time to themselves, but it is impossible to know how they would have felt if they had been left alone for longer. In two cases (both boys) children said that liked having someone around in the mornings and when they got home:

I wake up in the morning and there is normally breakfast cooking, you feel a sense of like security – you know you can sort of, there is always someone you can talk to and that (F9C, aged 15).

It is striking that parents laid such store by physical presence, especially given that technological change in the form of the mobile phone meant that ‘you can always find them’, as one father put it (F2F). Monitoring children by telephone was universal (see also Williams and Williams, 2005). One mother, whose son went to a fee-paying school, admitted that she encouraged her son to break the school’s rule by taking his mobile phone with him, so that he could text her to let her know where he was going to be. Another mother felt that she ‘could release quicker as a parent’ (F10M) because of the existence of mobile phones. However, a minority of parents stressed the disadvantages: that they no longer knew who was telephoning their children; that they no longer knew the telephone numbers of their children’s friends and therefore could not check with the parents; and that while they could ‘find’ their children, that did not mean that they necessarily knew where they were. Several children confirmed that they either knew ‘other children’ who did not tell their parents the truth about where they were going or who they were with, and two admitted that this applied to them:

...well it’s like if I say to her [Mother] I am going to my friend’s house, I don’t tell them which one. And if they go – “which one?”, I’ll think of the one that they like best and I’ll make like I’ll go to them. And because they don’t know any of the friends’ numbers, because I have got them all on my phone, so it just depends who I end up with really...(F12C, girl aged 14).

The very nature of the problem of managing the risks involved in the transition to greater independence centred for parents on how they could exercise control. In a few cases, particularly in families with 15 and 16 year old children (of both

sexes), they felt that they had lost, or were losing, the fight to balance control with letting go. For several parents sixteen, the school leaving age, signalled that the child had in any case to be held more responsible for his or her actions (see also Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004 on age-related responsibility; and Gillies et al., 2001 on the difficulty of exercising direct control over 16-18 year olds). In three of the four families with 16 year old children, the parents were greatly perturbed about their children's transition to independence. In one of these families, the father said that it was difficult to continually ask where the son was going, while the mother said: 'You can't dictate to him, if you dictate to him he will go further...you push them away' (F20M). This mother knew that her son smoked and worried about it, but felt that she could only forbid him from smoking in the house. The vast majority of families set some ground rules, particularly in regard to behaviour in the home and keeping in touch by telephone while out of the home. However, the parents of the 16 and some 15 year olds feared that the attempt to impose restrictions on their children's movements outside the home would alienate them further. In the case of the 16 year old girl who had been beyond control during the past year, the mother had long realised that she could not exercise any control over where she went or what she did outside the home, and so no longer wanted to know anything about it, requiring only telephone contact with the daughter in order to know that she was 'alright'.

Several parents of younger children were worried about their children's peer group, but said that they could not exercise control over their choice of friends – 'you can't choose their friends' (F3M) – and were often at a loss as to how to exercise any influence over this aspect of their children's lives. The most popular strategy in respect of younger children was to regulate the child's time to prevent 'loitering' or 'hanging about'; more than half the parents in the sample talked about their efforts to encourage what Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004) have called the 'purposeful use of time' (see also Kelley et al., 1997). One mother who was adamant that she had to be there when her children came home from school said:



I like to be at home when the children get home...[if you aren't] I think a bit of discipline goes out the door really...he would bring friends back...they'd raid the fridge, they'd start cooking...he might hang around...And I always say to them – we don't do hanging around (F3M).

Näsman (2003) and Gillis (2003) have commented on the increasing rigidity of children's schedules at home as well as at school, and have linked this to the time demands on working parents, however, in this sample, even the mothers who worked short part-time hours extolled the purposeful use of children's time. The driver was their perception of risk rather than their own time-pressures.

All but one family tried to set some basic rules and parents (usually the father) in four families attempted to 'tell' children in no uncertain terms about the kind of risks they ran if they did not obey. One father tried to put 'the fear of God' into his 13 year old daughter, warning her of the possibility of assault and murder. But most families relied on a complicated set of negotiations with their children, in which the degree to which they trusted their children and their children's judgement (see above p.) played a major part in how far the parents were prepared to let go: '...it is having that trust in you, it is letting out the leash a little bit, "yes you can go and do this now" and then wait and see if anything happens' (F20M).

The parents in three families told detailed stories of their children being caught in one place when they had said – via their mobile phones – that they were in another: '...so this at the moment is the big thing – if we can't trust, she can't be trusted' (F7M). Parents' responses to the vignette about a child going to use the internet at a friend's house to do homework while the friend's parents were out were also notable chiefly for the extent to which they said that they would have to place their trust in the teenager's account of where they said they were going to be and what they said they were going to do, and in the way they used the internet. Only two sets of parents favoured a strict monitoring approach, saying that they would want to check to see that the homework had actually been done.

The children's interviews showed that they fully appreciated the nature of negotiations based on reciprocity and trust. Some, particularly the older children, often made instrumental assessments of the benefits that accrued from reciprocal trust:

If you do stuff for your parents, then they do it for you, she [a friend who broke all the rules all the time] just don't see it like that...she just thinks it's funny to just be horrible (F15 C, girl aged 15).

If I went into town and they go 'you can't go into the ice rink' and I went they'd stop me from going into town because I have broken their rule. So if I break their rules they are going to take something away (F25C, boy aged 12).

If she [mother] knows what's going on she like trusts me a bit more, but if she doesn't and she knows when I am lying or whatever, so she doesn't really let me out or things like that, so now I just tell her the truth (F14C, girl aged 16).

This last girl admitted that she used to lie to her mother about where she was going, but she had found that telling the truth brought her more freedom. Her mother still tried to set a time for her to be home, but when she told her mother that she had no intention of being back until '2 or 3 [a.m.], she panics and negotiates anyway'.

A large number of parents felt or feared that they would soon feel relatively powerless in face of their children's march towards greater independence. Even in the case of one of the two home-loving boys, the father said that negotiation was important because if rules were dictated, his son would disobey them anyway. Younger children in particular spoke of being 'grounded' if they misbehaved at home, or were caught out doing something that was not permitted outside the house. But parents of older children seemed to feel that they had few sanctions at

their disposal, and parents in general often commented to the effect that their children “had to make their own mistakes”. Parents *wanted* to trust their children, and while almost a quarter expressed considerable reservations about their children’s judgement – because they wanted to be liked, because they were considered immature, or because they had chosen ‘unsuitable’ friends – no parent, not even in the three families with children who had histories of problematic behaviour [viii] said that they had no trust in their child. Such control as they were able to exercise over their children’s move to greater independence was premised on negotiation founded in trust, and some parents felt very strongly about the importance of putting their trust in their children. Thus in commenting on the vignette about doing homework on the internet at a friend’s house, the father of the 16 year old girl, who had been largely beyond control during the previous year, said that it would be a betrayal of trust to check up on where she was going.

However, the children’s interviews showed that parents were overly optimistic about their children’s truthfulness and honesty. Children often did not tell their parents about things they had done or things that had happened to them, sometimes withholding or providing inaccurate information in advance (for example, about which friend they were seeing), and sometimes after the fact (about something that they had ended up doing or that had happened to them). The wish to avoid some form of punishment was only one reason for doing this. Several children said that their parents would “only worry”, a few feared that their parents would over-react and/or behave in way they considered inappropriate, for example by visiting the school to complain about bullying. One boy growing up in a well-off family with very traditional values expressed his fear that his parents would think differently of him, in other words he feared losing their approval. And some older children found the idea of telling their parents everything that was going on repellent:

‘I like to keep my business private, most of it. But then I’ll tell her [mother] this and that and just tell her stuff that’s happened and stuff. Not usually about me though’ (F8C, girl aged 16).

'I find it weird to tell my mother everything...I don't really feel the need to like share that information [about what happened in school]' (F26C, girl aged 15).

Harden (2000) identified the fact that children withheld information from parents as a negotiating strategy. Certainly the two children just quoted also expected parents to try and lay down some rules, and to worry about them. The 16 year old girl, quoted above, who was one of the three children with problematic behaviour, had failed to do her homework over a long period of time: 'Mum said she wanted me to stay in and work and stuff...and I was thinking yes I should. But I just needed her to say it. Yes.' The 15 year old girl reported that she had a friend whose mother showed no interest in where her daughter went and commented: 'I'd find that a bit unnerving if my Mum didn't worry'. Another girl of the same age told a similar story about a friend and commented 'her Mum just didn't care'. Worrying about what was going on and what might happen, and trying to enforce at least some control was perceived as 'normal', and even caring, parental behaviour.

The difficulty perceived by parents was in how to exercise control over external situations, which they felt by definition to be beyond their control. No household opted for traditional 'command and control' parenting, although a small minority tried 'to tell' children, often in apocalyptic terms, what the dangers might be, and several tried to monitor their movements, often by taxiing them around. Thus parents were forced to rely on their parenting skills to negotiate from a position of authority. Most found this difficult, and even in families where there the children were not currently exhibiting risky behaviours, parents often feared what might happen in the future. Negotiations about greater freedom to 'go out' were described in some detail by parents and by children. Reciprocal trust was central to these negotiations and often subject to manipulation.

## **Conclusions**

Parents perceptions of risk, actual and potential, in respect of teenage children tended to be strong, although the discrepancy between the risk perception scores and interview data collected from these parents should alert us to the difficulties both of measuring and interpreting expressions of risk anxiety. The independence scores that mothers and fathers gave to their children were also at odds with the interview material in significant respects. Children were often aware that their parents ‘worried’ and, indeed, expected them to do so, while also often having little precise sense as to why this should be so, or how it might relate to their own behaviour. This had some justification in so far as parents’ perceptions of risk were often abstract and/or future-oriented.

Parents accepted that children “doing things for and by themselves” was crucial to their development: to “growing up”. Indeed, parents effortlessly mixed the agency and developmental perspectives on childhood that have increasingly been distinguished by sociologists (see Prout and James, 1997). Thus the issue became how to walk the tightrope between control and “letting go”. When we began this research, we thought that increasing individualisation in the sense of economic independence among adults in families would be a major factor in risk perception and its management. We anticipated, for example, that parents, particularly mothers, who worked full-time might have heightened risk anxiety. In fact, the strength of mothers’ perceptions about risk had played a major part in determining their hours and mode of employment in the first place. Even though risks were perceived to lie outside the home, being at home, especially at the end of the school day, was seen as important for a majority of mothers in this sample because they felt that they were better placed to “pick up on” what might be going on in their children’s lives. Knowing the child was essential to negotiations about greater independence that had in the end to be based on trust.

Parents endeavoured to monitor their children’s activities, but the main vehicle for this (the mobile phone) allowed children much more freedom to choose where to go and with whom than was once been the case. In the case of children who were 15 and 16 years old, parents felt that sanctions were almost non-existent, and

several feared that attempts to curtail children's movements would only succeed in "pushing them away". Negotiation was deemed essential, whether the parents preferred it or not, and we suggest that success in this respect was intimately linked with parenting style, which was not something that we had set out to investigate. For example, in the case of two of the three children whose risk-taking behaviour with peers had been problematic, both sets of parents felt that allowing their children to make up their own minds – 'drive his own life' (F25F), in the words of one – was part of making the transition to independence. Yet as one 16 year old girl told us, she had wanted her mother to 'tell' her to do her homework (see above, p.21). These same parents also took a principled approach to trust, which stopped them checking up on their children. But for their children, as for most of the children in this sample, trust was part of the negotiating process and was subject to manipulation. Negotiation as the means of handling relations between parents and teenage children is probably here to stay, but parents' heightened perceptions of external risk make it a difficult strategy. As in the case of adult relationships, a more 'democratic' approach to family relations may require more rather than less energy, skills and commitment.

i

The research for this paper was supported by ESRC grant no. L326253054. We are grateful to Kathryn Backett-Milburn for her helpful comments.

ii

The recent shift among academic sociologists towards seeing children as social actors in their own right (Prout and James, 1997) is interesting in this respect.

iii

Three children were aged 12, 6 were aged 13, 8 were aged 14, 5 were aged 15 and 4 were aged 16.

iv

44 per cent of women in the UK work part-time. In the EU, this figure is exceeded only by women in The Netherlands

v

Each quotation is followed by the family number (F4) in this case, and whether the mother (M), father (F) or child (C) is speaking.

vi

This is of course reminiscent of Gilligan's pioneering work on the gendered ethics of young people.

vii

It must be noted that it highly unlikely that parents who were not in any way concerned about these issues would have agreed to be interviewed.

viii

In two cases this would objectively have been considered to be the case (involving as it did, binge drinking, assault on a parent and absence from the home over night in the case of a 15 year old girl, and suspension from school in the case of a 12 year old boy). In the third case (of a 16 year old boy, almost 17), the parents, especially the mother, expressed great concern about his behaviour, but no law had been broken.

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