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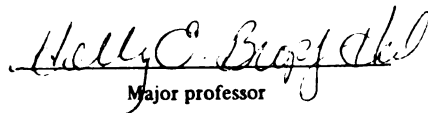
**WORRIES AMONG PARENTS OF EARLY
ADOLESCENTS TRANSITIONING TO OR CURRENTLY
ENROLLED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY**

presented by

**Heather M. Lewis**

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

**M.A.** degree in **Child Development**

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Major professor

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# WORRIES AMONG PARENTS OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS TRANSITIONING TO OR CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

By

Heather M. Lewis

A THESIS

Submitted to
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# ABSTRACT

## WORRIES AMONG PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS TRANSTIONING TO OR CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

By

Heather M. Lewis

This descriptive study examined the worries of 281 parents of early adolescents either transitioning to or currently enrolled in middle school in a suburban Midwestern university town. Anlayses revealed no significant differences in the number of parental worries as a function of adolescents' enrollment status in middle school. Parents for both groups were primarily concerned with their children's achievement in school, peer pressure, achieving a balance between providing structure and allowing freedom, and adolescents' studying habits. Both groups of parents reported few worries on their adolescents' potential exposure to or experience with drug/alcohol use and sexual activity. Implications of the findings on worries among parents of adolescents are discussed.

Dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Joseph F. McDevitt

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of major developmental change in children as well as a time of significant transformations and realignment in family relations. Raising adolescents can be stressful and difficult for parents. In fact, during this period parents are likely to feel less adequate and more anxious and stressed than when their children were younger (Ballenski & Cook,1982; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1990; Hoffman & Manis, 1978; Montemayor, 1983; Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988; Veroff & Feld, 1970). The worries parents experience during this time in their child's development are often different from worries experienced earlier in their child's development (Collinsworth, Strom, & Strom, 1996). Adolescents are experiencing a range of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes that can lead to periods of personal stress and turmoil (Elkind, 1984). Effectively dealing with these changes can be challenging for parents and they may struggle to adjust to their adolescent's rapidly evolving development.

Times of transition can be particularly stressful for both parents and children (Collinsworth, Strom, & Strom, 1996), and this research assesses parental worries both for parents of adolescent children making the all-important transition to the middle school experience as well as parents of adolescents who are already experiencing middle school. Research indicates that the transition to middle school can be particularly stressful (Bronstein, et al., 1996; Collinsworth, et al., 1996; Lerner & Galambos ,1998). Children are experiencing a drastic change in their educational environment at the same time drastic physical and emotional changes are occurring. They are looking for more

independence from their parents and are becoming more dependent on peer feedback. At the same time, academic demands have heightened (Bronstein, et al., 1996). All of these factors contribute to increased anxiety for both children and the parents who are raising them. To date, most research on the adolescent experience, including the transition to middle school, has focused on the adolescents' worries (King, Ollier, Iacuone, Schuster, Bays, Gullone & Ollendick, 1989; Ollendick, Matson & Helsel, 1985; Orton, 1982; Silverman & Nelles, 1988) or on parental perceptions of adolescents' worries ( Gottlieb & Bronstein, 1996; Staley & O'Donnell, 1984). Little research has examined the worries of the parents. As parental stress appears to affect parental behavior and functioning (Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, Robinson, and Basham, 1983; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Tuner & Avison, 1985; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983), and in turn, parent-child interactions (Collinsworth, Strom, & Strom, 1996), studying parental worry is important in identifying what supports could be helpful to parents during this critical time.

The social support literature reveals the importance of parents having supportive and nurturant resources as they traverse stressful times and situations (Unger & Nelson, 1990; Tracy, 1990; Hashima & Amato, 1994). The presence of social support networks, including informational support available from schools and similar organizations, may mediate the stress experienced by parents and may facilitate better coping with the demands of parenting (Unger & Nelson, 1990). Therefore, This research has implications for supportive agencies such as schools, community organizations and even informal support networks in assessing exactly what parents are worried about, both in the transition to middle school as well as during the middle school experience.

# PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to describe the worries of parents in their role as parents of 10-14 year old early adolescents transitioning to, or currently attending, middle school in a moderately urban, Midwestern university town.

In this study, the dependent variable is *"parental worries"* and the independent variables are *enrollment status*: either "transitioning" or "currently enrolled," and *demographic characteristics*, including religion, ethnicity, family income, family structure, parenting experience (target child is first child vs. subsequent child), work level (part vs. full time), contact with extended family members, and respondent's level of education.

## CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

The dependent variable, "parental worries", was conceptually defined as the concerns/worries expressed by parents of early adolescents transitioning to, or already attending, middle school. The definition of parental worries was operationalized using the instrument designed by the researcher entitled "Parental Worries Questionnaire" (PWQ). Specifically, one closed-form question (#5a. & 5b.) and one open-ended question (#6) assessed parental worries.

The independent variable, "enrollment status", was conceptually defined as "transitioning" and "currently enrolled." "Transitioning" refers to sixth grade students who would be entering middle school as seventh graders in the fall of 2001. "Currently enrolled" refers to current seventh and eighth graders at the middle school for the school year 2000. "Enrollment status" was operationally defined as grade level indicated by respondent on question #1 of the PWQ.

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The independent variable, "demographic characteristics" was conceptually

defined as religion, ethnicity, family income, family structure, parenting experience

(target child is first child vs. subsequent child), work level (part vs. full time), contact

with extended family members, and respondent's level of education. "Demographic

characteristics" were operationally defined by items #11 (religion), #10 (ethnicity), #13

(family income), #12 (family structure), #2 (parenting experience), #14 & #15 (work

level), #23 (contact with extended family members) and #20 &21 (level of education).

"Early adolescence" is conceptually defined as the period spanning children ages

10-15 years of age. Both scholarly organizations such as the Journal of Early

Adolescence (2002) and lay organizations such as the National Middle School

Association (2002) define early adolescence as including ages 10-15 years. Lerner

(1993) defines the stage of early adolescence as ages 10-14. Therefore, the age-range of

the target children in this study is consistent with the above generally accepted definitions

of early adolescence. Early adolescence is operationally defined by question #1 on the

questionnaire which asks for the age of the target child.

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study examined the worries of parents of early adolescents at the critical

transition to middle school and was designed to address a perennial parental problem as

opposed to being a study emerging out of theory. This study neither seeks to prove nor

disprove a theory. However, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory informed and guided the

development of this study. This study was borne out of work being conducted with the

school district of interest on supporting parents of early adolescents at the middle school

level. The school district was interested in providing additional sources of support for

their population, and a necessary first step in such a process is to seek information from parents regarding their particular needs and concerns (Berger, 2000). This descriptive study aims to be a beginning step in illuminating the potential power of the mesosystemic influence of the home/school connection. As the school of interest was interested in exploring the worries of their parents and subsequent pathways to better supporting parents of early adolescents, this study aims to contribute to the strengthening of the home/school interface.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was also consulted in the development of the survey. Bronfenbrenner (1995) argues that development is influenced by both the environment and the person as the person grows and interacts within a nested system of environmental contexts. Influences imbedded in these contexts, which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, might represent sources of concern for the parents of early adolescents. For instance, microsystemic influences such as home, school and peers were included in the survey as possible sources of concern for parents. Exosystemic influences were considered as well and included community safety issues and possible support from extended family as possible concerns for parents. Finally, macrosystemic influences were considered in including such questions as religion and ethnicity in tapping into cultural norms and values as possibly being influential in terms of parental worry. Bronfenbrenner's work suggests that ongoing, sustained interactions within these contexts, called proximal processes, shape development. Given this, the survey was designed to provide information about the ways in which characteristics within these contexts (family demographics, etc. ) might be related to parents' perceptions of worries.

In examining parental worries, one must consider the mesosystemic connections between parents (the unit of analysis in this study) and their child's immediate environments (the microsystems). For example, do parents know their child's friends? Are they aware of what is happening in their child's school? Are parents aware of their child's whereabouts after school and before they return home from work? Are these connections strong and informed or are they tenuous and muddled? In terms of macrosystemic influences, are our culture's values an influence on parental worry? Are parents aware of the media images and content their early adolescents are digesting? Are parents hearing the statistics in regards to adolescent risk-taking behaviors and challenges? In other words, do parents know what they *could be* or *should be* worried about? All of these contexts must be considered to truly get a picture of parental worry or lack thereof.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The central role parents play in socializing their children can not be denied or overlooked. A rapidly expanding body of evidence has indicated that adolescents are confronted with changes in multiple domains of their lives, including the biological changes that accompany the pubertal period (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991), transformations in their cognitive capacities (Newcombe & Baenninger, 1989), the shifting school context (Simmons & Blyth, 1987), and changes in family and peer relationships (Hill, 1987; Selman, 1980). Parents play an important role as a continuing resource for adolescents in healthy families, despite increases in adolescent autonomy and distance from parents (Hill, 1987; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Hauser et al., 1987).

Given the critical role parents play, it stands to reason that the absence of literature specifically regarding parental worries is a significant hole in the literature base. If parents are critical during this period, as previous research suggests, then research specifically focused on the worries of parents, and the implications of those worries for supporting parents, becomes a valuable contribution to the literature.

# CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research regarding the worries of parents of adolescents is severely lacking. Kipke's (1999) synthesis of current studies on adolescence points out that very little is known about how to educate and support parents of adolescents most effectively and to enhance their childrearing abilities. There appears to be an enormous gap between what is known about the effects of parenting on adolescents and what can be done to enhance it when parents struggle (Kipke, 1999). Understanding parental worries is important in trying to develop the strategies that are likely to be most helpful and effective for supporting parents of adolescents. There are numerous studies documenting the worries of adolescents themselves (King, Ollier, Iacuone, Schuster, Bays, Gullone & Ollendick, 1989; Ollendick, Matson, Helsel, 1985; Orton, 1982; Silverman & Nelles, 1988; Gottlieb & Bronstein, 1996), and even a few studies regarding parents' perceptions of their adolescent's worries (Staley & O'Donnell, 1984; Gottlieb & Bronstein, P., 1996), but virtually none specifically targeting the worries of parents of adolescents.

Transition to Middle School

The transition to middle school can be very difficult for both adolescents and their parents (Bronstein, et al., 1996; Collinsworth, et al., 1996; Lerner & Galambos, 1998). Early adolescents (ages 10-14 years) are experiencing biological and physiological changes associated with puberty, as well as coping with the social and learning environment changes that characterize the transition from elementary to middle schools. The combination of these two major life changes can be very stressful for parents and children.

Research has shown that many adolescents experience a decline in school performance and adjustment during this transition time (Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Simmons and Blyth (1987) found that students not only experienced a significant decline in school grades during the middle school transition, but also that the magnitude of this decline was predictive of subsequent school failure and possible dropout. In addition, researchers have found declines in student self-perception and self-esteem associated with the transition from elementary to middle school (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). With all of these facts considered, it is little wonder that parents, along with their children, can experience significant stress.

Interestingly, no studies were found regarding the worries of parents of adolescents transitioning to middle school. Some research has addressed the worries of the transitioning adolescents themselves as well as parental perceptions of adolescents' worries (Gottleib & Bronstein, 1996) but no attention was given to the worries of the parents. The literature regarding transitions focuses primarily on the worries and problems that adolescents experience during the transition to middle school, but the role of the parent, particularly the worries and anxieties of the parent, has been largely ignored. However, identifying topics and concerns of parents of adolescents is a critical issue in understanding how to provide parenting programs, information, or other supports to parents (Collinsworth, Strom & Strom, 1996).

<u>Parental Worries</u>

Due to the absence of empirical literature specifically regarding the worries of parents of adolescents, recent surveys of contemporary parental worries were examined. A survey conducted in 1996, carried out by the independent pollsters Penn & Schoen for the National Parenting Association assessed parental worries about raising children. Parents were sampled across socioeconomic groups, and questions were asked in an open-ended format with up to three responses allowed. The top seven responses included the following: crime/violence/gangs/safety (30%), drugs (21%), quality of schooling (17%), paying for preschool/schooling & college (15%), declining family/moral values (14%), providing opportunities for the children (7%), and health/AIDS (5%). It is important to note that this survey polled parents of any aged child, not specifically the parents of adolescent children.

A 1994 article in USA Today discussed the concern over working families' "time crunch." It detailed parents' concerns over the work-day being longer than the school-day, and the fact that children are returning to empty homes in the after school hours. Parents of "latchkey" children (children who return home alone after school) are especially concerned with their children's safety and exposure to dangers, both inside and outside the home (USA Today, 1994). Yet another nationwide poll conducted in 1999 by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and JC Penney found that the respondents cited unsupervised children in the after school hours as their top concern (Mott Foundation/JCPenney, 2000). Interestingly, the concern was strong among both parents and non-parents, male and female respondents, and across all political party lines.

Recent Gallup Poll analyses report parents are worried about violence in their child's school. A 1999 poll found that nearly half (47%) of all parents fear for their child's safety at school. Rural parents were more likely to be afraid (54%) than are parents in urban or suburban school districts (46% and 44% respectively), and parents in the South are more likely to be afraid (56%) than are those in any other region. In a 2001 poll, 70% of K-12 parents expressed concern over violence in their child's school, and 68% reported that it was either very likely or somewhat likely that a shooting similar to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton Colorado could happen in their community (Gallup, 2001). In addition, 76% of parents polled cited a breakdown in the American family as the primary reason for the recent rise in school violence. (Gallup, 1999).

Interestingly, a follow-up 1999 poll reporting on the most serious problems facing schools today reported violence as not being the most significant issue. Only 28% of parents ranked violence as a serious problem. This compares with 43% who cited drugs, 40% who cited sex, and 39% who cited discipline in the classroom as serious problems. In addition, nearly two out of three parents (64%) cited the social pressure to be popular as a serious problem (Gallup, 1999).

A 1990 article in USA Today reported that parents of teenagers often worry about their children's sexual freedom, venereal disease, drug abuse, and violence (USA Today, 1990). Some of these same concerns are echoed today. A recent website entitled "Digital High" houses a section called "Teen Issues." A parent and freelance writer expressed worries about sex, teenage pregnancy, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases as current concerns for her and other parents (Campoy, 2001).

Parental Stress and Demographic Factors

Due to the absence of literature specifically regarding the worries of parents of adolescents, the parental stress literature was consulted in examining what the worries of parents may be, assuming that stress and worry are interrelated and similar concepts, and how worries might vary as a function of family demographics such as parenting experience, parental employment, family size, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family structure, and religious affiliation

Parenting experience. Small, Eastman, & Cornelius (1987) found that parental stress was highest for parents whose children were in early adolescence. They also found that parents of first-born children reported significantly more stress than did more experienced parents. This finding was consistent with a study by Cohen et al. (1986), who found that parents of first-born sixth and seventh graders perceived their child more negatively and had more negative feelings about the child than did parents of later born children.

Parental employment and family size. A 1991 study which explored dual-career men and women and stress yielded relevant results. As Pearlin and Schooler (1978) proposed, the feelings of emotional stress in social roles are influenced by the amount of strain experienced. This study further conceptualized role strain as the individual's appraisal of the level of conflict between roles and of the degree of overload experienced from attempting to meet multiple role demands (Gilbert, 1985; Voydanoff, 1987). The study found that both men and women with larger families report higher levels of distress. Further, there are gender differences in role strain. For women, working longer hours is associated with higher role strain. For men, larger family size and having work

schedules that cannot accommodate family needs are associated with higher role strain

(Guelzow, Bird, & Koball, 1991). Yet another study regarding employment found that

between families with and without employed mothers indicated that the woman's

employment is related to both spouses' psychological distress (Levee, et al., 1996). It is

important to note, however, that in regards to maternal employment, it has been found

that effects on adolescents and other family members depend on the way the parents'

work affects family roles, relationships, and activities (Crouter & McHale, in press;

Hoffman, 1989) and is not considered deleterious just by virtue of the mother working

outside the home.

Ethnic and religious diversity. A 1998 study by Dumka, Gonzales, Wood and

Formoso explored parenting stress in terms of ethnically diverse and low-income

families. The study highlighted the need for research regarding parenting stress that takes

into account the differences inherent in populations varying according to ethnicity and

income. The goal of the research was to create a measure that would effectively assess

parenting stress in regards to the parenting role for these diverse groups. In conducting

qualitative interviews, they found several salient stressor factors which were mentioned

most frequently across ethnic groups: (a) out of household environmental hazards and

negative influences on children (indicated by concerns about violence, gangs, drug

pushing, association with questionable peers); (b) difficulties related to adolescents'

oppositional or independence-oriented behavior (indicated by demands for greater

freedom, neglect of household responsibilities, rebelliousness, oppositional behaviors,

complaints, and demands); (c) financial strain (indicated by not being able to buy things

the child needed or wanted and inability to pay bills); and (d) time and energy strain

imposed by life circumstances (indicated by raising child alone or without help, work time and energy demands, inability to monitor children, trying to develop a partner relationship). This research was paramount in bringing to light the differences in parental stress according to more diverse, "minority", and low income populations. Perhaps worries for these diverse populations may differ from the worries of the "majority" populations.

Ethnic and religious backgrounds may be significant in terms of parental worries, as they are key in illuminating differences in parenting values and practices. Research has shown that parenting practices can vary dramatically as a function of a family's ethnic and cultural background (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a fundamental aspect of the self that is associated with an individual's sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group and includes an individual's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors associated with ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1996). Lerner (1994) asserts that within each specific racial-ethnic group or subgroup, there are traditional cultural values and ideologies, including different expectations and sets of family rules, various cultural practices and rites marking passage into adulthood that may differ from the majority culture. Groups may also vary in their perspectives on the relevance of developmental tasks and needs. Thus, identity with a particular ethnic group is key in informing an individual's values, decisions and practices, and could strongly affect what a parent is or is not worried about for their child.

Gunnoe, Hetheringtion & Reiss (1999) point out the fact that most literature addresses parenting and child adjustment as a function of socioeconomic status, family structure, and ethnicity while very little addresses parenting and child adjustment as a

function of religiosity. This is unfortunate, they assert, considering that 92% of

Americans identify themselves as religious (Golman, 1991) and 57% of Americans claim

that their religious beliefs are important to them (Princeton Religion Research Center,

1980). Gunnoe, Hetherington & Reiss (1999) assert that very few general statements

about the influence of religiosity on family relations can be made. At this point, one may

only theorize that religious beliefs will indeed affect parental values, rules, norms, and

expectations for their own parenting behavior and for their children. In this same vein,

one might theorize that parental worry may differ as well as a function of religious belief.

Socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status has long been a demograhic factor

used to explain variations in family functioning. Level of income and level of education

certainly have shown to affect the way a family fares in society. Several studies indicate

that economic factors can be very stressful for all parents. Research has indicated that

financial stress in families is associated with physical and psychological health problems

in children and adolescents (Angell, 1936; Elder, 1974; Lempers, Clark-Lempers &

Simons, 1989; Marotz-Baden, Hennon, & Brubaker, 1988; Voydanoff & Majka, 1988).

Lempers et al. (1989) found that higher levels of economic hardship were associated not

only with higher levels of adolescent distress, but also with lower levels of parental

nurturance, which, in turn, was negatively related to the distress. Economic distress, in

turn, adversely affects parental functioning and exacerbates parenting role strain and

depression (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Ross & Huber, 1985; Pittman,

Wright, & Lloyd, 1989). A 1996 study also found that higher levels of family income

were related to adolescents achieving higher grades in school. Given the relationship

between income and parental distress, examining economic factors in relation to parental worries is particularly relevant.

Family structure, economics, and age of household head. Family composition has been found to affect family functioning and child outcomes. Single-parent family structure is associated with lower quality of parent-child interactions, less parental supervision, and family dynamics that have been shown to have deleterious consequences for adolescents (Dornbusch et al., 1985; Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987). In addition, family systems theories posit that stepfamily living arrangements tend to be complex and stressful (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989), especially for stepparents and stepchildren (Mills, 1984). Family boundaries involving half-siblings, step-kin, and quasi-kin (Bohannon, 1970) are ambiguous, and step-family members lack institutionalized guidelines and social support for their relationships (Bray, 1988; Cherlin, 1978; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Perhaps step-families have worries that may be different from "intact families." In a 1996 study concerning family structure and adolescent well-being, it was found that adolescents whose mothers and fathers are both in their first marriage have the fewest problems with socioemotional adjustment, academic performance, and global well-being (Demo & Acock, 1996). Therefore, parental worries may vary as a function of family structure.

Another facet regarding the importance of family structure for parents and their children is economic in nature. National data indicate that nearly half (47%) of children in mother-only families are living below the poverty threshold, compared to 9% of children in two-parent families (Lerner, 1993). Among black families, three of every five in mother-child families are living in poverty (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Overall,

poverty is experienced most by children living in non-white female-headed families; families that were often initiated while the mother was an adolescent (Lerner, 1994). In addition, the age of the household head is related to family income. More than one of every four young families and sub-families lives below the poverty line. Among those headed by a person under age 25, over one-third live below the poverty line (Lerner, 1994). Economic hardship has intense consequences for parents and children, including lower levels of parental nurturance, inconsistent discipline, and adolescent distress (Lempers, Clark-Lempers & Sommons, 1989; Voydanoff, 1990). It may be that parental worries may vary according to family structure. It stands to reason that worries of parents with economic difficulties may be different than worries of parents without economic difficulties.

Parents of children with special needs

Research has shown that parents of "special needs" children often experience more stress than parents with children who do not have special needs. A 1995 study revealed that parents of children with learning disabilities had very elevated scores on the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1989), indicating that they perceived far more stress in their role as parents than did parents of children without learning problems (Latson, 1995). Other studies have yielded similar results (Baker & McCal, 1995; Fuller & Rankin, 1994). Part of that stress may be related to how their children will fare in the school environment. Perhaps parents having children with special needs in middle school have worries different from those of parents whose children do not have special needs.

<u>Social Support</u>

Clearly, if not in the empirical literature, certainly in the popular literature, parents of early adolescents have a number of worries for their children. The presence of social support networks may reduce the number of stressful events experienced by parents or how those stresses are perceived by parents. In particular, the provision of concrete assistance may mediate the stress experienced by parents and may facilitate better coping with the demands of parenting (Unger & Nelson, 1990). Additionally, support networks provide role models for parents as well as a link to other sources of parenting information (Tracy, 1990). Interestingly, Hashima & Amato (1994) found that regardless of income level, the more help parents receive, the less likely they are to report negative parental behavior. Perhaps most relevant to this study is the fact that several studies have found that stresses associated with many family transitions appear to be mediated by social support (Abernathy, 1973; Liang, Dvorkin, Kahana, and Marian, 1980; Stemp, Turner, and Noh, 1986; Turner & Avison, 1985).

Social support may come in the form of extended family. In the past, parents have commonly relied on grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even neighbors to help them raise their children. This type of extended support system from families and friends in general is no longer widely available (Collinsworth, Strom & Strom, 1996). High rates of mobility, maternal employment, marital separation, and divorce have left many parents on their own and wondering how they can succeed with their difficult role (Furstenburg & Cherlin, 1991). It may be that families which lack the immediate and sustained support of extended family may have different worries from those who do have regular family support. As research suggests that social support is a

key factor in supporting parents, it becomes apparent that assessing the specific worries of parents is critical in providing the appropriate support for parents of adolescents. An absence in the literature regarding the worries of parents of adolescents is problematic, and this study aims to begin to fill in the gaps found in the process of completing this literature review.

The Current Study

This study explored the worries of parents of adolescents transitioning to-or already attending-a suburban middle school in a Midwestern university town.

This study provides a unique contribution to the literature base by being one of the first studies known to date which specifically examines *parental* worries as opposed to simply assessing the adolescents' worries. This study may be a first step to identifying how best to support parents of early adolescents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The overall purpose of this research was to describe the worries of parents in their role as parent of a 10-15 year old early adolescent transitioning to-or currently enrolled in- middle school. In order to frame this research, the following questions and hypotheses were devised:

1. a. What worries do parents identify as their children are transitioning to middle school?

   b. What worries do parents identify when their children are currently enrolled in middle school?

2. Do parents of children transitioning to middle school identify more worries than the parents of children who are currently enrolled in middle school?

HO1: Parents of children transitioning to middle school will not identify more worries than parents of children currently enrolled in middle school.

HA1: Parents of children transitioning to middle school will identify more worries than parents of children currently enrolled in middle school.

3. Are the worries of parents whose children are transitioning to middle school different from the worries of parents whose children are currently enrolled in middle school?

4. a. What worries do parents identify as "most pressing?"

b. Do parents whose children are transitioning to middle school identify different "pressing worries" than parents whose children are currently enrolled in middle school?

5. Is the total number of parental worries identified by parents related to demographic variables, including religion, ethnicity, family income, family structure, parenting experience (target child is first child vs. subsequent child), work level (part vs. full time), contact with extended family members, and respondents level of education.

HO4: There is no correlation between total number of parental worries and demographic variables.

HA4: There is a correlation between total number of parental worries and demographic variables.

## Limitations and Assumptions

1. The results of this study are generalizable only to the population studied: primarily Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class intact families. The lack of diversity among the sample does not allow for a true picture of parental worries.

2. This study only utilized one parents' worries: primarily the mother (79.4%). A clearer picture of parental worries would include responses from both parents and/or guardians of the target child.

3. This study assumes that respondents are honest in their responses.

# CHAPTER 3

## METHODS

### Research Design

This is a descriptive study which compared the worries of two groups: parents of children transitioning to middle school, and parents of children currently enrolled in middle school. The data collected consisted of a single 24-item anonymous survey completed by parents of early adolescents.

### Subjects

All parents of children transitioning from elementary to middle school (approximately 274) and all parents of children currently enrolled in MacDonald Middle School (approximately 548) were sent the survey for completion. In all, 281 questionnaires were returned to the researcher: 93 transitioning (6th grade), and 188 currently enrolled (96 7th grade and 92 8th grade). This represented a response rate of approximately 25%. The respondents were overwhelmingly mothers (79%). Fathers, stepmothers, step-fathers, and legal guardians/others comprised the rest of the respondents (See Table 1). The majority of the subjects were Caucasian (85%), while the remaining 15% reported their ethnicity to be Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, African American, and Other (See Table 2). The majority of the respondents(74%) reported that they were married (See Table 3). The majority of the respondents were either Protestants (39%) or Catholics (26%)(See Table 4). Many respondents reported being employed (82%)(See Table 5 for occupations). The mean for number of hours worked per week for respondents was 37.54 hours ($SD$=12.31). The majority of the subjects reported their partners as being employed (76%), while 10% were unemployed, and 13% responded

"not applicable." (See Table 6 for occupations). The mean for number of hours worked per week for partners was 33.97 hours ($SD$=17.78). Fifty-three percent of respondents reported their "work level" to be full time (See Table 7). Eighty-five percent of respondents reported a college degree or post-graduate degree (See Table 8). Seventy percent of respondents' partners obtained a college degree or a post-graduate degree. Fifteen percent reported partner's level of education as being "not applicable." (See Table 9). Total family income is reported in Table 10. The vast majority of subjects reported having contact with extended family (99%) (See Table 11).

The majority of the respondents reported having more than one child (87%), and 43% reported that their target child (for this study) was the eldest in the family, and were, therefore, parenting an adolescent for the first time. The mean age at birth of first child was 28.85 years ($SD$= 5.24). The mean age at birth of the target child was 31.43 ($SD$= 5.42). Eighty-eight percent reported that their child did not receive special education services, while 9% reported their child did receive special education services.

**Table 1**

Respondent's Relationship to Target Child

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Mother | 223 | 80 |
| Father | 47 | 17 |
| Step-Mother | 2 | 1 |
| Step-Father | 1 | .4 |
| Legal Guardian/Other | 3 | 1.1 |

**Table 2**

Ethnicity of Respondent

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Caucasian | 238 | 85 |
| African American / Non-Hispanic | 5 | 2 |
| Hispanic / Latino | 9 | 3 |
| Asian American | 12 | 4 |
| Other | 11 | 4 |

**Table 3**

Respondent's Relationship Status

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Married | 208 | 74 |
| Divorced, Not Married | 38 | 14 |
| Re-Married | 14 | 5 |
| Single | 3 | 1 |
| Widowed | 4 | 1 |
| Committed, Live-In Relationship | 8 | 3 |

**Table 4**

Respondent's Religion

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Catholicism | 73 | 26 |
| Protestantism | 110 | 39 |
| Judaism | 6 | 2 |
| Hinduism | 2 | 1 |
| Buddhism | 2 | 1 |
| Orthodox Eastern Church | 2 | 1 |
| Non-Denominational | 4 | 1 |
| Non-Religious | 26 | 9 |
| Other | 12 | 4 |
| No Response | 40 | 14 |

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**Table 5**

Respondent's Occupation

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Executives, Skilled Tech, Govt. Officials, Professors | 57 | 20 |
| Middle Managers, Professional/Technical, Independent Business Owners | 57 | 20 |
| Junior College, Public/Private Teachers, Skilled Labor/Trades, Real Estate | 86 | 31 |
| Factory, General Sales, General Service, Office/Secretarial Workers | 22 | 8 |
| Homemaker | 24 | 9 |
| Graduate Student | 9 | 3 |
| Retired | 3 | 1 |
| Not Applicable | 4 | 1 |

**Table 6**

Partner's Occupation

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Executives, Skilled Tech, Govt. Officials, Professors | 73 | 26 |
| Middle Managers, Professional/Technical, Independent Business Owners | 52 | 19 |
| Junior College, Public/Private Teachers, Skilled Labor/Trades, Real Estate | 54 | 19 |
| Factory, General Sales, General Service, Office/Secretarial Workers | 20 | 7 |
| Homemaker | 5 | 2 |
| Graduate Student | 4 | 1 |
| Retired | 3 | 1 |
| Not Applicable | 53 | 19 |

**Table 7**

Respondent's Work Level (Part vs. Full Time: Part $\leq$39 hours; Full $\geq$40 hours)

| Work Level | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Part Time | 79 | 28 |
| Full Time | 148 | 53 |

**Table 8**

Respondent's Level of Education

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Professional/Graduate Degree | 143 | 51 |
| College/Technical School Graduate | 97 | 35 |
| Some College/Technical School | 32 | 11 |
| High School Graduate | 9 | 3 |
| Some High School | 0 | 0 |

**Table 9**

Partner's Level of Education

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Professional/Graduate Degree | 136 | 48 |
| College/Technical School Graduate | 62 | 22 |
| Some College/Technical School | 31 | 11 |
| High School Graduate | 5 | 2 |
| Some High School | 1 | .4 |
| Not Applicable | 43 | 15 |
| No Response | 1 | .4 |

**Table 10**

Total Family Income

| Income $ | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| <14,999 | 9 | 3 |
| 15,000-34,999 | 33 | 12 |
| 35,000-54,999 | 28 | 10 |
| 55,000-74,999 | 42 | 15 |
| 75,000-94,999 | 41 | 15 |
| 95,000-114,999 | 38 | 14 |
| 115,000-134,999 | 16 | 6 |
| 135,000-154,999 | 17 | 6 |
| 155,000-174,999 | 12 | 4 |
| 175,000-194,999 | 4 | 2 |
| 195,000+ | 21 | 8 |

**Table 11**

Contact With Extended Family

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Several Times Per Week | 27 | 10 |
| Each Week | 42 | 15 |
| A Few Times Per Month | 69 | 25 |
| A Few Times Per Year | 113 | 40 |
| One Time Per Year or Less | 25 | 9 |
| Not Applicable | 1 | .4% |

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection Methods

Permission was secured from the school district to contact sixth, seventh, and

eighth grade families. The district database was utilized for addresses of families.

Letters of explanation with the elements of consent included, as well as the surveys, were

sent home via the mail to parents. Families wishing to participate returned the surveys

directly to the researcher via the mail in stamped/addressed return envelopes. Procedures

for obtaining consent and providing anonymity as outlined by the University Committee

on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) were followed.

Providing Anonymity

Due to consent being obtained via the completion and return of the questionnaire

(and not by signature) there was absolutely no identifying information returned to the

researcher, and thus the research was completely anonymous in nature.

Instrumentation

Parents were asked to complete the 24-item questionnaire entitled "Parental

Worries Questionnaire" (PWQ), which was designed by the researcher to assess parental

worries as well as basic demographic variables. The list of 27 items was informed by the

literature review, as well as by a review of the popular literature. In addition, informal

interviews with several parents of early adolescents were conducted. Parents were asked

to identify their worries by giving a yes or no response to each listed worry (27 total

items). In addition, from that list of 27 worries, parents were asked to rank their top 3

most pressing worries. Discipline/behavioral worries, health and safety,

responsibility/maturity, peer pressure/fitting in, and success in school were among the

worry dimensions assessed. See Appendix A for copy of the survey.

<u>Missing Data</u>

Of the 281 surveys returned, seventeen had some form of missing data. Four of

the surveys contained missing demographic information, and thirteen of the surveys had

either omitted or completed incorrectly the rating of the worries. It appears that many of

the thirteen misunderstood the directions to rate only three worries (their top three: #1,

#2, and #3 worries). Nine of the thirteen rated more than three worries, and the

remaining four did not provide any ratings at all. None of the surveys returned had

difficulty with the yes/no ratings of the worries that identified an item as a worry or not a

worry. The total number of worries did not vary significantly between respondents who

completed the survey and those who did not (p=.89). Given the anonymous nature of the

survey, recontacting respondents to attain the missing data was not possible. Slavin

(1984) suggests that missing data poses less of a problem in descriptive studies

examining the relationships among variables.

Analyses were run with all of the cases included as well as with the missing cases

deleted. There were no significant differences in results based on the complete sample

and the sample with missing cases deleted. Therefore all cases were included in the

reporting of the findings, so as to maximize the utilization of the information received.

<u>Data Analysis</u>

Due to the descriptive nature of the study, data analysis strategies included

descriptive analyses such as frequencies and percentages, t-test of means, and

correlational analyses. There were no differences in the type or number of worries

identified by the parents of seventh graders and the parents of eighth graders, nor did they

differ according to demographic characteristics. Therefore, the two groups were

combined into one group of "currently enrolled" parent respondents. For exploratory

purposes, any differences in the number or type of worries between sixth grade parents

and eighth grade parents were explored as well as any difference in type or number of

parental worries over time from sixth to seventh to eighth grade. There were no

significant differences in either case. Groups did not differ according to demographic

characteristics either. Therefore, results reflect comparisons between two groups: parents

of transitioning sixth graders and parents of currently enrolled seventh and eighth

graders.

Research question #1a & 1b (see Research Question/Hypotheses section above)

were addressed by running frequencies and percentages to identify the overall number of

times and percentage each worry was identified by parents according to enrollment status

(transitioning or currently enrolled).

Research question #2 and its corresponding hypotheses were addressed by

running a t-test to compare the mean number of worries for each group (transitioning vs.

currently enrolled).

Research question #3 was addressed by running frequencies and percentages to descriptively identify differences in reported worries according to enrollment status.

Research question #4 was addressed first by running frequencies and percentages to describe "most pressing" worries (worries most often ranked as the #1, #2, or #3 worry out of the 27 possible worries identified on the survey). Next, rank order for each worry item was figured to descriptively identify differences in ranking of items according to enrollment status.

Research question #5 and its corresponding hypotheses were addressed by running Eta correlations to identify relationships between demographic variables (nominal variables) and total worries identified (an interval variable). The Eta correlation is a measure of association that ranges from 0 to 1, with values close to 0 indicating no association and values close to 1 indicating a high degree of association. Eta is appropriate for a dependent variable measured on an interval scale (total worries) and categorical independent variables (all demographic variables).

# CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

Research question #1a. & 1b.

1a. What worries do parents identify as their children are transitioning to middle school?

b. What worries do parents identify when their children are currently enrolled in middle school?

The first research question sought to describe the worries of parents of early adolescents transitioning to-or currently enrolled in-middle school. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify overall number of times and percentage of time each worry is identified by parents as a function of enrollment status. The findings are presented in Table 12. Items are listed in descending order, from items most often identified by parents as worries, to those least often identified as worries.

**Table 12**

Parental Worries by Enrollment Status

| Worries for Transitioning | | | Worries for Currently Enrolled | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peer Pressure | % | 57 | Achievement | 58 |
| | (n) | (53) | | (108) |
| Achievement | | 52 | Child's Level of Stress | 58 |
| | | (48) | | (109) |
| How Much Freedom to Give | | 52 | How Much Freedom to Give | 56 |
| | | (48) | | (105) |
| Studying Adequately | | 51 | Studying Adequately | 54 |
| | | (47) | | (100) |
| Child's Level of Stress | | 49 | Setting Appropriate Boundaries | 53 |
| | | (45) | | (109) |
| Chores for Child | | 47 | Mental Well-Being | 50 |
| | | (43) | | (93) |
| Discipline | | 44 | Peer Pressure | 50 |
| | | (41) | | (94) |
| Mental Well-Being | | 43 | Discipline | 45 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | (40) | | (85) |
| Work/Locker, etc. Organization | 42 | Turning in Homework | 45 |
| | (39) | | (85) |
| Setting Appropriate Boundaries | 42 | Amount of Homework | 43 |
| | (39) | | (80) |
| Turning in Homework | 40 | Chores for Child | 40 |
| | (37) | | (74) |
| Amount of Homework | 39 | Friendship Group | 39 |
| | (36) | | (73) |
| Bullies & Teasing | 32 | Responsible Use of Resources | 33 |
| | (30) | | (61) |
| Development of Self-Control | 31 | Work/Locker, etc. Organization | 27 |
| | (29) | | (50) |
| Friendship Group | 30 | Health of Child | 27 |
| | (28) | | (48) |
| Responsible Use of Resources | 30 | Clothing/Hair Issues | 27 |
| | (28) | | (50) |
| Behavior in School | 28 | Bullies & Teasing | 27 |
| | (26) | | (51) |
| Health of Child | 26 | Development of Self-Control | 27 |
| | (27) | | (50) |
| Clothing/Hair Issues | 26 | Violence in School | 25 |
| | (24) | | (46) |
| Child's Loneliness | 26 | Child's Loneliness | 25 |
| | (24) | | (47) |
| Violence in School | 19 | Behavior in School | 23 |
| | (18) | | (43) |
| Safety in Community After School | 19 | Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 21 |
| | (17) | | (40) |
| Safety to and from School | 18 | Safety in Community After School | 21 |
| | (17) | | (40) |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 17 | Physical Safety at School | 20 |
| | (16) | | (37) |
| Physical Safety at School | 14 | Safety to and from School | 17 |
| | (13) | | (31) |
| Sexual Activity | 9 | Sexual Activity | 11 |
| | (8) | | (20) |
| Getting Lost in Building | 0 | Getting Lost in Building | .5 |
| | (0) | | (1) |

Research Question #2:

2. Do parents of children transitioning to middle school identify more worries than the parents of children who are currently enrolled in middle school?

HO1: Parents of children transitioning to middle school will not identify more worries than parents of children currently enrolled in middle school.

HA1: Parents of children transitioning to middle school will identify more worries than parents of children currently enrolled in middle school.

A t-test was used to compare the mean number of worries for both groups (transitioning and currently enrolled). Transitioning families reported a mean of 8.4 worries ($SD$=5.3) and currently enrolled families reported a mean of 8.7 ($SD$=5.2) worries. The difference was not significant (p=.64). Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Research Question #3:

3. Are the worries of parents whose children are transitioning to middle school different from the worries of parents whose children are currently enrolled in middle school?

Frequencies and percentages for each worry were used to identify differences in reported worries by enrollment status (transitioning vs. currently enrolled) (Refer to Table 12). For descriptive purposes, any items identified by more than half (50+%) of respondents, as well as any items identified by approaching half (40-49%) of respondents were considered identified worries. (Refer to Table 13 and Table 14). Additionally, items that were overwhelmingly NOT identified by parents as worries (70+%) are reported in Table 15. The least worried about items for both groups were drug/alcohol exposure and sexual activity. Eighty-three percent of transitioning parents and 79% of currently enrolled parents were NOT worried about drug/alcohol exposure, and 91% of transitioning parents and 89% of currently enrolled parents were NOT worried about sexual activity. (See Table 16).

**Table 13**

Worries Identified by More Than Half (50+%) of Transitioning and Currently Enrolled Parents

| Transitioning Worries | Currently Enrolled Worries |
|---|---|
| Achievement in School | Achievement in School |
| Peer Pressure | Peer Pressure |
| How Much Freedom to Give | How Much Freedom to Give |
| Studying Adequately | Studying Adequately |
| | Child's Level of Stress |
| | Setting Appropriate Boundaries |

**Table 14**

Worries Identified by Almost Half (40-49%) of Transitioning and Currently Enrolled Parents

| Transitioning Worries | Currently Enrolled Worries |
|---|---|
| Discipline | Discipline |
| Chores for Child | Chores for Child |
| Turning in Homework | Turning in Homework |
| Setting Appropriate Boundaries | Amount of Homework |
| Mental Well-Being of Child | |
| Child's Level of Stress | |
| Work/Locker/Personal Organization | |

**Table 15**

Items NOT Identified as Worries by 70+% of Both Transitioning and Currently Enrolled Parents

| Items Both Groups Identified as NOT Worries |
|---|
| Behavior of Child in School |
| Health of Child |
| Clothing/Hairstyle Issues |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure |
| Sexual Activity |
| Violence in the School |
| Physical Safety in School |
| Safety to and from School |
| Safety in Community After School |
| Getting Lost in Building |

**Table 16**

Top 2 Items NOT Identified as Worries by Transitioning and Currently Enrolled Parents

| Worry | Transitioning | Currently Enrolled |
|---|---|---|
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 83% NOT Worried | 79% NOT Worried |
| Sexual Activity | 91% NOT Worried | 89% NOT Worried |

Research Question #4a. & 4b.:

4. a. What worries do parents identify as "most pressing?"

   b. Do parents whose children are transitioning to middle school identify different "pressing worries" than parents whose children are currently enrolled in middle school?

   Frequency counts and percentages were used to describe "most pressing" worries, that is, worries that were most often ranked as the #1, #2, or #3 worry out of the 27 possible worries identified on the survey. The results are reported in Table 17, in descending order, from items most often cited as "pressing" worries (either a #1, #2, or #3 worry) to those items least often cited as "pressing." To provide a more detailed examination of parental rankings of worries, the #1 most pressing worries were analyzed (See Table 18). Worry items were arranged in descending order, based on the number of people who reported each item as a #1 most pressing worry. The #1 rank order item is the item most often rated by respondents as the #1 most pressing worry; the #2 rank order item is that which was ranked second most often as a #1 worry, and so on. In the case of a tie, (for example, the same number of people identified two worries as #1) an average place value was determined. For instance, in the group of parents whose children were transitioning to middle school, an equal number of people rated mental well-being and

how much freedom to give adolescents most frequently as #1 most pressing concerns. In listing the items from 1 to 27, mental well-being and how much freedom to give are items one and two. Since both were rated with equal frequency, a mean of the #1 and #2 place holdings was figured, resulting in a mean rank of 1.5.

Also to afford a closer look at parental ranking of worries, a sum worry value was calculated for the combined #1, #2, and #3 most pressing worries, and the items were rank ordered based on the worry value. For figuring the ranks for the combined #1, #2, and #3 most pressing worries, the #1 worry was assigned a value of three for being the most pressing worry, the #2 worry a value of two, and #3 a value of one. Then, each value was multiplied by the number of respondents ranking that item. Next, those three numbers were added to arrive at a total sum. Therefore, the sum reflects the value of the worry, with the higher the sum, the greater the worry. For example, in the group of parents whose children were transitioning to middle school, seven people ranked mental well-being #1, five people ranked it #2, and two people ranked it a #3 most pressing worry. The resulting sum worry value was thirty-three for mental well-being. Next, using the summed values, rankings were figured using the same procedure described above in reference to the rankings of #1 most pressing worries (See Table 19).

Comparing the #1 most pressing worry rankings (Table 18) between the transitioning and currently enrolled groups shows that, in the top quartile, both groups are worried about mental well-being, child's level of stress, health of child, peer pressure, and child's friendship group. Transitioning parents, however, also ranked discipline and how much freedom to give as pressing worries, while currently enrolled parents rated achievement and turning in homework as pressing worries. Likewise, in the bottom

quartile, both groups rated safety in the community after school, sexual activity, safety to and from school, responsible use of resources, and getting lost in school building as least pressing worries. In contrast, transitioning parents rated studying adequately and child's loneliness as least pressing worries while currently enrolled parents identified clothing/hair issues and chores for child as least pressing.

Comparing the combined #1, #2, and #3 most pressing worry rankings (Table 19) between the transitioning and currently enrolled groups shows that, in the top quartile, both groups are worried about mental well-being, how much freedom to give, child's level of stress, and studying adequately. Transitioning parents, however, also ranked peer pressure, health, and amount of homework as top pressing worries. Currently enrolled families, on the other hand, ranked achievement, turning in homework, and setting appropriate boundaries as pressing worries. Likewise, in the bottom quartile, both groups rated behavior in school, sexual activity, responsible use of resources, and getting lost in school building as least pressing worries. Transitioning parents, however, rated safety to and from school, safety in community after school, and physical safety at school as least pressing worries while currently enrolled parents rated drug/alcohol exposure, clothing/hair issues, and chores for child as least pressing.

**Table 17**

Pressing Worries as a Function of Enrollment Status:

**Transitioning**

| Worry | #1 Worry % (n) | #2 Worry % (n) | #3 Worry % (n) | Sum Σ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Well-Being | 8 (7) | 5 (5) | 2 (2) | 33 |
| How Much Freedom to Give | 8 (7) | 3 (3) | 4 (4) | 31 |
| Child's Level of Stress | 7 (7) | 3 (3) | 2 (4) | 30 |
| Peer Pressure | 4 (4) | 7 (6) | 3 (3) | 27 |
| Amount of Homework | 4 (4) | 3 (3) | 5 (5) | 23 |
| Health of Child | 7 (6) | 1 (1) | 2 (2) | 22 |
| Studying Adequately | 1 (1) | 9 (8) | 3 (3) | 22 |
| Achievement | 2 (2) | 4 (4) | 8 (7) | 21 |
| Work/Locker Organization | 4 (4) | 0 (0) | 10 (9) | 21 |
| Development of Self-Control | 4 (4) | 4 (4) | 1 (1) | 21 |
| Friendship Group | 4 (4) | 2 (2) | 5 (5) | 21 |
| Setting Appropriate Boundaries | 3 (3) | 5 (5) | 1 (1) | 20 |
| Discipline | 5 (5) | 2 (2) | 1 (1) | 20 |
| Bullies & Teasing | 3 (3) | 3 (3) | 3 (3) | 18 |

**Currently Enrolled**

| Worry | #1 Worry % (n) | #2 Worry % (n) | #3 Worry % (n) | Sum Σ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Achievement | 17 (32) | 7 (13) | 6 (11) | 133 |
| Mental Well-Being | 11 (20) | 7 (13) | 3 (5) | 91 |
| Child's Level of Stress | 8 (15) | 6 (12) | 6 (12) | 81 |
| Turning in Homework | 6 (11) | 7 (14) | 4 (7) | 68 |
| How Much Freedom to Give | 4 (7) | 7 (13) | 8 (15) | 62 |
| Setting Appropriate Boundaries | 3 (6) | 4 (7) | 7 (14) | 46 |
| Studying Adequately | 2 (4) | 6 (11) | 4 (8) | 42 |
| Development of Self-Control | 4 (7) | 3 (6) | 4 (7) | 40 |
| Friendship Group | 4 (7) | 3 (6) | 3 (5) | 38 |
| Peer Pressure | 4 (8) | 2 (4) | 3 (6) | 38 |
| Amount of Homework | 3 (5) | 4 (8) | 3 (6) | 37 |
| Health of Child | 4 (7) | 2 (4) | 4 (7) | 36 |
| Bullies & Teasing | 3 (5) | 4 (7) | 2 (4) | 33 |
| Work/Locker Organization | 2 (3) | 3 (5) | 6 (11) | 30 |

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**Table 17 (Continued)**

| Worry | #1 Worry | #2 Worry | #3 Worry | Sum Σ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Turning in Homework | 3 | 4 | 0 | 17 |
| Chores for Child | (3) 2 | (4) 2 | (0) 3 | 13 |
| Child's Loneliness | (2) 0 | (2) 1 | (3) 9 | 11 |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | (0) 2 | (1) 1 | (9) 2 | 10 |
| Clothing/Hair Issues | (2) 1 | (1) 3 | (2) 1 | 10 |
| Violence in the School | (1) 1 | (3) 2 | (1) 0 | 7 |
| Behavior in School | (1) 1 | (2) 1 | (0) 2 | 7 |
| Safety to and from School | (1) 0 | (1) 2 | (2) 2 | 6 |
| Safety in Community After School | (0) 1 | (2) 1 | (2) 1 | 6 |
| Physical Safety at School | (1) 1 | (1) 1 | (1) 0 | 5 |
| Sexual Activity | (1) 0 | (1) 2 | (0) 1 | 5 |
| Responsible Use of Resources | (0) 0 | (2) 0 | (1) 2 | 2 |
| Getting Lost in School Building | (0) 0 | (0) 0 | (2) 0 | 0 |
|  | (0) 0 | (0) 0 | (0) 0 |  |

| Worry | #1 Worry | #2 Worry | #3 Worry | Sum Σ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Discipline | 1 | 4 | 5 | 30 |
| Child's Loneliness | (2) 3 | (7) 3 | (10) 2 | 29 |
| Violence in the School | (5) 2 | (5) 2 | (4) 2 | 19 |
| Safety in Community After School | (3) 1 | (3) 3 | (4) 2 | 19 |
| Physical Safety at School | (2) 2 | (5) 1 | (3) 2 | 19 |
| Safety to and from School | (4) 1 | (2) 3 | (3) 1 | 17 |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | (1) 1 | (6) 1 | (2) 1 | 15 |
| Clothing/Hair Issues | (3) 2 | (2) 1 | (2) 3 | 13 |
| Responsible Use of Resources | (2) 1 | (1) 1 | (5) 2 | 10 |
| Behavior in School | (1) 1 | (2) 1 | (3) 1 | 12 |
| Chores for Child | (2) 0 | (2) 1 | (2) 1 | 7 |
| Sexual Activity | (0) .5 | (2) .5 | (3) 0 | 5 |
| Getting Lost in School Building | (1) 0 | (1) 0 | (0) 0 | 0 |
|  | (0) 0 | (0) 0 | (0) 0 |  |

**Table 18**

Mean Ranks of #1 Most Pressing Worries by Enrollment Status

| Worry | Transitioning (N=92) Mean Rank | Worry | Currently Enrolled (N=188) Mean Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Well-Being | 1.5 | Achievement | 1 |
| How Much Freedom | 1.5 | Mental Well-Being | 2 |
| Child's Level of Stress | 3.5 | Child's Level of Stress | 3 |
| Health of Child | 3.5 | Turning in Homework | 4 |
| Discipline | 5 | Peer Pressure | 5 |
| Peer Pressure | 8 | Health of Child | 7.5 |
| Amount of Homework | 8 | Friendship Group | 7.5 |
| School Organization | 8 | How Much Freedom | 7.5 |
| Develop. of Self-Control | 8 | Develop. of Self-Control | 7.5 |
| Friendship Group | 8 | Setting Boundaries | 10 |
| Setting Boundaries | 12 | Bullies & Teasing | 12 |
| Bullies & Teasing | 12 | Amount of Homework | 12 |
| Turning in Homework | 12 | Child's Loneliness | 12 |
| Achievement | 15 | Studying Adequately | 14.5 |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 15 | Physical Safety at School | 14.5 |
| Chores for Child | 15 | Violence in School | 17 |
| Behavior in School | 19.5 | School Organization | 17 |
| Clothing/Hair Issues | 19.5 | Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 17 |
| Violence in School | 19.5 | Discipline | 20.5 |
| Physical Safety in School | 19.5 | Safe in Community | 20.5 |
| Safety in Community | 19.5 | Clothing/Hair Issues | 20.5 |
| Studying Adequately | 19.5 | Behavior in School | 20.5 |
| Responsible w/Resources | 25 | Safe to/from School | 24 |
| Child's Loneliness | 25 | Responsible w/Resources | 24 |
| Safe to/from School | 25 | Sexual Activity | 24 |
| Sexual Activity | 25 | Chores for Child | 26.5 |
| Getting Lost in Building | 25 | Getting Lost in Building | 26.5 |

**Table 19**

Mean Ranks of Combined #1,#2,&#3 Most Pressing Worries by Enrollment Status

| Worry | Transitioning (N=92) Mean Rank | Worry | Currently Enrolled (N=188) Mean Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Well-Being | 1 | Achievement | 1 |
| How Much Freedom | 2 | Mental Well-Being | 2 |
| Child's Level of Stress | 3 | Child's Level of Stress | 3 |
| Peer Pressure | 4 | Turning in Homework | 4 |
| Amount of Homework | 5 | How Much Freedom | 5 |
| Health | 6.5 | Setting Boundaries | 6 |
| Studying Adequately | 6.5 | Studying Adequately | 7 |
| Achievement | 9.5 | Develop. of Self-Control | 8 |
| School Organization | 9.5 | Friendship Group | 9.5 |
| Develop. of Self-Control | 9.5 | Peer Pressure | 9.5 |
| Friendship Group | 9.5 | Amount of Homework | 11 |
| Setting Boundaries | 12.5 | Health | 12 |
| Discipline | 12.5 | Bullies & Teasing | 13 |
| Bullies & Teasing | 14 | School Organization | 14.5 |
| Turning in Homework | 15 | Discipline | 14.5 |
| Chores for Child | 16 | Child's Loneliness | 16 |
| Child's Loneliness | 17 | Violence in School | 17 |
| Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 18.5 | Safe in Community | 18 |
| Clothing/Hair Issues | 18.5 | Physical Safety at School | 18 |
| Violence in School | 20.5 | Safe to/from School | 20 |
| Behavior in School | 20.5 | Drug/Alcohol Exposure | 21 |
| Safe to/from School | 22.5 | Clothing/Hair Issues | 22 |
| Safe in Community | 22.5 | Behavior in School | 23 |
| Physical Safety at School | 24.5 | Responsible w/Resources | 24 |
| Sexual Activity | 24.5 | Chores for Child | 25 |
| Responsible w/Resources | 26 | Sexual Activity | 26 |
| Getting Lost in Building | 27 | Getting Lost in Building | 27 |

Research Question #5:

5.  Is the total number of parental worries identified by parents related to

    demographic variables, including religion, ethnicity, family income, family

    structure, parenting experience (target child first child vs. subsequent child), work

    level (part vs. full time), contact with extended family members and respondent's

    level of education?

41

HO4: There is no correlation between total number of parental worries and demographic variables.

HA4: There is a correlation between total number of parental worries and demographic variables.

The Eta correlation was used to identify relationships between demographic variables (nominal variables) and total worries identified (an interval variable). The eta correlation is a measure of association that ranges from 0 to 1, with values close to 0 indicating no association, and values close to 1 indicating a high degree of association. Eta is appropriate for a dependent variable measured on an interval scale (total worries) and categorical independent variables (all demographic variables). Demographic characteristics used in correlational analyses are as follows: religion, ethnicity, family income, family structure (intact vs. not intact), parenting experience (target child first child vs. subsequent child), work level (part vs. full time), contact with extended family members, and respondent's level of education.

The analyses run describe only the magnitude of association between variables. After a thorough study of the SPSS software, it was discovered that it was not possible to assess level of significance. SPSS 9, 10, and 11 was consulted. In addition, other information regarding the Eta correlation was explored, and assessing level of significance was not found to be possible. Therefore, results in the correlational analyses reflect only the magnitude of association between the variables, and not the level of significance. Results are reported in Table 20. The association between demographic variables and total number of worries is very low, as is evidenced in the association values in Table 20. None of the values come close to approaching 1.

**Table 20**

Eta Correlations for Demographic Variables and Total Worries

| Demographic Variable | Value of Association Between Variables |
|---|---|
| Religion | .158 |
| Ethnicity | .160 |
| Income | .212 |
| Family Structure | .189 |
| Parenting Experience | .118 |
| Work Level | .096 |
| Respondent's Level of Education | .110 |

Qualitative Analyses:

One open-ended question was used to assess parental worries (#6 on the PWQ). The question asked for other worries (aside from the listed concerns already rated in question #5) parents may have had at that time. Of the sixth grade respondents, 42% (n=39) of parents reported additional concerns, 41% (n=38) left the question blank, and 17% (n=16) explicitly reported "none." Of the seventh grade respondents, 48% (n=44) reported additional concerns, 42% (n=39) left the question blank, and 10% (n=9) stated "none." Of the eighth grade respondents, 40% (n=37) of parents reported additional concerns, 47% (n=43) left the question blank, and 6% (n=6) stated "none."

Parents varied widely in their responses, although there were a few cases where parents reported the same concerns (See Table 21 for summary of qualitative responses). The transition to middle school, overscheduling (too many activities), peer pressure, and developing a positive circle of friends were among the common worries. Individual parents also reported being concerned with lying/dishonesty, "talking back," living according to family's values, "not thinking"/impulsivity, going to sleep "on time," lack of motivation, and not helping with family chores/responsibilities. Academic concerns

included increased workload of middle school, getting enough help with reading/writing, physical education in middle school, overemphasis on "projects" as form of learning, lack of biblical teaching, and narrow/unchallenging academics. In terms of school concerns, parents reported worry about lack of caring by some teachers, not enough resources in the middle school: allowing some children to "fall through the cracks," and school funding being cut each year diminishing "top programs." Balancing academics and extra-curricular activities was mentioned as a worry. School/friend pressures were mentioned by several families, including the aforementioned peer pressure/ developing a positive circle of friends and discrimination based on family income. Family issues such as moving, divorce, after-school supervision, sibling issues, spending enough time with their children, practicing religious faith enough with children, and saving for college were mentioned as concerns. Self esteem and maturity issues such as body image, teasing for non-athleticism, child learning to advocate for self, being judged by looks/clothing, when to allow child to shave legs/wear make-up, and the mature looks (from media) that girls are wanting to wear are all concerns expressed by sixth grade parents. One parent expressed worry about the additional worries that she felt were yet to come. She wrote, "I can assure you that next year my worrying will mount. Having an older sibling, it all "hits" with a bang in seventh grade- a very stressful year!! With this, our second child, we'll be more aware..."

Again, parents varied in their responses to concerns at the seventh grade level, but several concerns were reported by more than one parent, including work-load issues (too much work unevenly spaced throughout the year), too much time spent on the computer or computer games, balancing activities/overscheduling, peer pressure, interactions with

siblings, and the effects of divorce. Other responses mentioned by individual parents included such issues as verbalizing feelings/communication, negative attitude towards school, mood swings, possible depression, pressure on self to succeed, the development of self-control, assuming responsibility for actions, self-centeredness, developing moral standards, becoming more independent, and balancing child's own needs with helping others. Family concerns such as blending families in remarriage, sibling issues, relationships between child and parents, being alone after school, dealing with different standards/beliefs of friends' families and goal setting for child's college/career were mentioned. Self esteem and confidence issues were reported such as speaking up in class, weight issues, and "being happy." School issues included such concerns as teachers not helping with organizational skills, the professional abilities of some teachers, literature chosen for study by the school, classroom size, fighting/lack of respect some students have for others and how that is dealt with, and being informed of school activities in a timely manner. Academic issues included turning in homework, dramatic changes in grades, improving school performance, character education (or lack thereof), lack of programs for Spanish-speaking students, and curriculum/quality of education. Lastly, peer groups were mentioned as concerns, including child's ability to make positive friends, having all friends from opposite sex and no friends of same sex, peer pressure, and "dumbing down" to fit in.

Eighth grade parent respondents also varied in their responses, but again, a few concerns were shared by several parents, including the transition to high school, the influence of siblings, goal setting for the future, lack of self-motivation, self-esteem issues, and balancing homework and extra-curricular activites/overscheduling.

Additional concerns included primarily behavioral concerns such as lying/dishonesty, lack of communication between child and parents, attitude issues, anger management, manners/respect, living values/morals, lack of respect for authority figures, and pressure put on self to achieve. Family concerns such as monitoring computer/computer game usage, contact with extended family, too much T.V., and lack of parental supervision (by friends' parents) were also reported. School concerns included such issues as teacher incompetence, lack of supervision in halls between classes, too large class sizes, number of movies and their content watched in school, too much information too soon (sex ed.), and lack of emphasis on competition. Academic issues included too much homework, quality of education, study habits of child, and the impending transition to high school. Self-esteem and confidence were mentioned as concerns, including weight issues, shyness, and lack of self-confidence. Surprisingly, only one respondent mentioned peer groups or concerns with relationships with the opposite sex.

**Table 21**

Additional Worries Reported Qualitatively

| **Common Worries Across Groups** (more than one parent mentioned in all grade levels) |
| --- |
| Overscheduling/balancing academics with extracurricular activities |
| Sibling issues |
| Communication with parents/verbalizing feelings |
| Self-esteem and body image issues |
| Academic achievement |
| **6th Grade Worries** (more than one parent mentioned) |
| Transition to middle school |
| Overscheduling |
| Peer Pressure |
| Developing a positive circle of friends |
| **7th Grade Worries** (more than one parent mentioned) |
| Academic work-load (too much work, unevenly spaced) |
| Too much time spent on computer/computer games |
| Overscheduling |
| Peer pressure |

Interaction with siblings
Effects of divorce

**8<sup>th</sup> Grade Worries**

Transition to high school
Influence of siblings
Goal-setting for future
Lack of self-motivation
Self-esteem issues
Overscheduling

# CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Findings

This study described the worries of parents of early adolescent children either transitioning to-or currently enrolled in-middle school. As there was an absence of literature specifically targeting the worries of early adolescent parents, the current study was largely exploratory and descriptive in nature. In addition to describing parental worries, this study also hypothesized that parental worries would vary according to enrollment status (either transitioning or currently enrolled). Based on the literature regarding the transition to middle school and its stressful nature (Bronstein, et al., 1996; Collinsworth, et al., 1996; Lerner & Galambos, 1998) this study hypothesized that parents of transitioning students would identify *more* worries as well as *different* worries than parents of currently enrolled students. In addition, the current study hypothesized that parents of transitioning students would identify different "pressing worries" than the parents of currently enrolled students.

### Parental Worries

The results from this study failed to detect differences either in number or types of worries between the two groups assessed. Of the total list of worries, parents of transitioning students reported a mean of 8.4 worries and parents of currently enrolled students reported a mean of 8.7 worries (difference not significant at $p=.64$). In analyzing the worries of each group, many similarities were found. More than half of the transitioning parents expressed worry for the following: achievement in school, peer pressure, how much freedom to give their child, and studying adequately. More than half

of the currently enrolled parents expressed each of those same worries, and two

additional worries: their child's level of stress and setting appropriate boundaries for their

child. Other worries were expressed to a slightly lesser extent. Almost half of

transitioning parents expressed discipline, mental well-being of their child, child's level

of stress, setting appropriate boundaries, chores, turning in homework, and

work/locker/personal organization as worries. Almost half of parents of currently

enrolled students expressed discipline, chores, amount of homework, and turning in

homework as worries.

Perhaps even more interesting than what parents were worried about was what

parents were not worried about. As noted in Table 15, the vast majority (70% or more)

of both groups were not worried about the following (meaning that they did not select

each of these items as worries): behavior of child in school, health of child,

clothing/hairstyle issues, drug/alcohol exposure, sexual activity, violence in the school,

child's loneliness, safety in school, safety to and from school, safety in the community

after school, and getting lost in the building. The most startling of these worries is the

percentage of parents who were overwhelmingly not worried about drug/alcohol

exposure (83% of transitioning not worried and 79% of currently enrolled not worried),

and sexual activity (91% of transitioning not worried and 89% of currently enrolled not

worried). The literature regarding the risk-taking behaviors of early adolescents indicates

that the time of early adolescence is particularly vulnerable for experimenting with high-

risk behaviors such as drug/alcohol experimentation and sex (Carnegie Council on

Adolescent Development, 1995; Udry, et al., 1997). A study by the Centers For Disease

Control and Prevention (2001) found that young adolescents (ages 11-14) are engaging in

multiple health-risk behaviors. For example, 50% had tried alcohol (prevalence increased by grade: 34% of sixth graders, 55% of seventh graders, and 61% of eighth graders), 18% had tried marijuana, and 13% had already had sex (prevalence increased by grade level: 10% of sixth graders, 13% of seventh graders, and 17% of eighth graders) (Fetro & Coyle, 2001). With these statistics, one could wonder why parents would be so overwhelmingly not worried about drug/alcohol exposure and sexual activity. Are parents not processing the information coming to them regarding the onset of risk-taking behaviors? Media messages seem strong and clear, but are parents processing the incoming information? Is there a breakdown in the exosystemic connection between media reports and parental processing? Martin and Martin (2000) pose two explanations for ineffectiveness in recognizing and dealing with adolescent risk-taking behaviors. They assert that affluent parents often seem to send mixed messages to their children— that their lives are too demanding, and at the same time, because of their affluence, they do not see the needs of their troubled teenagers. They note that when these problems do "hit home" parents' reactions are often shock or dismay. Most parents in the current study appear to have financial security with approximately 40% of this sample reporting family incomes of at least $95,000. In addition, they live in a highly educated, suburban, university community. Parents may be lulled into a false sense of security and may feel that children growing up in such a seemingly comfortable and "secure" environment would not be tempted by or exposed to drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. Again, are parents aware of who their children's friends are or the activities in which they are involved? Bronfenbrenner (1986) asserts that when basic values between different microsystems diverge (i.e. peer values are in conflict with parental values), tensions

develop in the mesosystem that can pull the individual's loyalties in different directions. Parents may not be aware that their early adolescent's microsystems are in conflict, and thus may be unaware that their children may be diverging from values in the home. In addition, Gottleib and Bronstein (1996) found that parents can underestimate the amount their adolescent children worry as well as what their adolescents are worrying about. So, while teenagers may be thinking or worrying about risky behaviors such as drug use and sexual experimentation, parents may not be attuned to their children's worries or to the magnitude of those worries. Again, a false sense of security could be created by being "out of touch" with the reality of their adolescent's world.

Parent reporting of being unconcerned regarding violence in the school, safety in the school, their child getting lost in the building, and their child's behavior in school may all be indications of their perception of the effectiveness their child's school displays in handling these issues. Unconcern for clothing/hairstyle issues, the health of their child, their child's safety in traveling to and from school as well as their child's safety in the community after school may be partially explained by the middle-class to upper middle-class nature of the respondents. Adequate economic resources as well as access to medical care may make those worries largely obsolete for this population.

Parent Ranking of Worries

There were many similarities in worry rankings between transitioning and currently enrolled parents. Comparing the #1 most pressing worry rankings (Table 18) between the transitioning and currently enrolled groups shows that, in the top quartile, both groups are worried about mental well-being, child's level of stress, health of child, peer pressure, and child's friendship group. Transitioning parents, however, also ranked

discipline and how much freedom to give as pressing worries, while currently enrolled

parents rated achievement and turning in homework as pressing worries. Perhaps

transitioning parents are anticipating the change in their child's microsystem (new school

environment) and are therefore more concerned with evolving discipline and freedom

issues for their children, whereas currently enrolled parents may already be dealing with

those issues, and are more concerned now with achievement/homework issues as they

look onward to high school. In the bottom quartile, both groups rated safety in the

community after school, sexual activity, safety to and from school, responsible use of

resources, and getting lost in school building as least pressing worries. In contrast,

transitioning parents rated studying adequately and child's loneliness as least pressing

worries while currently enrolled parents identified clothing/hair issues and chores for

child as least pressing. Again, it is interesting to note that both groups consider sexual

activity as a least pressing concern.

Comparing the combined #1, #2, and #3 most pressing worry rankings (Table 19)

between the transitioning and currently enrolled groups shows that, in the top quartile,

both groups are worried about mental well-being, how much freedom to give, child's

level of stress, and studying adequately. Transitioning parents, however, also ranked peer

pressure, health, and amount of homework as top pressing worries. Currently enrolled

families, on the other hand, ranked achievement, turning in homework, and setting

appropriate boundaries as pressing worries. Likewise, in the bottom quartile, both groups

rated behavior in school, sexual activity, responsible use of resources, and getting lost in

school building as least pressing worries. Transitioning parents, however, rated safety to

and from school, safety in community after school, and physical safety at school as least

pressing worries while currently enrolled parents rated drug/alcohol exposure, clothing/hair issues, and chores for child as least pressing. It is evident that parents of both transitioning and currently enrolled children are concerned with psychosocial issues such as mental well-being, stress, health, peer influences and friendship groups. Perhaps these psychosocial types of worries are "safer" or more generally socially acceptable for parents to "worry" about, whereas drugs and sex may be considered more deviant and taboo, and therefore are pushed more into the subconscious realm of "worry." It is particularly curious that currently enrolled parents have ranked drug/alcohol exposure and sexual activity as least pressing, as their children are older than transitioning children, and are more solidly in the age range research shows these risk-taking behaviors are taking place.

Parental Worries and Family Demographics

This study also hypothesized that there would be differences in parental worries relative to demographic variables. Certainly, an ecological framework would suggest that cultural values and norms would shape parental perceptions. Correlational analyses, however, failed to identify any strong associations between parental worries and demographic variables. Why would religion, ethnicity, family structure, work level, and level of education not be related to parental worry? As posed in the literature review, these demographic factors are all believed to have some bearing on family stress. The failure of this study to find any association between demographic variables and parental worry may be explained by the lack of diversity in the respondents. The majority of the respondents were Caucasian (85%), Christian (65%: 39% Protestant & 26% Catholic) mothers (79%) in intact families (74%) with high levels of education (85% with a college

or graduate degree). With the lack of diversity in this sample, significant differences would not be expected. In a more diverse population, differences would be much more likely to become evident.

The results of the qualitative analyses suggest several themes. All three groups were concerned with the balance of academics and extra-curricular activities, sibling issues, communication with parents/verbalizing their feelings, self-esteem and body image issues, and the academic achievement of their children. In addition, there was surprisingly little mention of any sort of delinquent activities such as violence (very surprising given the level of violence in our society, including the school attacks that have occurred more and more frequently in recent years), sex, drugs/alcohol, trouble with the law, etc. As cited previously, these "risk-taking" behaviors often begin in early adolescence, and the absence of concern regarding these behaviors is an interesting theme gleaned from the surveys. Lastly, only one parent mentioned relationships with the opposite sex as a concern. Given the research regarding sexual activity cited previously, it is very surprising that parents aren't concerned with their adolescent's relationship status-regardless of awareness of sexual activity. Again, parents may be aware on some level of sexual activity among teens, but may not believe that *their* adolescent might be involved in risky behaviors.

Implications for Practitioners and Researchers

The findings of the current study can be helpful to those individuals and institutions working with early adolescents and their families. Schools, school counselors, principals and teachers, parent education coordinators and community outreach programs should take care in assessing the concerns, worries and needs of the

populations they are serving as opposed to simply assuming what their parents are concerned with or what services they perceive are important for families. If supporting institutions and individuals looked only at the literature or popular culture in assessing issues confronting adolescents and families, then they would be missing large pieces of the puzzle. Collingsworth, Strom and Strom (1996) assert that the educational needs of parents must become known before they can be met. They lament the fact that despite knowing that one should assess the needs of the population being served, the programs most parents receive are based largely upon what program planners intuitively suppose is appropriate. They further argue that one must identify concerns and topics that parents consider to be relevant. This way, programs can be offered that support family satisfaction and help overcome predictable obstacles and reach a larger number of families as opposed to just families experiencing more severe crisis-type issues such as drug abuse, pregnancy and delinquent behavior. By providing programs that are responsive to parents' needs, parents may learn to maintain reasonable expectations of their children, sustain confidence in their parenting abilities, and build mutually satisfying relationships with their sons and daughters (Collinsworth, Strom & Strom, 1996). Likewise, even if schools, for instance, are not in a position to offer programs for parents, having an understanding of parental worries is likely to promote more sensitive interaction with parents and better home-school relationships.

In terms of future research, it is important that similar assessments be made utilizing more diverse populations. Worries and concerns may vary significantly in more diverse populations, and that should be explored in future research endeavors. In addition, it would be much more illuminating to conduct longitudinal studies that track

parental worries over a longer time period than this study attempted (perhaps from early through late adolescence.) Research that assesses the worries of the same subjects over the course of their middle school experience (as opposed to the cross-sectional possibilities this study briefly considered), and perhaps on to high school would be very beneficial and would show how worries may or may not change over time. In addition, it would provide a much more complete picture to follow up a study such as this with focus groups that could lend a qualitative piece to the research and get at the thought processes behind parents' survey answers. Lastly, it would be fascinating to share the results of the study with a group of early adolescents and ask them what *they* think their parents should *really* be worried about. Comparing the results between parents and the adolescents themselves would highlight the similarities and differences in the perceptions of what is truly happening in the world of the early adolescent.

Appendix

Appendix A

# Appendix A

## Parental Worries Questionnaire

*Thank you so much for completing this brief survey!* By cooperating, you will help provide important answers to important questions; however, your participation is strictly voluntary. You may omit any questions which you feel unduly invade your privacy or which are otherwise offensive to you. *You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by completing and returning this questionnaire. This is a completely anonymous survey.*

1.  The child for whom I am filling out this questionnaire is _____years old, and is currently in _____ grade at _____ (fill in name of school).

2.  Is this your eldest child?    No _____                    Yes_____

3.  _____ I have other children            _____I do NOT have any other children

4.  The child for whom I am filling out this questionnaire is a special needs child (either receives special education services, or needs special education services).
    No_____                    Yes_____

5a. *Have you worried about the following issues in the last 3 months?* (Mark yes or no after **each** item below).

5b. *Next, using the column at the left of each item, please rate your **top three** most pressing worries today.* (You will only mark 3 items from the entire list).

| Rating (1-3) | Key: | NO | YES | | Rating (1-3) | Key: | NO | YES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| _____ | -disciplining my child | __ | __ | | _____ | -My child's physical safety at school | __ | __ |
| _____ | -my child's achievement in school | __ | __ | | _____ | -My child's physical safety to and from school | __ | __ |
| _____ | -my child's behavior in school | __ | __ | | _____ | -My child's physical safety in the community after school | __ | __ |
| _____ | -my child's health | __ | __ | | _____ | -Teaching my child responsible use of resources | __ | __ |
| _____ | -my child's mental well-being | __ | __ | | _____ | -Deciding how much freedom is appropriate to give my child | __ | __ |
| _____ | -peer pressure | __ | __ | | _____ | -Setting appropriate boundaries for my child | __ | __ |
| _____ | -my child's concern with clothing and hairstyle issues | __ | __ | | _____ | -Chores for my child | __ | __ |
| _____ | -drug/alcohol exposure | __ | __ | | _____ | -The amount of homework my child has | __ | __ |
| _____ | -sexual activity | __ | __ | | _____ | -My child turning in homework | __ | __ |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ____ | -violence in the school | ____ | ____ | | ____ | -My child studying adequately | ____ | ____ |
| ____ | -bullies & teasing | ____ | ____ | | ____ | -My child's school-work/locker/personal belongings organization | ____ | ____ |
| ____ | -my child's loneliness | ____ | ____ | | ____ | -My child getting lost in the building | ____ | ____ |
| ____ | -my child's friendship group | ____ | ____ | | ____ | -My child's development of self-control | ____ | ____ |
| ____ | -my child's level of stress | ____ | ____ | | ____ | | | |

6. What other worries do you have at this time?

_____

_____

_____

7. I am my child's
____ mother
____ father
____ step-mother
____ step-father
____ legal guardian/other : Please specify: _____

8. I was _____ years old when I had my first child.

9. I was _____ years old when I had this child (the child for which you were asked to

complete this survey).

10. My ethnicity/racial group is:

____ Caucasian
____ African American/Non-Hispanic
____ Hispanic/Latino
____ Asian American
____ Other (please describe your ethnicity/racial group) _____

11. My religious affiliation is: _____

12. My current relationship status is:

____ married
____ Divorced, not married
____ Re-married

_____ Single
_____ Widowed
_____ in a committed, live-in relationship

13. Estimate of your total family income each year:

_____ Less than 14,999
_____ 15,000-34,999
_____ 35,000-54,999
_____ 55,000-74,999
_____ 75,000-94,999
_____ 95,000-114,999
_____ 115,000-134,999
_____ 135,000-154,999
_____ 155,000-174,999
_____ 175,000-194,999
_____ 175,000-194,999
_____ 195,000+

14. Are you employed outside the home?     _____No     _____Yes

15. If yes, approximately how many hours per week? _____

16. If there is a spouse or other parental figure in the home, is he/she employed outside

the home?          No_____                          Yes_____


17. If yes, approximately how many hours per week? _____

18. Please state your exact occupation: _____

19. If there is a spouse or other parental figure in the home, please state your
spouse/partner's exact occupation: _____

20. Your education:

| Key: | Some High School | High School Graduate | Some College or Technical School | College or Technical School Graduate | Professional/ Graduate Degree |
|------|------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
|      | _____            | _____                | _____                            | _____                                | _____                         |

21. Your spouse's/partner's education (if applicable):

|  | Some High School | High School Graduate | Some College or Technical School | College or Technical School Graduate | Professional/ Graduate Degree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Key: | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

22. Does your child have contact with extended family members like grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces and so on?

_____ No                          _____ Yes

23. How often does your child see extended family members?

_____ One time per year or less
_____ A few times per year
_____ A few times per month
_____ Each week
_____ Several times a week

Appendix B

Appendix B

Research Cover Letter

Dear Parents,

We are inviting you to participate in a study about worries of parents with middle-school-age children. We hope to compare worries of parents whose children are transitioning from elementary to middle school with worries of parents whose children are currently enrolled in middle school. Your participation will help us understand the worries parents experience while parenting a middle-school-age child, and will help schools and other organizations which support families be more aware of, and responsive to, parental worries. *This research is being carried out with the consent of the East Lansing School District.*

Your participation only requires you to complete the brief, 24-item questionnaire which is enclosed, and return it to us within 7 days. (A return, postage-paid envelope is included.) The questionnaire has been tested on a group of subjects, and has shown to *take approximately 5-10 minutes.* Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose not to participate at all, or you may choose to omit any question(s) that are offensive to you. **This research is completely anonymous.** Your name will not appear on the questionnaire you return to us, and there is no way to connect you with your responses.

*You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by completing and returning this questionnaire.*

We sincerely thank you for your participation in this exciting study. Your help will be invaluable to our findings!

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact researcher Heather M. Lewis (517-655-5038), Michigan State University Professor Dr. Holly Brophy-Herb (517-355-1900) or Dr. David E. Wright, Chairperson, University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (517)-355-2180, 246 Administration Building, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,


Heather M. Lewis, Researcher
Michigan State University

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