Relationships between parents and their children change considerably over the life span. In the early years, parents nurture, support and guide their children’s development. As young people move through adolescence into adulthood, the nature of this relationship typically changes; moving from a dependent relationship between a parent and a child, to a more equal, mutually supportive relationship between two adults (Birditt, Fingerman, Lefkowitz, & Kamp Dush, 2008; Tanner, 2006).

Underpinning this change is a shift in the way parents and young people view each other. Ideally, parents learn to accept that their son or daughter is no longer a child, but an autonomous individual (Aquilino, 2006), while young people learn to see their parents as unique beings (not just parents), with their own life histories, needs and shortcomings (Aquilino, 2006; Birditt, et al., 2008).

However, this move to a more equal relationship may be difficult for some parents and young people to achieve. This may be particularly true in today’s world, as more young people live with their parents, or are financially dependent upon them, for a longer period than in previous generations (Cobb-Clark, 2008; Weston, Stanton, Qu, & Soriano, 2001; White, 2002). The proportion of adults in their twenties living with their parents rose from 21% in 1976 to 30% in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). Furthermore, in 2006–07, 49% of Australian males and 45% of Australian females aged 18–24 years had never left the parental home (ABS, 2008). Explanations for this trend focus on the increasing number of young people pursuing higher education; a decline in the availability of low-skilled but well-paid jobs for school leavers; financial pressures; and the convenience and enjoyment of living within the parental home (ABS, 2008; Cobb-Clark, 2008; Weston, et al., 2001).

The fact that many young people still rely upon their parents at a time during which they are considered an “adult” in most other respects (for instance, they can legally drive, vote, drink, and make their own life decisions), may leave young people feeling “betwixt and between”, and create tension in relationships with their parents (Aquilino, 2006).

One Australian study (White, 2002) illustrates the challenges that many encounter. Interviews with 83 young people aged 18–25 years who were still living at home revealed that many did not have a clear sense of their role within the
household, and felt they were treated as both “children” and “not children” (but not yet adults) by their parents. Many found it difficult to establish a truly equal relationship with their parents, with a sense of not “having a voice” being a common theme expressed.

Given the changes that may occur in parent-child relationships during early adulthood, and the tensions that may arise during this period, there is a surprising paucity of research on parent-child relationships at this stage of the life cycle. Furthermore, the perspectives of parents have rarely been sought. Thus, little is known about parents’ perceptions of their relationships with their young adult children, and parents’ conceptions of their parenting role at this time. Do parents believe they should continue to support their young adult children, or do they expect them to “stand on their own two feet”?

The small number of studies that have addressed these issues have mostly been conducted outside Australia (Rezac, 2007). For instance, Hillcoat-Nalletamby and Dharmalingam (2003) interviewed 380 New Zealand parents who had at least one child aged 15 years or above who had moved out of home. Half of the parents had provided financial assistance and/or emotional support more than once within the past year. Assistance with daily tasks (such as gardening, meal preparation, child care or transport) was less common, with only 29% of parents providing this “service-type” of support more than once during this time period. Differing trends were found by Veevers and Mitchell (1998), who investigated the types of support provided by 218 Canadian families to their 19–35 year old children who had returned to live within the parental home. About three-quarters of parents regularly prepared meals and/or emotionally supported their children, while 70% undertook their son’s or daughter’s grocery shopping. However, only about a third of the parents provided transportation (37%) or did their laundry (33%). Finally, in a study of 2,685 Australian adults aged 21–71 years, Millward (1998a) found that 74% believed that parents should financially support their adult children if it was needed, and 79% believed that parents should let their adult children live with them if they wanted to. In terms of actual support provided, when Millward looked specifically at parents with adult children (those aged 18 or above), she found that 80% of parents had provided emotional support, 72% had provided practical assistance, and 62% had provided financial assistance (Millward, 1998b).

There remains much to learn about how Australian parents see their role as their children enter adulthood, and the types of support and assistance they provide. The current paper presents data from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP) that address these issues, and is framed around four questions:

1. How do parents of children aged in their mid-20s perceive their parenting role?
2. How much financial assistance and emotional support do parents give their young adult children?
3. Do parents of young men have differing views of their parenting role than parents of young women? Do parents provide more, less, or a similar level of support to sons and daughters?
4. Do parents’ perceptions and level of support differ according to whether their son or daughter is still living at home or has moved out of home?

The study

The findings presented come from the Australian Temperament Project,1 a longitudinal community study that has followed the development of a large group of Victorians from infancy onwards (for more details, visit the ATP website: <www.aifs.gov.au/atp>.

The study commenced in 1983 with a representative sample of over 2,400 infants (aged 4–8 months) and their parents. Fourteen waves of data have been collected to date, via mail surveys, with the most recent taking place in 2006–07, when the young people were aged 23–24 years. Approximately two-thirds of the sample is still taking part.

A wide range of aspects of life have been studied over the course of this project, including the young person’s temperament, health, social skills, behavioural and emotional problems, risk-taking behaviours, educational and occupational progress and peer and family relationships, as well as family functioning, parenting practices and socio-demographic background. Information has been collected from parents, maternal and child health nurses, primary school teachers and, from age 11 onwards, the young people themselves.

During the most recent survey in 2006–07, parents were asked questions about the emotional support and financial assistance they provided to their 23–24 year old children and their perceptions of their parenting role. Most of the 968 participating parents were mothers (89%). Approximately half had a female child participating in the study, and half a male child (52% and 48%, respectively). For 61% of parents, their son or daughter was not living in the family home.

The 23–24 year old participants also completed questions about the emotional support they received from parents. Of the 1,000 young people who participated, 61% were female and 62% were living away from home. While the data reported came mostly from parents and young people from within the same families, in 23% of families only the parent or the young person responded (for example, because the young person was travelling overseas, or parents were very busy). Thus, the groups of parents and young people differ slightly in composition.

Measures

Perceived parenting roles

Parents were asked: “Now that your son/daughter is an adult, do you think it is your role to:

- give financial support;
- advise about financial matters;
- provide food, clothing, other everyday needs;
- help out with household tasks (e.g., cleaning, shopping);
- give advice about career directions;
- advise about other employment issues;

1. How do parents of children aged in their mid-20s perceive their parenting role?
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Almost two-thirds of parents had provided some form of financial assistance to their son or daughter during the past year.

Findings

Question 1. How do parents perceive their parenting role?

Figure 1 shows the responses of parents to the items assessing parental role perceptions. As the figure shows, most parents agreed that it was their role to pass on their values and/or life philosophy to their 23–24 year old (88%), to care for them when they were sick (87%) and provide them with various forms of advice (ranging from child rearing advice, 59%, to financial advice, 75%).

However, the majority of parents did not believe that it was their role to provide their son or daughter with food, clothing or other everyday needs (68%), or to assist them with household tasks (59%).

A sizeable minority (between 20 and 30%) were unsure as to whether or not they should care for current or future grandchildren, provide child rearing advice to their son or daughter, offer personal, employment or career advice, or be one of their son’s or daughter’s closest friends.

Next, using factor analysis, we sought to determine whether the items assessing parental role perceptions cohered into broader subsets. As shown in Table 1, two broad underlying themes emerged, namely: (a) the degree to which parents believed that they should provide advice and guidance to their 23–24 year old son or daughter; and (b) the extent to which parents saw it as their role to provide tangible, material aid.

Financial assistance

Parents were asked whether they had provided any of the following forms of financial assistance to their ATP son or daughter within the past year:

- assistance with bills or rent;
- a gift/loan of money;
- payment of education course fees;
- substantial material support (e.g., car, house/flat to live in); or
- some other form of financial assistance, and what type.

Parents were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to each item. As well as examining the types of assistance provided, a total score was computed by summing the number of differing types of assistance provided.

Emotional support

Emotional support was assessed via the Social Support subscale of the Quality of Relationships Inventory (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). The items were adapted for parent report, to reflect parents’ views of the degree to which their ATP son or daughter relied on them for emotional support.

Parents were asked: “To what extent does he/she:

- count on you to listen to him/her;
- count on you for help with a problem; and
- seek your advice?”

Young adults were asked to what extent the following parallel statements applied to their relationships with their parents:

- You can count on them to listen to you.
- You can count on them for help with a problem.
- You can turn to them for advice.

While a five-point scale ranging from “always” to “never” was used, to aid interpretation, responses were subsequently recoded into two categories. The “always” and “often” responses were seen as indicating agreement and combined, while the “sometimes”, “rarely” and “never” responses were deemed to reflect disagreement and combined.

As well as examining the different types of emotional support provided, an overall emotional support score was calculated by averaging respondents’ scores across the three items (the original five response categories were used in these computations).

Items were devised by the ATP team and are based on Millward (1998a). Parents answered the questions using a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. For ease of interpretation, parents’ responses were subsequently recoded into three categories: “agree” (combining the “strongly agree” and “agree” categories), “unsure” (the “unsure” category), and “disagree” (merging the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” categories).
On the basis of these findings, items were grouped into two scales; a 6-item “advice and guidance role” scale and a 5-item “material aid role” scale. One item, “be my son’s/daughter’s closest friend”, was not included in either scale, as it was not highly associated with items on either of the factors identified. The two scales thus formed were used in the subsequent analyses.

**Question 2. To what extent do parents financially and emotionally support their adult children?**

**Financial assistance**

Almost two-thirds of parents (63%) had provided some form of financial assistance to their son or daughter during the past year. The most common forms of financial assistance were the provision of a gift or loan of money (38%) and assistance with bills or rent (31%). Fifteen per cent of parents had given their son or daughter some substantial form of material assistance (such as a car or a house/flat to live in), and about one in ten had paid for their son’s or daughter’s education course fees or financially supported them in some other way (see Figure 2). Other forms of financial assistance included the provision of food and a place to live, not charging adult children board to live at home, and support with living costs.

About a third of parents reported that they had provided one of the five types of financial assistance listed, 20% had provided two different forms of assistance, 8% reported three, and 3% had provided four or more different types of financial assistance to their children.

**Emotional support**

Many parents believed that their sons or daughters relied upon them for emotional support. For instance, close to 70% believed that their son or daughter counted on them to listen to them, about half perceived that they relied upon them for assistance with problems, and a similar number indicated that their son or daughter sought their advice.

However, it seemed that parents underestimated the amount of emotional support they gave their adult children, as a much higher proportion of young adults than parents (between 85% and 88%) agreed with these statements (see Figure 3 for comparisons between parents’ and young adults’ reports).

The findings presented thus far have described general trends in parents’ perceptions of their parenting role, and the amount of financial assistance and emotional support provided to young people aged 23–24 years. We next compared the perceptions of: (a) parents of young men and young women, and (b) parents whose 23–24 year olds lived with them versus those who did not. For these comparisons, the four parent-reported composite scales were used (parenting role—advice and guidance, parenting role—material aid, provision of financial assistance, and provision of emotional support).

**Table 1 Description of items comprising the “advice and guidance role” and “material aid role” scales, item factor loadings, and scale reliabilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Advice and guidance role ($\alpha = .74$)</th>
<th>Material aid role ($\alpha = .67$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give advice about career directions</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>– a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advise about other employment issues</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advise about financial matters</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer advice on personal issues, etc.</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer guidance on child rearing</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass on your values/philosophy of life</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide food, clothing, etc.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help out with household tasks</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give financial support</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide personal physical care</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide child care for grandchildren</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be one of your son’s/daughter’s closest friends</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a Items marked as “-” had factor loadings < .3 and are not shown in the table.
Question 3. Do parents of young men and parents of young women differ in their views and the support they provide?

Parents of young men did not significantly differ from parents of young women in the degree to which they felt it to be their role to provide advice and guidance or material aid to their children. Similarly, parents of young men and women did not significantly differ in the level of financial assistance they had provided to their 23–24 year old (as measured by the number of different types of assistance provided).

However, parents’ perceptions of the extent to which their adult child relied upon them for emotional support did significantly differ according to the gender of their 23–24 year old. According to parents, young women relied on their parents for emotional support to a greater extent than young men.

Question 4. Do parents’ perceptions and level of support differ according to whether or not their son or daughter lives with them?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents’ perceptions of their parenting roles differed according to whether or not their son or daughter was still living in the family home. Parents whose 23–24 year old was living at home were significantly more likely to believe that it was their role to provide material aid, and to provide advice or guidance. They also provided significantly higher levels of financial assistance than other parents, but did not differ on the level of emotional support provided.

Discussion

This paper aimed to shed light on the roles of parents at the early adult stage of development, and the degree and types of support parents gave their 23–24 year old sons and daughters.

Perceptions of the parenting role

Looking firstly at how parents of young people in their mid-20s viewed their parenting role, there were signs that parenting was becoming more differentiated than in earlier stages of development. Thus, while most parents saw it as their role to provide advice and guidance, few believed that they should provide tangible, practical types of aid. Hence, as had been anticipated, it seemed that a shift from a more hands-on caregiving role to a more supportive, guiding role was occurring. It is likely that this parallels a change in relationships between parents and young people, with more equal and mutually supportive relationships becoming the norm (Aquilino, 2006; Birditt, et al., 2008). Nevertheless, these trends did not apply to all, as between 20% and 30% of parents continued to see the provision of physical care and support as being part of their role.

The findings also suggested that in some areas, parents were unsure of their role. Areas of greatest uncertainty were whether parents should provide care for grandchildren, child rearing advice, personal or career advice, or be a close friend to their 23–24 year old. Between 20% and 30% of parents were unsure about these aspects. To some extent, this may reflect the fact that these circumstances have not yet arisen, as only 22% of the parents had a grandchild, and even fewer (7%) had a grandchild whose parent was an ATP study member. Thus, many parents may not yet have considered this extension of their role.

It is difficult to draw comparisons between the present findings and other research, as few other studies have examined this particular issue. Nevertheless, our finding that just over half of parents saw their role as including financial support is substantially lower than that of Millward (1998a), who found that three-quarters of adults believed that parents should financially support their children if they needed it. However, sample differences (the ATP findings were based on the reports of parents who were middle-aged or older, whereas Millward’s sample was of adults aged 21–71 years), and disparities in the way questions were worded (Millward’s wording included the phrase “if they needed it”) may explain the differing rates across these two studies.
Extent and type of financial and emotional support

The second issue addressed was the degree to which parents actually supported their 23–24 year olds, and the types of support given.

Direct financial assistance (e.g., through a gift or loan, or help with rent or bills) was more common than not, with close to two-thirds of parents reporting that they had given their son or daughter some type of financial assistance in the past year. (Indeed, almost one in seven parents had given substantial assistance, such as buying their 23–24 year old a car or residence). This degree of support is consistent with earlier research; for example, Millward (1998b), a decade earlier, reported an almost identical rate of financial assistance among parents of adult children.

As well as providing financial assistance to their sons and daughters, many parents had provided emotional support. Thus, almost three-quarters reported that their 23–24 year olds had counted on them to listen, and half that their son or daughter had sought their advice, or counted upon them for help with a problem. These findings are in keeping with other studies, which have found rates of emotional support ranging from 50% to 80% (Hilcoat-Nalletamby & Dharmalingam, 2003; Millward, 1998a, 1998b; Veevers & Mitchell, 1998).

A strength of the current study was the existence of parallel data from young people as well as parents on the emotional support provided by parents. Interestingly, this data suggested that parents tended to underestimate the amount of support their adult children derived from their relationships, as between 85% and 88% of the 23–24 year olds agreed that they could count on their parents to listen to them, help them with problems, or advise them on other matters. These rates are noticeably higher than those reported by parents. These findings suggest that young people in their mid-20s are still very much connected to their parents and value their parents’ input, although parents seem to be less aware of this.

Differences between parents of young women and parents of young men

The third issue addressed was whether parents of young men had differing perceptions of their role than parents of young women, and provided differing levels and types of support. On the whole, this did not appear to be the case, although more parents of young women believed their daughters relied on them for emotional support than parents of young men. There are several possible explanations for this trend. Firstly, as most of the parents surveyed were mothers, it is possible that these findings reflect closer relationships between mothers and daughters than between mothers and sons at this age. However, the lack of research on parent–child relationships at this age makes it difficult to test this explanation. Secondly, it is possible that young women discuss and seek help more freely than young men. Support for this proposition can be found in the large number of studies showing that women more often seek professional help for health and psychological problems than men (Judd, Komiti, & Jackson, 2008; Koopmans & Lamers, 2007; Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994). Thirdly, parents may actually give more emotional support to young adult daughters than sons. However, again research that could speak to this issue is lacking. Lastly, a combination of these explanations is plausible. Further research seeking the views of both parents (fathers and mothers) could shed light on this issue.

Differences between parents of young people living in, or away from, the family home

The last issue investigated was whether parents differed in their perceptions of their role and the support they provided according to whether or not their son or daughter was still
living within the family home. A number of differences were found, with significantly more parents whose 23–24 year old still lived at home feeling that it was their role to provide material aid as well as advice and guidance. This group of parents also tended to provide higher levels of financial assistance.

These findings suggest that parents who co-reside with their young adult children may maintain a more “parent-like” relationship with their sons and daughters, and may be moving more slowly towards an egalitarian relationship than parents whose sons or daughters have left home. Additionally, young people who still live with their parents may be at a different life stage to those who have moved out of home, with study commitments, financial pressures, unemployment and similar factors likely to be more common. In circumstances of extended dependence, it is unsurprising that parents may maintain a more “parent-like” role.

Conclusions

These findings paint a positive picture of connections between parents and young people in early adulthood. Parents clearly retain a close involvement in the lives of their young adult children through the advice and support they give; and this is very much valued by the great majority of young people. This is highlighted by the finding that parents tended to underestimate the level of support young people obtained from their relationships with them. Nevertheless, a “sea change” seems to be occurring, with parents loosening the reins and moving away from the more tangible and practical types of support they provided at earlier stages of development. Finally, contrary to popular views and those of some parents themselves, parents still seem to be a major presence and vital part of young people’s lives.

Endnotes

1 The ATP is a collaborative project between researchers from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Royal Children’s Hospital, the University of Melbourne and Deakin University. The project is led and managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and is also supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council.

2 Further information about the derivation of these scales can be obtained from the authors.

3 Further information relating to the statistical analyses undertaken in this section can be obtained by contacting the authors.

References


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