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Men and Women in the Family as Reflected in a Two-Generational Study

Fruzsina Albert and Beáta Dávid

Introduction

The aim of this study is to add fresh elements to the description of the personal networks of men and women, using data from our two-generational study entitled *Social embeddedness of young people aged 15–20 and their parents, and its impact on physical and mental health*.¹ The subjects of the study were young people aged 15–20 and their parents.² The questionnaires were designed in such a way that, in many cases, the opinion of the respondent was elicited in relation to the other two family members as well. We created a so-called ‘family database’, which enabled us to apply a method we call the ‘mirroring technique’, or the cross-questioning of family members.³

In our study, we will look at data only in relation to respondents’ personal networks, with special emphasis being placed on the relationships between the three family members.

Socio-demographic characteristics of two-generational families

The young people aged 15–20 who took part in our study lived in families of four on average. The proportion of two-member households was 6%, of

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² The sample is representative according to gender and age for people aged 15–20. In 191 cases we had a ‘complete’ triangle, i.e. apart from the young person’s data, we also had data relating to the mother and father. In 50 cases, the triangle is ‘incomplete’, i.e. the questionnaire was filled in by the child and one parent—generally by the mother (90%). The most typical reason for this was that the child was being raised by a single mother (29 cases). In ten cases the partner was dead, and in four the father refused to respond. Thus, the full sample included 244 children and 432 adults. The survey took place at Veresegyháza, in the first half of 2002.

³ The basis of the family database is the ‘child database’, which included 244 people. We used this as the basis for building the ‘mother’ (236 cases) and the ‘father’ (196 cases) databases. The two latter databases were created by splitting the entire adult database according to gender. In the family database, as mentioned above, in 191 cases we had responses from all three family members, in 50 cases from two and in three cases from one person.

three-member households 21%, and 39% of the families had four members. Some 34% of the young people in the survey lived in families of five or more members; 13% of respondent children lived in incomplete, and 12% in non-nuclear families. About half of the families in the category of 'other family type' were multigenerational families,⁴ while the other half of the children lived with other relatives or friends. Some 88% of the mothers had other children, too. The proportion of blood fathers was lower, at 91%. Looking at the sample by type of family, the occurrence of 'your child' is the most frequent in the 'other' family type: in this category almost one in four children lived with a man other than their biological father.

The trends visible in national data correspond to those of the parent generations in our sample: a higher rate of mothers than fathers have primary (eight grades or less of primary school) and secondary education. Fathers are overrepresented in the groups of skilled manual workers and degree holders. Those with tertiary education (having college or university degree) are overrepresented in our sample compared to the national average. The average age of mothers is 44 and of fathers 46 years. About 60% of the parents are at the so-called 'threshold age'⁵ (40–49 year-olds), critical from the standpoint of health.

Very few men in the sample live alone, without a partner; almost one in ten lives in a marriage with another woman, and they are often⁶ active in bringing up their present wife's children. The ratio of women living without a partner is much higher (15%).

Young people in the survey were split equally according to gender (123 boys and 121 girls). Boys and girls in the survey were of the same age.

Personal networks

The way the survey was conducted enables us to characterize personal networks from two aspects. On the one hand, we can analyse the egocentric personal networks of parents and children. On the other hand, we can examine how strong relationships are between the three family members, i.e. the father, mother and teenage child, across the various dimensions of their lives that are covered by our survey.

In order to identify respondents' egocentric networks, we used three Fischer-type name-generator situations, with a view to revealing the

⁴ The rate of multigenerational families in the sample is 7%.

⁵ According to health and sociological surveys, the 'threshold age' (the age group of 40–49 year-olds) marks an important stage in life: people at this age do not yet suffer from known and treated diseases, but already have various pathological and pre-disease symptoms and health problems (Susánszky and Szántó, 2002: 165).

⁶ In the case of 28% of men living in marriage or in a common law marriage, the respondent child was not the man's natural child.

relationships of instrumental helpers,⁷ confidential and emotional supporters,⁸ and the relationships that occur in the way free time is spent⁹ (McAllister and Fischer, 1978).

On average, children mention a total of 8.86 persons in their responses, while mothers named an average of 6.97, and fathers 6.34 alters.¹⁰ If we count multiply-mentioned people only once, the average number of persons mentioned will be 5.38 in the case of children, 4.53 for their mothers, and 4.38 for fathers, i.e. this is their average personal network size (*Table 1*). Similarly, in all three situations, children mentioned the most persons, and fathers the fewest. On average, respondents named the most people in relation to the question on free time.

Table 1

Average number of persons mentioned in name-generator situations, by situation and according to the subgroups under review, where the variance between the averages of the individual groups is statistically significant (persons)

Subgroup	Instrumental help	Mental support	Spending free time	Average network size based on the three situations
Children	3.0	2.65	3.2	5.38
Boy		2.37		
Girl		2.9		
Mother	2.1	2.02	2.8	4.53
With father and child	2.2		2.9	4.71
With child only	1.77		2.2	3.77
Father	2.09	1.65	2.58	4.38

We examined the internal composition of the personal networks that resulted from the three name-generator situations. *Figures 1* and *2* reveal that, in terms of the number of people named, friends have the most pronounced role in personal networks. This is especially true in the case of children, where friends account for almost half of people mentioned (*Figure 1*). Apart from friends, children mentioned their closest relatives at a rate of about 10%: the

⁷ The question revealing instrumental relationships was: "Who can you count on, or receive help from, in solving smaller or larger everyday practical tasks or problems?"

⁸ The question on confidential relationships was: "In the last six months, who are the people you have discussed your important things, problems and concerns with?"

⁹ The question about spending free time was: "Who do you go out or spend your free time with?"

Respondents were allowed to name a maximum of five persons in each situation, i.e. a total of 15 names. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of a person being named by a respondent in all three questions.

¹⁰ Person named.

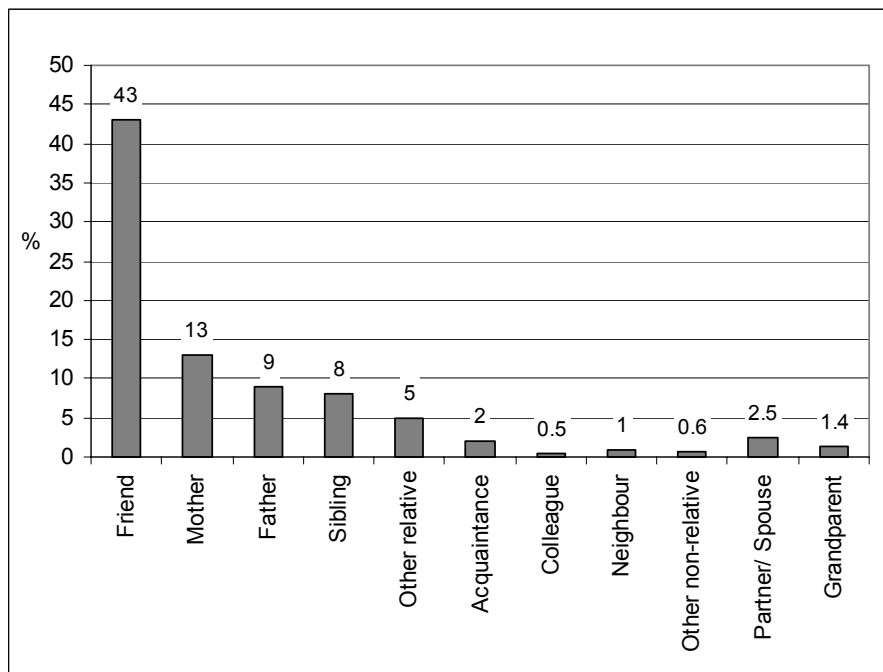
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presence of other persons is insignificant, according to the method used in the survey.

Parents, too, mentioned friends at the highest rate (*Figure 2*). Far more men mentioned friends than did their wives (28% and 20%, respectively). Women mentioned their relatives, mostly their parents (probably their mothers), in a much higher ratio than did their husbands (11% and 5%, respectively). Apart from the closest relatives, i.e. spouses and partners, children and parents, adults frequently mentioned their other relatives, especially in comparison to how often their children mentioned their other relatives. Neighbours, colleagues and other non-relatives combined made up less than one tenth of personal relationships.

Figure 1

Children's internal relationship structure established on the basis of the three name-generator situations (%)

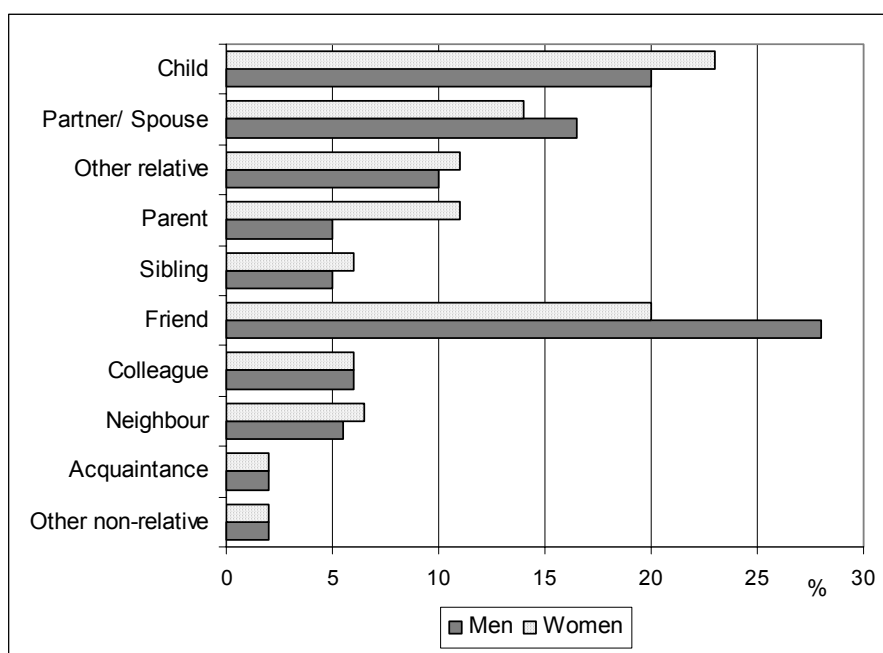


Single mothers have smaller personal networks. The difference comes from family relationships: fewer references are made to a missing husband, which, it appears, cannot be compensated for by any other relationship within or outside the family. Among children, the number of relationships is not affected by a missing father. The presence of single mothers in their children's personal networks is equal to that of mothers living with a partner. The difference is that, while mothers living with a partner fulfil many

functions in their children's lives together with the partner, single mothers are left to their own devices in this respect. Unfortunately, the lack of a father can clearly be felt in dimensions that, in principle, do not require a physical presence (for instance moral support).

Figure 2

Parents' internal relationship structure established on the basis of the three name-generator situations (%)



The size of the personal networks is closely related in the case of husbands and wives: the more relationships one spouse has, the more contacts the other partner will have, too.¹¹ There is no strong correlation between the size of the personal networks of children and their parents.¹²

¹¹ Correlation coefficient: 0.416, sig.: 0.000.

¹² No correlation whatsoever exists between the size of the personal network of children and their mothers, while there is some correlation between that of fathers and their children (Correlation coefficient: 0.170, sig.: 0.017).

The dynamics of complete personal networks in the child–father–mother triangle

There are hardly any families where everybody mentions everybody else in the three situations examined, i.e. where the three people in the survey each mentions the other two in their personal networks. The ratio of families with ‘empty triangles’, on the other hand, is quite high: these are families where the three members do not mention each other at all in the name-generator situations. Looking at the various aspects of personal networks, the incidence of families with ‘empty triangles’ is lowest in the category of moral support, with 11%, while in the case of instrumental help the rate is 18%, and when it comes to spending free time it reaches 36% (*sic*). Thus, more than one family in three spends its free time entirely with people other than the immediate relatives. In the case of children, this is understandable to some extent, as this is the age when they go through the frequently fraught times of separating from their parents; but in the case of spouses and partners, it is a sad reflection

We shall now look at the various dimensions of personal networks in more detail.

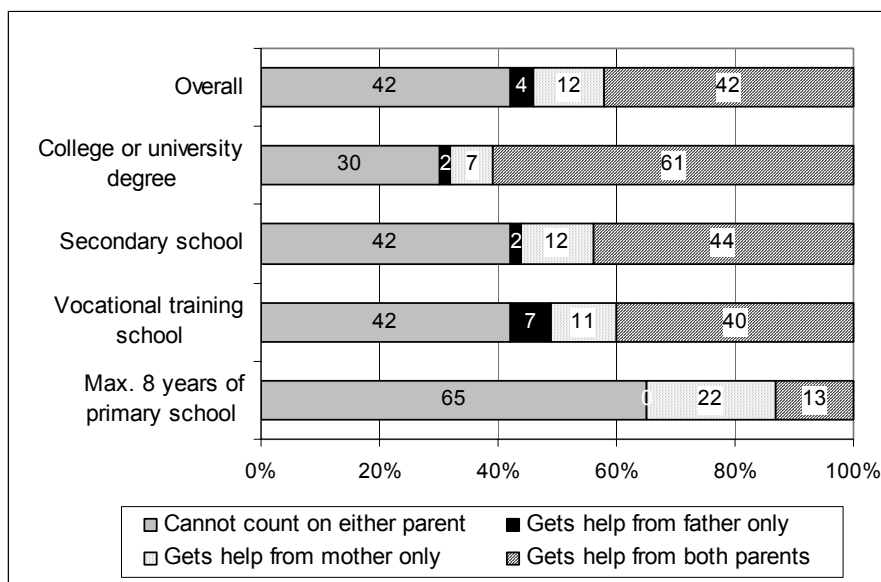
Instrumental help

Looking at each situation from the point of view of children, there is no significant gender difference.

Children largely expect instrumental help and emotional support from their parents: along these dimensions, 59% and 54%, respectively, of the sample mentioned one of their parents. Some 37% of the respondent children received instrumental help from both parents, and an additional 19% received help from their mothers, and 4% from their fathers only. Children are more likely to receive instrumental help from both parents in families where the father has a higher educational attainment level. By contrast, in families where the father has a relatively low level of education, there is a higher proportion of children who cannot count on either parent for help (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3

The child receives instrumental help from the parents—distribution of responses according to educational attainment level of the father, %



Although we had the family as the focus of our study, in the questionnaire that the children were asked to fill in there was only one direct question on the quality of the relationship that forms the basis of the family.¹³ In families where children perceive their parents' marriage as generally good, children can expect both more instrumental help and more emotional support from the parents, and also the ratio of those who feel that no such help is offered is much smaller (*Figures 4–5*).

Three-quarters of parent-couples receive no instrumental help from their children, but in 7% of the cases both parents do get support from their children. In families where the respondent child has no brothers or sisters, children give more help to either or both parents in solving tasks of an instrumental nature (46% and 24%, respectively).

One parent-couple in three gives the other partner instrumental help: in 20% of cases only the woman mentioned receiving such assistance from the man, while in one tenth of the families only the man said that he received such support from his partner.

¹³ The question was: "What do you think your parents' marriage is like (or the relationship they live in)?" Choice of response: very good; rather good than bad; rather bad than good; very good; cannot decide.

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Figure 4

The child receives instrumental help from the parents—distribution of responses according to quality of parents' relationship, as perceived by child (%)

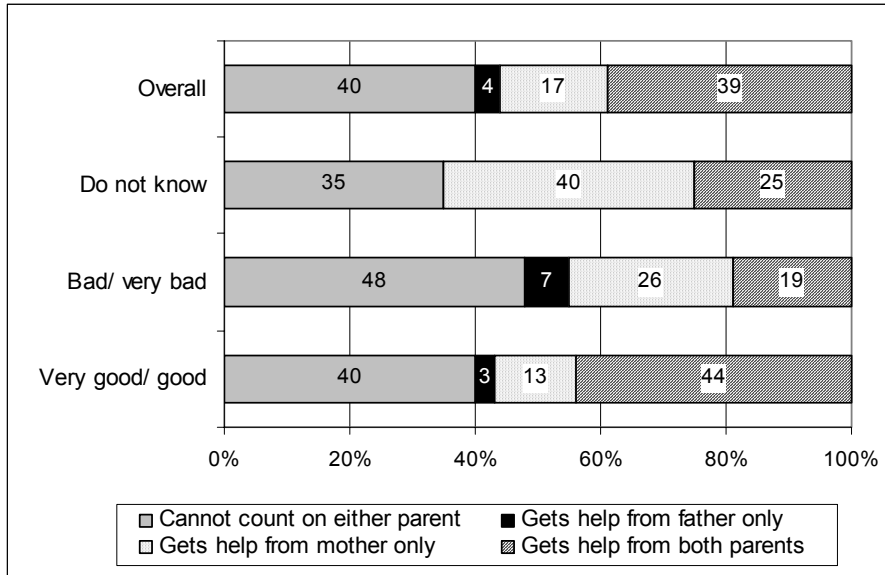


Figure 5

The child discusses problems with the parents—distribution of responses according to quality of parents' relationship, as perceived by child (%)

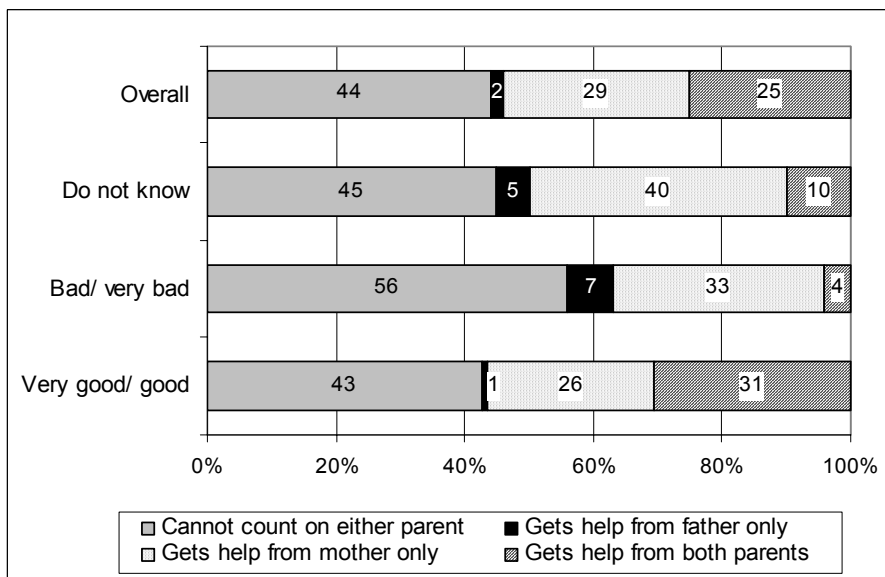


Figure 6

Instrumental support between the parents—distribution of responses according to quality of parents' relationship, as perceived by child (%)

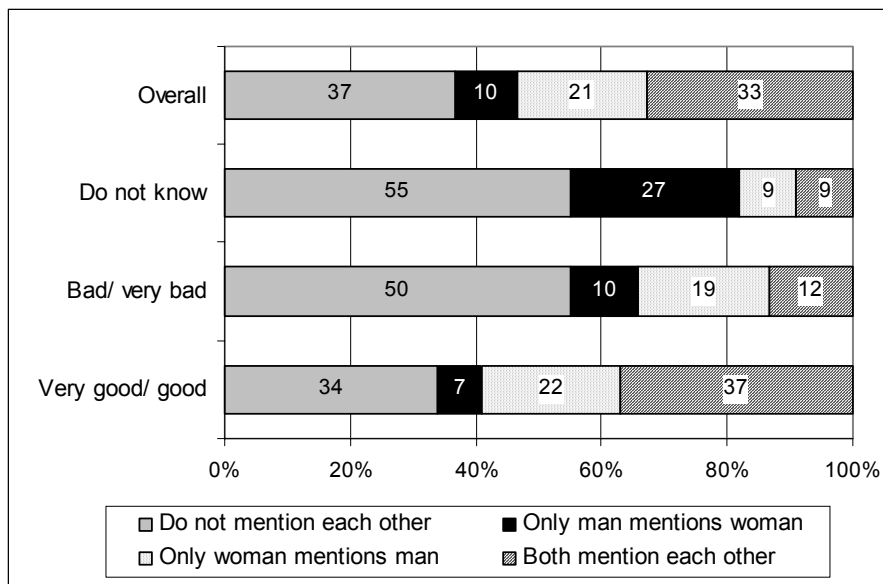
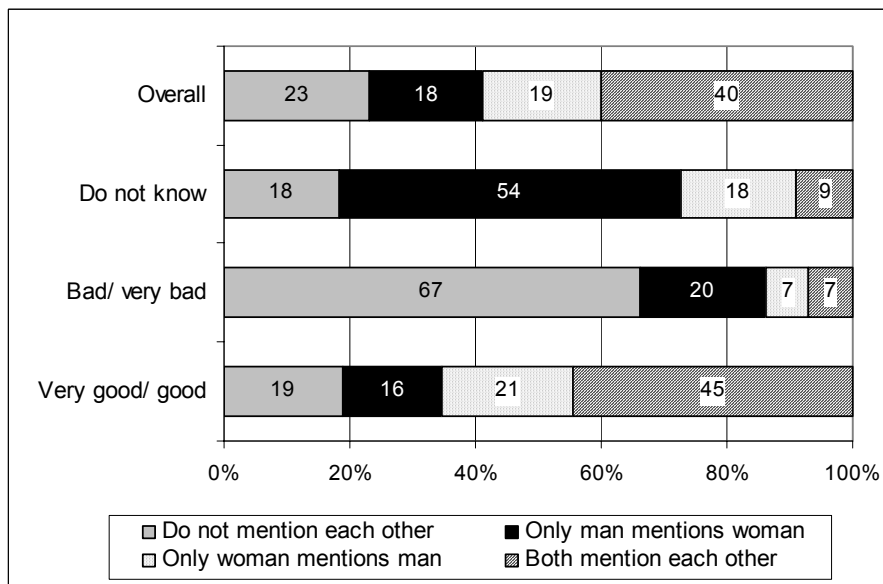


Figure 7

Parents discussing problems between each other—distribution of responses according to quality of parents' relationship, as perceived by child (%)



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That the children were pretty good at assessing the quality of their parents' relationship is supported by the fact that, in marriages perceived as good, parent-couples mentioned each other much more often, both in terms of instrumental help and discussing problems, than parents in relationships that were considered bad by their children or where children could not decide about the quality of the partnership (*Figures 6–7*). This correlation shows trends similar to those seen in the case of spending free time, but is not significant from a statistical point of view.

However, their assessment of the quality of their parents' marriage did not have any bearing on how often children mentioned their parents in the three situations examined.

Discussing problems

We used the so-called 'important conversation networks' (Marsden, 1991) to map human relations that function as emotional support or confidential help.¹⁴ We found that 7% of children, 12% of mothers and 19% of fathers in the sample had nobody to share their problems or important issues with, i.e. these persons have no intimate friends or real emotional support.

Table 2

Number of intimate friends by subgroup (%)

Number of intimate contacts	Children (N=244)	Mothers (N=236)	Fathers (N=196)
0	7	12	19
1	21	35	41
2	22	19	17
3	19	15	10
4	11	11	7
5	20	8	7

Girls approached more people with their emotional problems, three on average, while boys talked to two people on average. This gender difference exists in the case of parents as well. Men talk to fewer people about their emotional problems and rely more on their wives than *vice versa*.¹⁵ One in three men said that they discussed their emotional problems with their wives. One quarter named a friend, one in ten their child, and 7% their brothers or

¹⁴ The question was: "In the past six months, who have you discussed your important issues or problems with?" Respondents could decide for themselves what they considered important. Based on previous research, we expected this question to reveal strong, intimate and positive personal links.

¹⁵ Some of our previous studies gave the same results, see Albert and Dávid (1999).

sisters as confidants. Significantly more boys mentioned their fathers as confidants, which indicates that boys may be seriously disadvantaged by the absence of a father. With girls, additional emotional helpers come in the form of schoolmates: the proportion of schoolmates in girls' personal networks is twice as high as in boys'. Among women's confidants, husbands account for 25%, children for 19%, parents for 14% and friends for 16%.

If we continue our analysis at the level of families and focus on the father–mother–child triangle, we see the following: only 40% of adults living together as couples both named one another as people they can discuss their problems with. Almost the same rate named their partner unilaterally, but one in four couples failed to mention each other at all in this context (*sic*) (see *Figure 7* in the 'Overall' row).

It is thought provoking that almost half (44%) of the respondent children did not mention either parent as a confidant. One fifth could not name anyone else as a confidant; that is to say, they practically live without any emotional support!

Only an insignificant proportion of the children (2%), mainly boys, named their fathers as their only confidant; almost one in three children (29%) share their problems with their mothers only, while only one quarter said they discussed intimate problems and matters with both parents (see *Figure 5* in the 'Overall' row).

All this has a statistically significant correlation with the educational level of the mothers and fathers in question: in families where parents have high educational attainment levels, the proportion of children who cannot discuss their problems with either parent is lower, and the ratio of those who can rely on help from both parents is higher (*Figure 8*).

In families where the child has a negative view of the parents' marriage, i.e. rather bad than good or very bad, there are many more children who cannot confide in either parent (55–64%), and just a few who share intimate aspects of their lives with both (6% and 0% (*sic*), respectively—as against 37% in the case of children who think their parents' marriage is very good).

It is less typical for parents to discuss their problems and difficulties with their 15–20 year-old children, who are on the brink of adulthood. This never happens in three-quarters of the families, and only in a handful (2%) did both parents name their children as their confidants. However, while 15% of the mothers identified their children as confidants, only 7% of the fathers regard their offspring as people they can confide in.

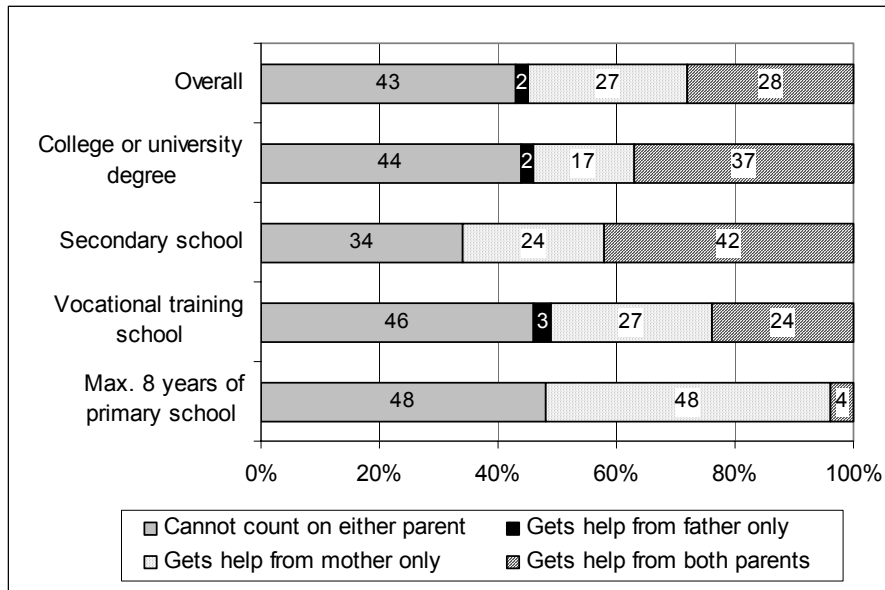
The fact that in 22% of parent-couples neither partner indicated the other as a confidant may be interpreted as an indicator of the quality of the relationships. Almost one fifth named the other partner unilaterally (the man

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named the woman or *vice versa*), and the rate of reciprocal indication was only 39%.¹⁶

Figure 8

Children receive emotional support from the parents, according to the father's educational level (%)



We used the method of binary logistic regression¹⁷ in performing multivariable analyses with a view to better understanding the individual determinants of the situation described above, and to determine the 'stand-alone impact' of the individual variables. We examined what influenced children to indicate at least one parent as a confidant. In the model, we took into account the child's and the parents' age, the gender of the child, the type of school they attended, the father's and the mother's educational attainment level and their economic activity, whether the child had a brother or sister, and what the child thought of the quality of the parents' marriage. Surprisingly, after filtering out the impacts of the other variables, we found

¹⁶ One would assume that the minimum criterion for a 'good' marriage is that partners discuss and share their problems and difficulties with each other.

¹⁷ We used the method of binary logistic regression to examine the chances of having parents indicated as confidants. By performing a multivariable analysis, we could analyse the impact that multiple explanatory factors have on the specific factor under review, by separating their independent effects. The relationship analysis below was used to determine a figure for the individual impacts of the explanatory variables, by 'filtering out' the effects of the other factors in the analysis. Because we compare different population groups in our analysis of the impact of explanatory factors, the differences identified may not be interpreted at the level of the individual.

that whether children consider their parents to be confidants is influenced by two variables of statistical significance, although with opposite effects.

Children of inactive mothers mention at least one parent as a confidant almost three times as often as children of active mothers. However, in families where the father is inactive, this rate is 84% lower than in families with an active father (see *Table 3*, and Dávid and Albert, 2004).

Table 3

“The child considers at least one parent to be a confidant”: results of logistic regression estimates using the statement above as a dependent variable—odds ratios according to the various explanatory variables¹⁸

Explanatory variables	Exp(B)
Mother’s educational level (ref: max. 8 grades of primary school)	
Vocational training school	0.910
Secondary school	2.214
Tertiary education	1.135
Father’s educational level (ref: max. 8 grades of primary school)	
Vocational training school	1.563
Secondary school	1.059
Tertiary education	1.095
Mother’s economic activity (ref: active)	2.767*
Father’s economic activity (ref: active)	0.160*
Does the child have a brother or sister (ref: none)	0.445
Assessment of quality of parents’ marriage (ref: good)	
Bad	0.933
Does not know	0.887
Child’s gender (ref: boy)	0.452
Has father hurt mother (ref: no)	0.313
Child’s age (ref: 15 years)	
16 years	1.011
17 years	0.600
18 years	1.253
19 years	0.449
20 years	1.308
Type of school child attends (ref: max. 8 grades of primary school)	
Vocational training school	0.776
Secondary vocational school	0.355
Grammar school	2.748
Tertiary education	2.151
Other training (e.g. non-school course)	2.503
Mother’s age (ref: max. 39 years)	
40–45 years	0.552
46–50 years	1.722
Above 50 years	0.652

¹⁸ In making an estimate of an odds ratio that describes the impact of an explanatory factor, the logistic regression applied will filter out the impact of the other factors in the analysis.

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Explanatory variables	Exp(B)
Father's age (ref: max. 39 years)	
40–45 years	1.597
46–50 years	1.881
Above 50 years	1.987
<i>Nagelkerke-type pseudo-R² (explanatory power)</i>	<i>24%</i>

* p < 0.05

We also examined the factors that determine whether parent-couples indicate each other reciprocally as confidants. In this model we used the following variables: father's and mother's educational level, their economic activity, gender of the respondent child, whether the family has other children apart from the child in the survey, how the respondent child assesses the parents' marriage, and whether there have been any cases of the father beating/hurting the mother (*Table 4*).

Table 4

"Married couples are mutual confidants to each other": results of logistic regression estimates using the statement above as a dependent variable—odds ratios according to the various explanatory variables

Explanatory variables	Exp(B)
Mother's educational level (ref: max. 8 grades of primary school)	
Vocational training school	0.535
Secondary school	0.970
Tertiary education	0.959
Father's educational level (ref: max. 8 grades of primary school)	
Vocational training school	4.041*
Secondary school	2.564
Tertiary education	4.115*
Mother's economic activity (ref: active)	0.725
Father's economic activity (ref: active)	1.032
Does the child have a brother or sister (ref: none)	1.195
Assessment of quality of parents' marriage (ref: good)	
Bad	0.070*
Does not know	0.195
Child's sex (ref: male)	0.452*
Has father hurt mother (ref: no)	0.313
<i>Nagelkerke-type pseudo-R² (explanatory power)</i>	<i>20%</i>

* p < 0.05

Children's opinion of their parents' marriage has a strong correlation with parents' reciprocal relationship as confidants, which shows that children are

fairly good at assessing the quality of their parents' marriage. Parents who live in bad marriages indicated each other as confidants at a rate 93% lower, i.e. only at a minimum, than those who live in marriages regarded as good by their children.

Compared to men with a maximum of primary education, men with vocational training school or college, university degree are four times—and those with secondary education 2.5 times—as likely to name their partners as confidants and to be named by them.

Interestingly, in families where the child in our study was a girl, parents indicated each other as mutual confidants at a rate 55% lower than in families with a boy. So far we have not found an explanation for this.

Spending free time

Looking at persons mentioned in connection with spending free time, we find that the rate of friends is much higher (66%) among boys than among girls (54.5%). More girls mentioned schoolmates (20%) and partners (5%) than did boys (11% and 2%, respectively). Girls' personal networks are less homogeneous by gender than are boys': 84% of boys' contacts are with other boys, while only 64.5% of girls' contacts are with girls.

Based on the number of references, the largest difference between the social networks of children and their parents is in the field of leisure time. While parents mention their children in 25% of cases, less than 5% of children mention that they spend some of their free time with their parents! In other words, when it comes to spending their free time—partly due to characteristics of age—young people do not rely on their parents, as almost nine in ten failed to indicate either parent in this context. Children play a larger role in their parents' free time, however; only one in six parents failed to name their child as a partner in leisure activities.

What is even more surprising is that almost half of parent-couples did not mention each other in this context either, and only one in four couples named each other reciprocally. Of the socio-demographic features reviewed, only men's economic activity has any significant correlation with spending free time with the spouse or partner. Among couples where the man is economically active, one in four named each other reciprocally as free-time partners, and 'only' 42% failed to mention each other altogether in this context. In the case of couples where the man is inactive, the figures are 12% (reciprocal mention) and 62% (neither mentioned the other).

Summary

We performed our study on a sample that was, in theory, in an advantageous situation, i.e. most families were living together, or at least in some form of partnership, in average living conditions, and with at least one child in their teens or early adulthood. As our findings show, living together is not, in practice, in any way particularly favourable: most people receive emotional support from the family, but even in this context, one couple in five receives no support from each other. And while almost half of young people get some instrumental help at home, they have very little leisure time spent with them—something that could help them emotionally. The proportion of symmetrical relationships is extremely low across all the dimensions we examined, yet they have a strong bearing on people's mental and physical health and on their general well-being (Albert *et al.*, 2004).

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