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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study investigated changes and continuities in the quality of communication between parents during the period when the oldest child in the family passes through the transition from childhood to adolescence. Furthermore, possible links were explored between adolescents' differential assessments of the quality of relationship with their parents and the quality of communication between parents. Participants were 47 two-parent families with an adolescent child (age 11 at start of study, age 15 at end). Families were visited every 6 months over 3 and a half years. Adolescents judged the quality of the relationship with their parents and various aspects of self-esteem at each visit. Parental communication in structured situations was videotaped at the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth data collection points. Cluster analysis revealed three groups of adolescents who differed markedly in their judgments about the quality of their relationship with their parents. Differential analysis of the observed communication between parents showed clear links to adolescents' assessed relationship quality as well as to aspects of adolescents' self-esteem. In general, parental communication showed changes in quality during the child's critical developmental period. (Author/EV)

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# The Quality of Parent-Parent Communication in the Family and its Impact on Adolescent Development

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## **Abstract**

The study investigates changes and continuities in the quality of communication between parents during the period when the oldest child in the family passes through the transition from childhood to adolescence. Furthermore, possible links are explored between adolescents' differential assessments of the quality of relationship with their parents and the quality of communication between the parents.

Forty seven two-parent-families with an adolescent child participated in a longitudinal study, in which the families were visited every six months over a three and a half year period (eight waves of data collection). At the beginning of the study, the child was 11,6 years old, at the end 15 years. Adolescents judged the quality of the relationship with their parents and various aspects of self-esteem every six months. Parental communication in structured situations was videotaped at the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth wave.

Three groups of adolescents who differed markedly in their judgments about the quality of their relationship with their parents were found in a cluster analysis. Differential analyses of the observed communication behaviors between parents revealed clear links to adolescents' assessed relationship quality as well as to aspects of adolescents' self-esteem. In general, parental communication showed changes in quality during the child's critical developmental period. Results are discussed under the perspective of adolescents' different experiences in family communication and their impact on successful or unsuccessful management of the transition period.

## **Introduction**

Parental communication is not only the relevant model and a general orientation how to apply communication formats in the family, it is also a template for possible schemes to deal with conflicts and to find problem solutions. Moreover, it is assumed that the quality of communication between parents mirrors the family's atmosphere in which the child has grown up and in which he or she has to manage the transition from childhood to adolescence.

However, communication among parents as a relevant factor for the socialization of children has long been neglected. Although recently an increase of studies can be noticed emphasizing the importance of parents' interactions with each other as models for children and their developmental pathways (e.g. Belsky, Crnic, Gable, 1995; Boyum & Parke, 1995; Davies, Myers, & Cummings, 1996), only sparse empirical research is available where concrete communication among parents during critical developmental periods like adolescence has been studied in more detail. Particularly during adolescence, when families have to renegotiate the status of their children and to rearrange their relationships, parental communication patterns may serve as salient models for children's attempts to gain more autonomy in the family. Children not only grow up while watching their parents' interaction with one another and their way to get along with each other when interests are controversial or when critical tasks have to be accomplished but also are eager spectators of their parents' way to manage daily hassles. Thus, the quality of parental communication is an important indicator of the general framework in which the family transition from childhood to adolescence is treated and finally mastered.

## **Aims**

The study explores whether communication patterns of the marital couple exhibit variations of quality over time during the period when the child is increasing his or her demands for more autonomy. Furthermore, the study investigates possible links between the quality of the child-parent relationship, the quality of adolescents' self-esteem, and the communication behavior of the marital couple during the period of the child's puberty.

Adolescents' subjective assessments over time about relationship quality and well-

being in the family as well as observational methods for the investigation of continuities and changes in concrete communication behavior between parents seemed adequate tools for the exploration of the role of parental communication for adolescents' developing self-esteem.

Two major questions about parental communication were:

- Does adolescents' transition crisis in the family affect the quality of parental communication over time?
- Can different patterns of parental communication be linked to children's differential judgment of relationship quality and self-esteem?

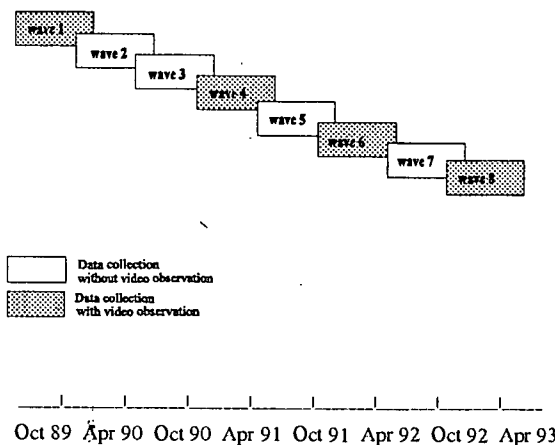
## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

Forty seven two-parent-families (caucasian, middle class, from former West-Berlin) with an adolescent child (age 11.6 years at the beginning of data collection) participated in a longitudinal study, in which adolescents judged the quality of the relationship with their parents every six months over a period of three and a half years (8 waves).

### Collection of Questionnaire and Video Data

#### Time Schedule 89 - 93



The two-parent families were part of a larger sample in which also one-parent families participated. Adolescents of all families had judged the quality of relationship with

their parents every six months. The parents of the forty seven two-parent families were observed in a structured situation while discussing issues given on cards during the 1st, 4th, 6th, and 8th wave of data collection. Adolescents were administered questionnaires asking for the quality of relationship with their parents and the assessment of adolescents' self-esteem. Questionnaires were given every wave of data collection (six months interval between waves) during the entire period of the three and a half year longitudinal investigation

### *Instruments*

#### Relationship Measurements:

For the measurement of relationship quality, the following three scales were constructed (Kreppner & Spiel, 1992): Dependability, Emotional Ambivalence, and Discussion Potential. The Dependability Scale (5 items, 4 point scale) assesses the degree of family functioning, that is, the degree to which parents and children can count on each other in everyday living; the scale was derived from the Family Assessment Measure (FAM) by Skinner, Steinhauer, and Santa Barbara (1983) for a multilevel description of the respondent's role in the family. The Emotional Ambivalence Scale (4 items, 6 point scale) measures perceived emotional ambivalence in the relationship with an other family member. This scale is part of the new instrument which assesses perceptions of self and others within the family (Spiel & Kreppner, 1991, Spiel, Kreppner, Von Eye, 1995). The Discussion Potential Scale (6 items, 3 point scale) assesses the intensity with which the adolescent discusses critical issues with his or her parents. This scale is a shortened version of Robin and Weiss "discussion at home" scale used to distinguish between clinical and non-clinical families. (see Robin & Weiss, 1980).

The two scales dependability and emotional hesitancy were cross-validated in a different sample of 181 (Spiel, Kreppner & Von Eye, 1995). In addition, exploratory factor analyses were computed separately for mothers and fathers. In both analyses, a 3 factor solution suggests independence of the three scales, both for perceptions of relationship with mothers and with fathers. Both solutions explain about 50% of the variance. The solutions were calculated using orthogonal varimax rotation. (see Spiel & Kreppner, 1991). Cronbach alphas for adolescents' perceptions of their mothers and fathers during the first wave of data

collection were 0.77 and 0.75 for the Dependability Scale, 0.64 and 0.59 for the Ambivalence Scale, and 0.54 and 0.70 for the Discussion Scale. The relatively low coefficients for fathers in the Ambivalence Scale and for mothers in the Discussion Potential Scale were taken as indicators of adolescents' inconsistent conception of these aspects at this age.

#### Self-Esteem Measurements:

*Family well-being* of adolescents was measured by a set of six items from the self version of the FAM III questionnaire (see Kreppner & Spiel, 1992), and *doubts in achievement orientation* of adolescents was measured by a questionnaire constructed by Spiel and Kreppner (1991). Cronbach alphas for the relationship assessment scales varied between .51 and .92 across waves, and for the family well-being and the doubts in achievement orientation scales between .74 and .81.

#### *Observation procedure*

Discussion situations between parents were produced by presenting a series of statements printed on cards to parent-children dyads. Each dyad had to discuss a number of stimulus cards with statements such as "We are planning an outing for next weekend together" or "Some in the family do not clean up their room as they should." The number of cards given in the different waves differed somewhat between the first and the other waves. During the first wave, an introductory card and then ten cards were given in each parent-child dyad, whereas during the fourth, sixth, and eighth wave each dyad had to discuss five cards. Each topic on a card was discussed for about two minutes. Communication behaviors were rated from tape according to a number of given categories. Each discussion following a card was taken as one event and given a score on each of the communication characteristics of the given categories. Four trained observers processed the tapes, reliabilities were obtained by computing kappa coefficients for about 10-15% of all cards per wave. Kappas ranged from .71 to .96. Resulting frequency distributions in cross-tabulations were generated by crossing variables such as time (e.g. wave 1, 4, 6, 8), group membership (e.g. cluster group habitual, ambivalent, secure) and categories of observed communication behavior with their different levels for various sets of separate analyses. Detailed descriptions of observational categories and procedure of data analysis has been published elsewhere (see Kreppner & Ullrich, 1996).

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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### *Analysis of observational data*

Log-linear analyses were conducted for the parent-parent dyads. Models with a probability  $p > .05$  were selected as fitting for explaining the frequency patterns (see table 3). Resulting models were analyzed according to the significances of the parameter estimates which were computed for the selected models. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate time-specific parental communication patterns, figures 6-9 illuminate cluster-specific parental communication patterns<sup>1</sup>.

## **Results:**

### **Adolescents' Relationship Data**

#### *Analyses of variance*

A series of 2 x 2 x 2 fixed effect ANOVAs were calculated to investigate influences of Gender, Family Structure, and Age on adolescents' various assessments of the quality of relationship during the first wave. The dependent variables showed no variation that was significantly dependent on the three factors.

#### *Cluster analyses*

The adolescents' ratings of their parents' dependability and emotional ambivalence with mother and father, and the adolescents' discussion of critical issues with mother were used to calculate a three cluster solution (Ward, 1963). The resulting three groups were labelled according to different profiles as habitual/routine (23 families), ambivalent (32 families), and secure/confident (12 families).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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<sup>1</sup> Frequencies are given as percentages in order to equalize differences in cluster group size.



### *Hierarchical regression analyses*

Hierarchical regression analyses were carried out for the variables describing relationship quality during the fourth, sixth, and eighth wave with a first step taking gender, age of adolescents, and family status as a set of independent variables, and cluster membership (two contrast variables, CL 3-12 and CL 2-13) as second set of independent variables for the second step. Results indicate that three of the five dependent variables, dependability with father and ambivalence with mother and father, were still best predictable in the fourth, sixth, and eighth wave by cluster membership (see Table 2).

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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### **Adolescents' Self Ratings**

Cluster-specific analyses of variance (repeated measurement MANOVAS for clustereffects) of the two self-assessments over time were conducted for adolescents. Both self ratings of adolescents showed cluster-specific mean differences over time. *Well-being* in the family shows cluster-specific mean differences for the entire period, where adolescents from cluster "Secure" display a higher estimation of their well-being compared to adolescents grouped into cluster "Ambivalent" (cluster effect:  $F=9.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The series of assessments concerning *Doubts in Achievement* shows a consistent pattern for adolescents from cluster "Ambivalent" who constantly exhibit the highest doubts in their achievement potential ( $F= 8.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

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Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here  
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### **Parents' Communication**

Parents' communication is affected by their children's transition period. Furthermore, adolescents' differential assessments of the quality of family relationships can be linked to different patterns of parent-parent communication. Communication behaviors in parent-

parent dyads show time-specific patterns in 12 of 14 cases (saturated model or model with a [TO] term), and cluster-specific patterns in 10 of 14 cases (saturated model or model with a [CO] term, see Tab. 3).

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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The examples of changes in parental communication style (using "statement") and high tension show high rates of using statements and of displaying high tension for both parents during the fourth wave, when children were about 13 years old (see Figures 4 and 5).

Z-transformed parameter estimates for the single contrasts between waves elucidate this tendency (for use of statements mothers:  $z_{t1-t4} = -3.86$ ,  $z_{t6-t4} = -1.97$ ,  $z_{t8-t4} = -2.40$ ; for fathers:  $z_{t1-t4} = -4.25$ ,  $z_{t8-t4} = -4.15$ . Significant contrasts for high tension in mothers were  $z_{t8-t4} = -2.17$ , for fathers  $z_{t1-t4} = -2.73$  and  $z_{t8-t4} = -2.90$ .

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Insert Figures 4 and 5 about here  
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When parental communication patterns are analyzed with regard to their children's differentiated assessments of relationship quality, differences among cluster groups were also found. For the given examples, significant contrasts between cluster groups were manifest for mothers' use of statements  $z_{C1-C3} = 3.18$  (see Figure 6), for mothers' attention  $z_{C1-C3} = -4.97$ , for fathers' attention  $z_{C1-C3} = -5.48$ ,  $z_{C2-C3} = -5.62$  (see Figure 7). When integrative discussion is considered, significant differences were encountered for mothers  $z_{C1-C3} = -3.84$ , for fathers  $z_{C1-C3} = -2.25$  (see Figure 8). Even when the nonverbal aspect of displaying high closeness during discussion is examined, mothers differed considerably across cluster groups ( $z_{C1-C3} = -2.31$ ,  $z_{C2-C3} = -3.10$ , see Figure 9).

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Insert Figures 6 - 9 about here  
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## **Discussion**

This longitudinal study focused on communication patterns between parents and their impact on the transition process from childhood to adolescence in the family. Two major results were found: First, during the period of transition, parents show time-specific variations in their communication patterns: When children are about 13 years old, discussions between mothers and fathers display more frequencies in exchanges of statements and a higher degree of tension as this is obviously the case when children are either younger or older. Second, differences in parental communication patterns could be linked to adolescents' differential judgments about the relationship quality in the family. Parents, especially mothers, exhibit less exchange of statements, more attentive and integrative behavior when discussing with the partner during the critical period when children had rated the quality of relationship with their parents as being secure. Moreover, also in nonverbal behavior, differences among cluster-specific parental communication patterns were salient. Higher closeness was found in parental communication in the secure cluster group.

Results point to a intricate pattern of children's experience in communication patterns in their families. Parents establish a kind of "culture" in communication which may serve as a model for the children when they have to negotiate a new role in the family and to affirm their demands for more autonomy. Detailed knowledge about family specific elements of parental communication may lead us to a better understanding of those factors which are relevant for a successful or unsuccessful passage from childhood to adolescence in the family.

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Table 1

**OBSERVATION PROCEDURE AND CODING (Overview)*****Observation of Discussions in Parent-Parent Dyads:*****(Number of cards for each dyad in each family and wave)**

Wave 1: 8 Cards  
 Wave 4: 5 Cards  
 Wave 6: 5 Cards  
 Wave 8: 5 Cards

***Statements printed on cards (parent-parent dyad):*****Examples:**

"The son/daughter brings along a new friend for staying overnight without having asked the parents. How will they react?"

"Imagine you wake up in the morning and find yourselves seventeen years young again, but with your actual knowledge and experience. How would you then plan your life?"

***Instruction:***

Each issue described on a card should be discussed for about two minutes

***Coding Categories for Card Discussions in Dyads*****Formal Aspects of Communication:**

Taker of Card [mother; father; nobody]  
 Talking Time m/f [low; middle; high]

**Interaction Aspects of Communication:**

Hierarchy [egalitarian; long leach; hierarchical]  
 Communication Style m/f [statement; attention seeking; teaching; negotiating]  
 Interaction Style m/f [integrative; competitive; distanced; dominant;submissive]  
 Self Disclosure m/f [very low; low; high; very high]

**Nonverbal Aspects:**

Tension m/f [very low; low; high; very high]  
 Closeness m/f [very low; low; high; very high]

Table 2:

***Hierarchical Regression Analysis***

Two step procedure: Independent variables for the first step: Gender, age, and family structure; independent variable for the second step: clustermembership (2 variables: cluster 2 - 13 and cluster 3 -12).

$\Delta R^2$  indicates the increment of  $R^2$  after adding clustermembership in the second step.

## WAVE 4

SCALE	MULT R	ADJ R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	VARIABLE	BETA	T	P
DP (ADOL-MOTHER)	.488	.176	.098	CLU 3 - 1 2	.329	-2.472	.016
DP (ADOL-FATHER)	.516	.208	.210	CLU 3 - 1 2	.405	3.111	.003
EA (ADOL-MOTHER)	.550	.246	.290	CLU 2 - 1 3	.472	3.830	.000
EA (ADOL-FATHER)	.525	.216	.272	CLU 2 - 1 3	.452	3.569	.000
DC (ADOL-MOTHER)	.295	.012	.021	GENDER	-.290	-2.217	.031

## WAVE 6

SCALE	MULT R	ADJ R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	VARIABLE	BETA	T	P
DP (ADOL-MOTHER)				-----			
DP (ADOL-FATHER)	.471	.152	.154	CLU 3 - 1 2	.302	2.222	.030
EA (ADOL-MOTHER)	.426	.110	.116	CLU 2 - 1 3	.360	2.767	.006
EA (ADOL-FATHER)	.450	.131	.156	CLU 2 - 1 3	.246	1.825	.073
DC (ADOL-MOTHER)	.410	.095	.045	AGE	-.300	-2.371	.021

## WAVE 8

SCALE	MULT R	ADJ R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	VARIABLE	BETA	T	P
DP (ADOL-MOTHER)	.383	.066	.100	CLU 3 - 1 2	.365	2.495	.016
DP (ADOL-FATHER)	.324	.019	.075	CLU 3 - 1 2	.278	1.837	.072
EA (ADOL-MOTHER)	.334	.026	.090	CLU 2 - 1 3	.260	1.757	.084
EA (ADOL-FATHER)	.353	.041	.115	CLU 2 - 1 3	.346	2.357	.022
DC (ADOL-MOTHER)	.515	.196	.051	AGE	-.387	-3.182	.002

DP: DEPENDABILITY

EA: EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

DC: DISCUSSION POTENTIAL

**Table 3****Communication Behaviors between Parents, Clustermembership, and Time (1, 4, 6, 8)**

Log-linear models for formal and communication dyadic parent-parent communication for wave 1, wave 4, wave 6, and wave 8.

T = Time (wave 1, wave 4, wave 6, wave 8)

O = Levels within a category (vary for each category)

C = Cluster Membership (habitual, ambivalent, secure)

	Model	p
<u>Formal aspects</u>		
Taker of card	saturated	
Talking time Mother	[T], [CO]	.54
Talking time Father	[C], [TO]	.64
<u>Communication aspects</u>		
Hierarchy in communication	[C], [T], [O]	.32
Communication style mother	[CO], [TO]	.42
Communication style father	[CO], [TO]	.37
Interaction style mother	[CO], [TO]	.05
Interaction style father	[CO], [TO]	.27
Self disclosure mother	[C], [TO]	.80
Self disclosure father	[C], [TO]	.50
<u>Nonverbal aspects</u>		
Tension mother	[CO], [TO]	.83
Tension father	[CO], [TO]	.18
Closeness mother	[CO], [TO]	.12
Closeness father	saturated	

Figure 1

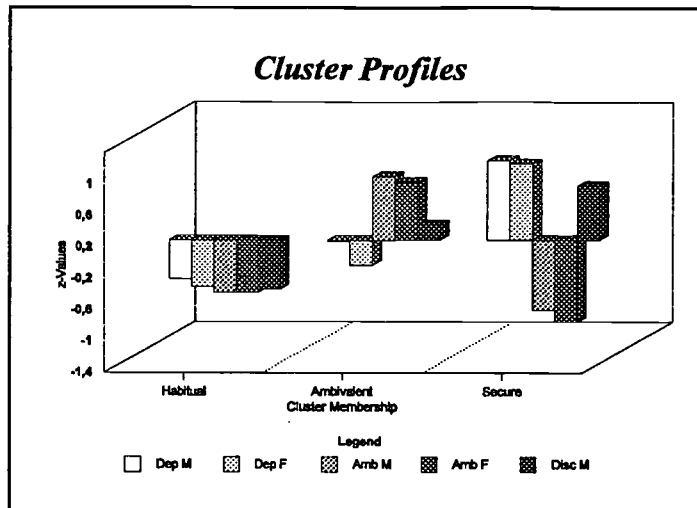


Figure 2

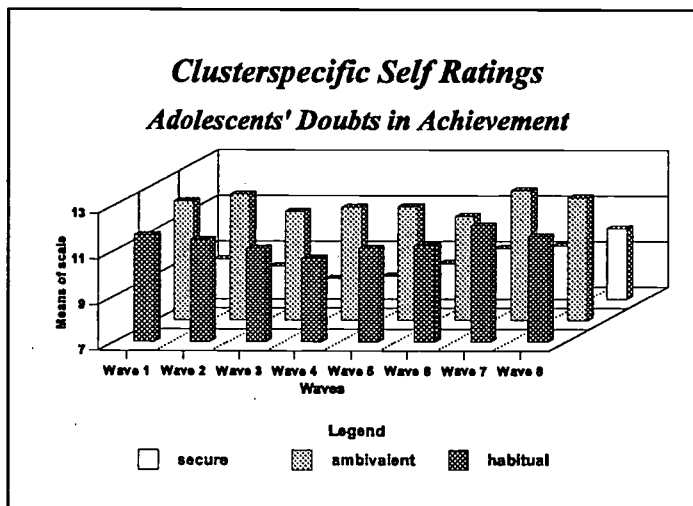


Figure 3

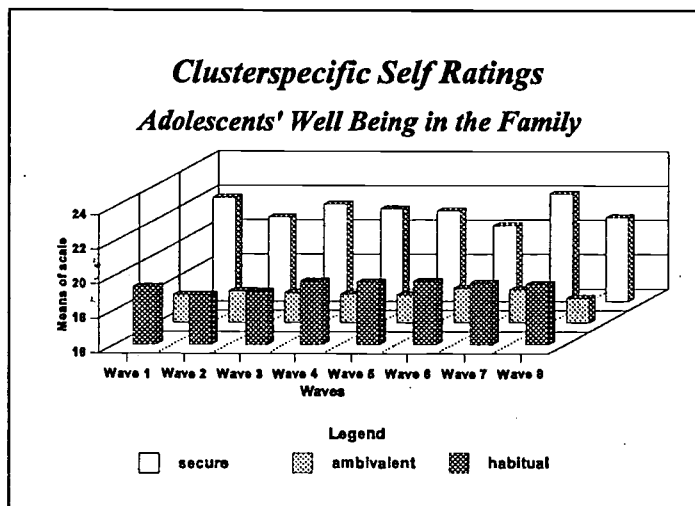




Figure 4

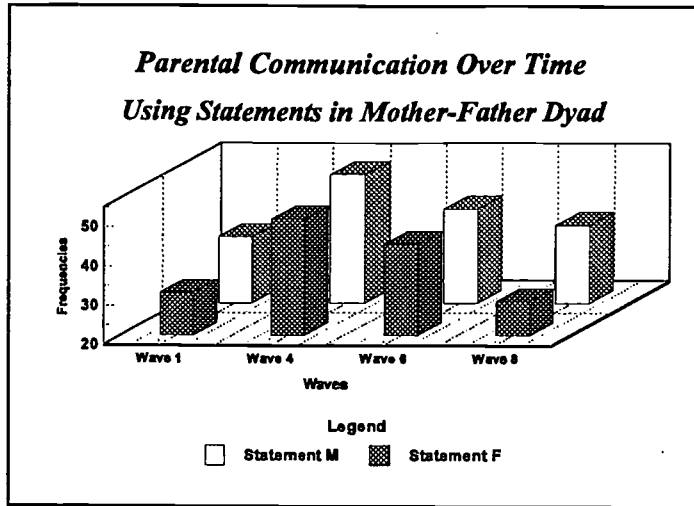


Figure 5

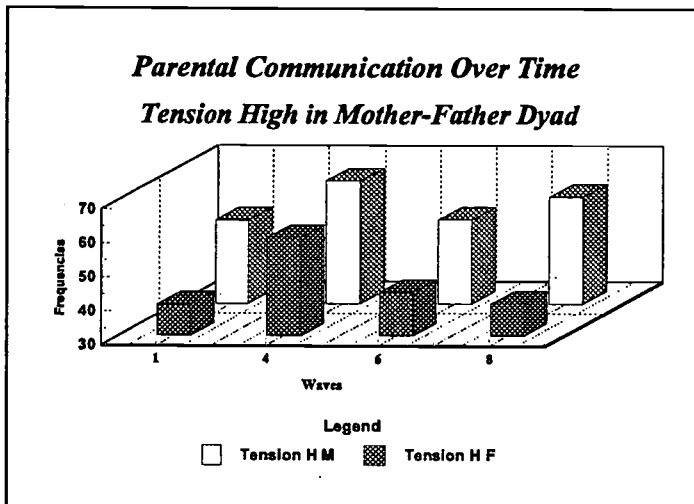


Figure 6

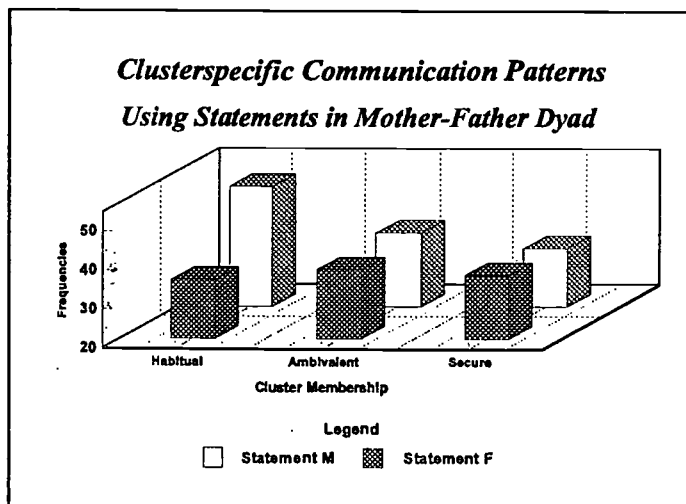


Figure 7

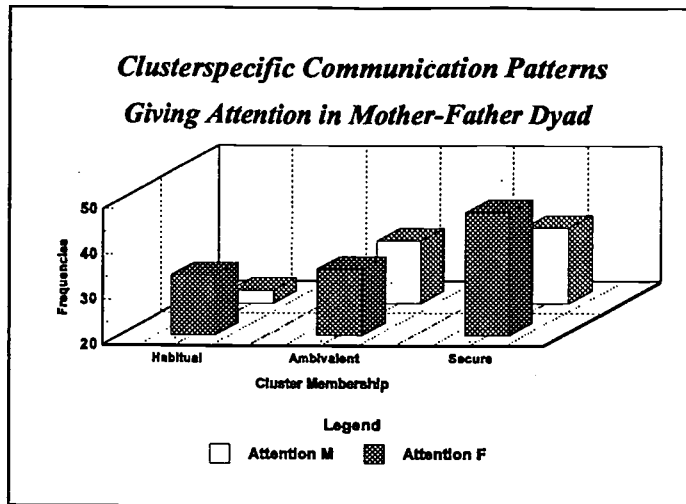


Figure 8

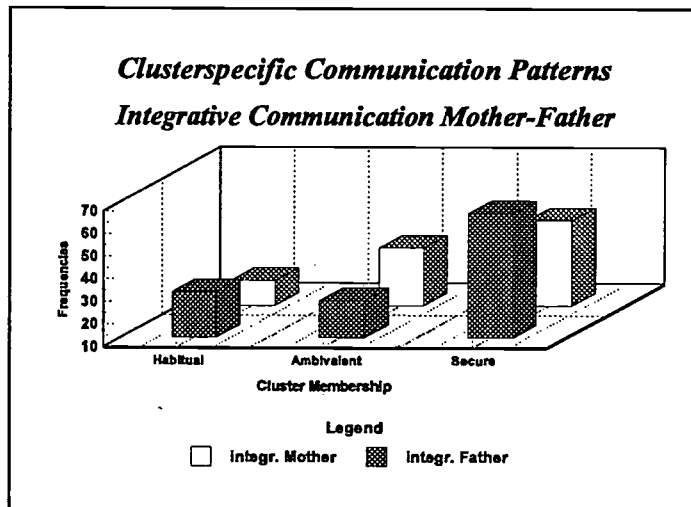
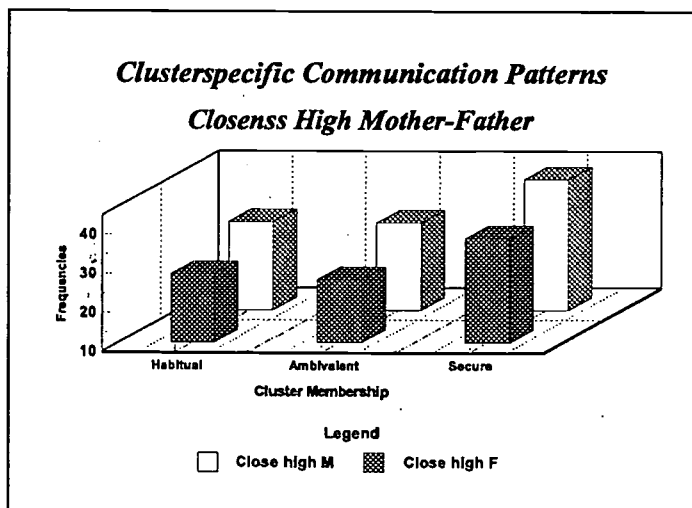


Figure 9



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