The Social Life and Emotional State of Adolescent Children of Parents Who Are Blind and Sighted: A Pilot Study

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Abstract: This pilot study compared the development of two groups of adolescents—those whose parents were blind and those whose parents were sighted. It found that there were no essential differences between the groups. Moreover, the friendship relationships, feelings toward parents, and some essential characteristics of the adolescents' emotional state were more positive among the adolescents whose parents were blind.

Since the 1960s, there has been growing interest in the effects of disabilities of parents on the development of children, and an increasing number of studies have dealt with this subject (Ackerson, 2003; Aldridge & Becker, 1999; Finney & Miller, 1999; Keith & Morris, 1996; Kelley, Sikka, & Venkatesan, 1997; Olsen & Parker, 1997; Wells & Jones, 2000). The main topics of these studies have been the quality of parenting (Olsen & Clarke, 2003), long-term outcomes for children of parents with disabilities and the impact of parents' disabilities on children's mental health and social behavior (Peters & McMahon, 2002; Olsen & Clarke, 2003), and the children's role as "young carers" for their disabled parents (Aldridge & Becker, 2003). No studies have been conducted on the attitudes of children and adolescents toward their parent or parents with disabilities, emotional responses to the situation, and social life. The main goal of the study presented here was to compare the social life, emotional state, and feelings toward parents of adolescents with parents who are blind and those with sighted parents.

Theoretical background

SOCIAL LIFE

In adolescence, social life has a special importance. Friendships supply emotional support and enrich the inner world of the adolescent and contribute to his or her physical and emotional well-being (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Laursen, 1993; Seiffge, 1993). Parenting styles and good parenting skills have an important impact on children's ability to develop a social life and friendships (Cui, Conger, Bryant, & Elder, 2002; Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Decovic, 2001; Rice, 1990; Yoniss & Smollar, 1985). In our study, two kinds of variables characterized the adolescents' social life: first, the amount of free time and the intensity of the aid that the adolescents rendered to their parents, and second, the quantity and quality of their friendship relations.

EMOTIONAL STATE

In this research, the children's emotional state was studied in the theoretical context of separation-individuation processes. The concept of separation-individuation was defined by Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975, p. 66) as "a process by which a person becomes increasingly differentiated from a past or present relational context." The individuation process, in the context of the family, is a process in which children increase the psychological distance between themselves and their parents. Normal separation-individuation processes depend on the balance between the adolescent's needs for independence and family support. The level of differentiation appears to be connected to the patterns by which interpersonal distances are regulated within the family system and the level of adaptability (Moos, 1997; Yahav, 2001). Well-differentiated families are characterized by an optimal pattern of emotional connectedness, which allows for feelings of both individual separateness and connectedness, and an optimal degree of adaptability for coping with life's stresses in a way that permits family members to function as part of the group while maintaining their individuality.

The emotional state during separation-individuation is formed by the following feelings: separation anxiety and engulfment anxiety, a sense of loneliness, self-appraisal, and ambiguous feelings toward parents. We studied these parameters of children's emotional state related to separation-individuation processes in our research.

ADOLESCENTS' FEELINGS TOWARD THEIR PARENTS

Children's perceptions of their parents with disabilities are partly the result of their culture and ethnic origin. Studies on this issue have revealed a range of feelings from pride to shame, from social contributions to social pathology, and from helpfulness to avoidance (Bornstein, 1995; Deshen & Deshen, 1989). In our study, the adolescents' feelings toward their parents were analyzed using the two-dimensional approach. This approach is based on the assumption that positive and negative dimensions coexist relatively independently, rather than being polar opposites (Russell & Carroll, 1999; Vautier & Raufaste, 2003). The two-dimensional approach has not been used previously in this area of study.

Anger and shame toward parents were defined as negative feelings, and care, concern, and responsibility were defined as positive feelings. In this research, the terms *positive* and *negative* were used according to the social acceptability (approval or blame) of various feelings toward parents in the context of the norms and values of Jewish tradition and culture.

The main goals of this pilot study were to examine how the parents' blindness influenced their children's social life (friendships and social relationships), emotional state (separation anxiety and engulfment anxiety, sense of loneliness, and self-appraisal), and feelings toward their parents (positive and negative, their intensity and balance). Two groups of adolescents were compared: adolescents whose parents were blind (the research group) and adolescents whose parents were sighted (the comparison group).

Method

DATA COLLECTION

The participants were located through the Service for the Blind, Ministry of Welfare,

in Israel, both local and governmental. According to the Israeli standard (best-corrected visual acuity in the better-seeing eye of < 6/60 or < 20/400), there are 23,547 people who are blind in Israel (Ministry of Welfare, 2004). From the list of the Service for the Blind of blind parents of sighted adolescent children in northern Israel, we randomly sent letters about the research to the parents and asked their permission to interview their children. Forty parents agreed to participate in the study. The comparison group was chosen randomly from the same age groups and regions as the research group. The interviewers were graduate students in the School of Social Work of the University of Haifa.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 40 adolescents whose parent or parents were blind and 42 adolescents whose parents were sighted. In terms of gender, the participants were divided almost equally, with 51% girls and 49% boys in both groups. All the participants were high school students. The mean age was 15.4 for the research group and 14.5 for the comparison group, a small but statistically significant difference ($t = 2.8$, $p < .007$). These differences did not influence the results of the study, however; a nonsignificant correlation was found between age and the study variables.

The mean number of siblings in both groups was the same: 2.5 in the research group and 2.9 in the comparison group (the difference was not significant; $t = 1.89$, $p = .07$). The level of parental employment differed between the two groups. In the comparison group, 75% of the fathers and 69% of the mothers were

employed, whereas in the research group, the figures were 65% and 45%, respectively. In the research group, of the 31 families with one parent who was blind, 71% of the blind fathers but 33% of the blind mothers were employed.

Both parents were blind for 9 families in the research group. The comparison between adolescents with one blind parent and two blind parents showed that only in one case were significant differences found. In accordance with the nonparametric tests (Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon), the intensity of positive feelings toward parents was lower among adolescents with two parents who were blind than among those with one parent who was blind (the mean intensity was 2.2 and 3.0, respectively). The comparison of each of these two groups of adolescents with the comparison group demonstrated the same results (in accordance with a nonparametric test), which allowed adolescents with either one or two blind parents to be analyzed as one group.

INSTRUMENTS

Three main instruments were used to measure the research variables: the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; J. B. Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986); the Friendship Questionnaire (FQ; Gresham & Elliot, 1990); and the Child Feelings Toward Parents Questionnaire (CFTPQ; Duvdevany, Yahav, & Moin, 2005), which was specifically constructed for this study.

The SITA was designed to investigate different aspects of separation and individuation during adolescence and was based on the theory of Mahler et al. (1975). It is a self-report inventory that poses a series of attitudinal statements

about relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Respondents are asked to rate each statement on a 5-point ordinal scale that ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The SITA has several forms (J. B. Levine et al., 1986; J. B. Levine & Saintoge, 1993). The construct and content validity of the SITA and the number of subscales have been widely discussed in the literature (J. B. Levine & Saintoge, 1993). In our study, we used the Hebrew translation of the questionnaire, which was translated by Alpha (1991) and adapted to the Israeli adolescent culture. The Hebrew version consisted of 43 items in three dimensions: separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, and narcissism (Cronbach's alpha from .71 to .85). The construct validity of the Separation Anxiety and the Engulfment Anxiety subscales were demonstrated by a positive correlation with the General Anxiety scale ($r = .35$ and $.37$, respectively, $p = .001$); the Narcissism subscale was positively correlated with the quality of the children's peer interactions ($r = .35$, $p = .001$) and showed a lack of significant correlation with general anxiety.

According to the goals of our study, two additional subscales were constructed: sense of loneliness and self-appraisal. *Sense of loneliness* consisted of three items: "Sometimes, I am afraid that I am not wanted by my friends"; "Frankly, I do not like anybody"; and "Actually, no one really understands me." The subscale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .81) and good construct validity. It was positively correlated with the Separation Anxiety subscale ($r = .54$, $p = .001$) and the General Anxiety subscale ($r = 56$, $p = .001$) and negatively correlated with the number of

good friends ($r = -.52$, $p = 001$). *Self-appraisal* consisted of four items: "I get along with my friends, and I feel free to tell them when I disagree with something they do"; "I know my friends so well that I can almost tell what they are thinking"; "Most of the time, I get positive feedback from people concerning their feelings about me"; and "People are impressed by my abilities" (Cronbach's alpha = .70). The construct validity of this subscale was demonstrated by a positive correlation with the Narcissism subscale ($r = 77$, $p = .001$) and the lack of a significant correlation with the Separation Anxiety subscale ($r = -.002$, $p = .99$).

The FQ is a frequently used self-report questionnaire for assessing the quality of children's peer interactions. The Hebrew version was translated by Z. Levine (1996). The FQ consists of eight statements that respondents are asked to rate on a 3-point ordinal scale—"very right," "sometimes right," and "never right." The friendship index was calculated as the mean of eight items (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

The CFTPQ is a revised version of a questionnaire on feelings toward parents (Yahav, Muller, & Vosberg, 2005) and consists of 36 items. The original questionnaire had a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .91) and high test-retest reliability ($r = .83$, $p = .001$). The CFTPQ is a self-report scale consisting of 29 statements. Respondents are asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "absolutely right" to "absolutely wrong." The CFTPQ consists of the following subscales: perceived peculiarity of parents, general anxiety, negative feelings toward parents (shame and anger), positive feelings toward parents (concern and care), general emotional

background, and discrepancy between positive and negative feelings toward parents.

The Negative Feeling Intensity (NFI) subscale was calculated as the mean of 12 items (such as "I feel angry at my parents" and "I feel ashamed to bring friends into the house"). This scale was found to have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .82), and the subscales had good construct validity. The NFI was positively correlated with the Sense of Loneliness subscale ($r = .57$, $p = .001$) and the General Anxiety subscale of the SITA ($r = 51$, $p = .001$) and negatively correlated with the number of good friends ($r = -.53$, $p = 001$).

The Positive Feeling Intensity (PFI) subscale was also calculated as the mean of another 12 of the 29 items (Cronbach's alpha = .84). Examples of items on the PFI are "Usually, I stay at home in the afternoon to help my parents" and "I try to study very hard to ease my parents' worries." General intensity of feelings (GIF) toward parents, which was calculated as the mean of the scores on the PFI and the NFI, characterizes the importance of parents in their children's emotional life (Cronbach's alpha = .84), and discrepancy between the PFI and NFI characterizes the gap between positive and negative feelings toward parents.

The General Anxiety scale was calculated as the mean of four items (Cronbach's alpha = .64). Examples of items on the General Anxiety scale are "I cry a lot at night" and "Sometimes I feel like dying." The subscales had good construct validity. The General Anxiety scale was positively correlated with the Sense of Loneliness subscale of SITA ($r = .56$, $p = .001$) and negatively correlated with the number of good friends ($r = -.37$, $p = 001$).

TYPOLOGY OF FEELINGS

The adolescents were divided into four subgroups according to the various combinations of their negative (high- or low-intensity) and positive (high- or low-intensity) feelings toward their parents (Duvdevany et al., 2005). These four groups were defined as (1) adolescents whose positive feelings toward their parents were stronger than their negative feelings, (2) adolescents whose negative feelings toward their parents were stronger than their positive feelings, (3) adolescents whose feelings toward their parents were indifferent (that is, whose positive and negative feelings were both low), and (4) adolescents whose feelings toward their parents were ambivalent (that is, whose positive and negative feelings were both intense). In accordance with these subgroups, four types of dominant feelings toward parents were identified: positive feelings, negative feelings, indifferent feelings, and ambivalent feelings.

In the study, different aspects of the adolescents' lives were characterized by various scales and subscales; social life was described by the number of good friends, friendship relationships, and amount of free time. The emotional state was characterized by separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, self-appraisal, sense of loneliness, and general anxiety. Feelings toward parents included a sense of attachment to parents, desired separation from parents, intensity of positive and negative feeling toward parents, discrepancy between PFI and NFI, the types of

dominant feelings, and the general intensity of feelings toward parents.

Results

Group comparisons were examined using multivariate analysis. A Bonferonni correction was taken into account in case of multiple tests. After the Bonferonni correction, all statistical tests were considered significant at the .004 (.05/12) probability level. The friendship relationships and feelings toward parents of the adolescents whose parents were blind (the research group) were found to be more positive than those of the adolescents whose parents were sighted (the comparison group).

In our study, two kinds of variables were used to characterize the adolescents' social life. The first was the amount of free time and the intensity of the aid that the children rendered to their parents, and the second was the quantity and quality of the adolescents' friendship relations.

With regard to the amount of free time and the intensity of the aid that children rendered to their parents, no significant differences were found between the comparison and the research groups (see Table 1). However, there were significant differences between the groups in friendship relationships: The quality of the adolescents' peer interactions was better in the research group than in the comparison group (see Table 1). In relation to the adolescents' emotional state, no significant differences were found between the groups in the tested indicators of emotional state: separation anxiety,

Table 1
Adolescents' social life, emotional state, and feelings toward parents, by research and comparison groups.

Variable	Comparison group (n = 42)		Research group (n = 40)		Multivariate testing	
	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
Social life						
Free time	2.8	1.65	2.6	1.47	.34	.559
Number of good friends	2.4	.91	2.8	.39	5.42	.023
Friendship relationships	3.6	.81	4.4	.55	25.47	.000
Helping the parents	2.6	1.5	2.4	1.2	.37	.543
Emotional life						
Separation anxiety	2.32	.47	2.38	.53	.52	.474
Engulfment anxiety	2.32	.57	2.33	.38	.002	.966
Sense of loneliness	1.92	.85	1.50	.59	6.46	.013
Self-appraisal	3.33	.88	3.84	.69	8.1	.006
General anxiety	1.88	1.1	1.43	.61	4.82	.031
Feelings toward parents						
General intensity of feelings	3.85	1.26	4.39	1.26	3.00	.087
Positive feelings intensity	2.1	.80	2.8	.87	12.3	.001
Negative feelings intensity	1.7	.67	1.58	.61	1.2	.276
Discrepancy between PFI and NFI	.35	.79	1.23	.80	21.15	.000

Note: After Bonferonni correction all statistical tests were considered significant at the .004 (.05/12) probability level.

engulfment anxiety, self-appraisal, and sense of loneliness.

ADOLESCENTS' FEELINGS TOWARD THEIR PARENTS

Bipolar, positive and negative, feelings toward parents were found to coexist among 86% of the adolescents in the sample. Nevertheless, significant differences were found in the intensity and interpersonal variability of the negative and positive feelings toward parents. Positive feelings were found to be more intense and less variable than negative feelings, both in the research group and in the comparison group. According to a paired-samples *t*-test, the intensity of the positive feelings toward parents was significantly higher than the intensity of negative feelings among all the adolescents who participated in the study (PFI = 2.5 and NFI = 1.7; $t = -7.82$, $p < .001$).

The level of positive feelings toward parents and the discrepancy between the PFI and the NFI were higher in the research group than in the comparison group. No significant differences were found between the two groups in negative feelings toward parents (see Table 1).

It is important to note that, in general, the intensity of feelings toward parents, positive or negative, was low in both groups (see Table 2). In the comparison group, most adolescents reported a very low intensity of positive (69%) and negative (81%) feelings toward their parents; in the research group, the proportions were 30% and 87%, respectively.

Variance in the PFI and the NFI may be explained by diverse factors. According to the multiple regression analysis, of the eight variables (age, free time, number of good friends, friendship, sense of loneliness, self-appraisal, general anxiety and parental disability), parental disability alone explained 27% of the variance in the participants' PFI. Other variables explained the variance in the participants' NFI: sense of loneliness and number of good friends (see Table 3). The greater the sense of loneliness, the more intense were the negative feelings toward parents. In addition, having more good friends was associated with less intense negative feelings.

Different factors influenced the intensity of negative and positive feelings toward parents among the girls and boys in both groups. The parents' disability and high self-esteem promoted positive feelings toward parents among the girls. Intimate friendships, however, were found to be a moderating factor; the closer the friendship ties, the less intense were the girls' positive feelings toward their parents. At the same time, the greater the

Table 2
Intensity of positive and negative feelings toward parents (percentage).

	Positive feelings			Negative feelings		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
Comparison	69	24	7	81	16	3
Research	30	42	28	87	13	0

Note: Low-intensity score = 1 to 2.4, middle-intensity score = 2.5 to 3.5, and high-intensity score = 3.6 to 5.

Results of the multiple regression analysis of adolescents' positive and negative feelings toward parents (standardized beta).

Variable	Sample (n = 82)		Girls (n = 42)		Boys (n = 40)	
	PFI	NFI	PFI	NFI	PFI	NFI
Age	.027	.051	−.249	.044	.118	.007
Parental disability	.475*	.131	.865*	.260	.354	−.024
Free time	−.208	.041	−.066	.010	−.035	.193
Number of good friends	.025	−.294*	−.143	−.496*	.143	−.027
Friendship	−.080	.011	−.579*	−.189	.302	.151
Sense of loneliness	.114	.300*	.117	.089	.329	.653*
Self-appraisal	.105	−.150	.372*	−.247	−.110	−.054
General anxiety	.220	.243*	.046	.131	.188	.321*
F	3.38*	8.17*	4.052*	4.15*	2.31*	10.63*
R^2	.273	.476	.503	.509	.373	.733

* $p < .05.$
Note: PFI = positive feelings intensity; NFI = negative feelings intensity.

number of good friends, the less intense were the girls' negative feelings toward their parents. For the boys, no research factors were related to the variance of their positive feelings toward their parents (even parents' disability), and the sense of loneliness was found to be related to negative feelings toward their parents (see Table 3).

TYPOLOGY OF FEELINGS

Significant differences were found between the research and comparison groups in terms of dominant types of feelings toward parents. Positive feelings were expressed more strongly (58%) in the research group than in the comparison group (17%). Negative and indifferent feelings were expressed more strongly in the comparison group (41% and 21%, respectively) than in the research group (10% and 10%, respectively) (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Some similarities and some differences were found between the research and comparison groups. These groups were similar in free time, separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, perceived peculiarity of their parents, perceived alienation of their parents, bipolarity of their feelings toward parents, and the intensity of their negative feelings. Nevertheless, the social life of the adolescents in the research group was richer, and their feelings toward their parents were more positive than those in the comparison group.

SOCIAL LIFE

One of the most important results of our study was that the adolescents in the research group had better-quality peer interactions than did those in the comparison group. The influence of the parents' disability on the adolescents' friendship relationships can be explained in two ways. First, it is possible that adolescents whose parents are disabled have a stronger need for a social life than do adolescents whose parents are not disabled because of the specific situation in their families (Yahav et al., 2005). Second, we assume that children who grow up in fam-
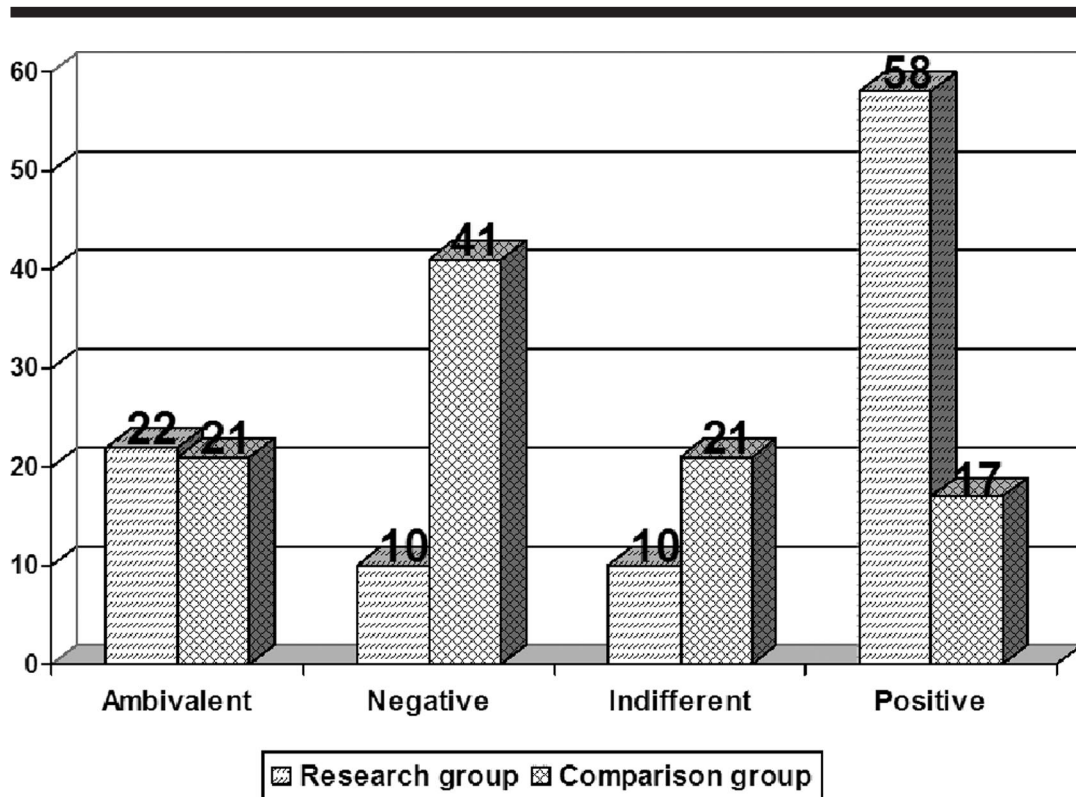
Figure 1. Types of feelings toward parents of the adolescents in the research and comparison groups.

ilies with parents who are blind gain flexibility, are less stigmatizing and more tolerant, and have more practical skills than do those who grow up in families with sighted parents. According to the findings of various studies of parental behavior, relations with parents, flexibility, and tolerance in the family are significant predictors of the quality of children's friendship relationships (Cui et al., 2002; Engels et al., 2001; Rice, 1990; Yoniss & Smollar, 1985). As the children become more independent and mature, they become more socially involved with their peers (Banks et al., 2001; Cohen, 1998).

EMOTIONAL STATE

No significant differences were found between the comparison and research groups in separation anxiety and engulfment anxiety—that is, the separation-individuation process was not different in the two groups. Children whose parents are blind can separate from their parents in spite of their need to care for their parents. This finding indicates that blind parents with good parenting skills are able to "let their children go" and do not prevent them from undergoing the ordinary developmental stages of life. These results, in conjunction with those of some other studies (Conley-Jung & Olkin, 2001; Duckett & Pratt, 2001; Kitchin, 2000), confirm the idea that parents who are disabled can be good parents and that their disability does not necessarily affect the meaningful process that their children undergo during their developmental stages.

FEELINGS TOWARD PARENTS

The bipolarity of feelings toward parents was a characteristic of both the research group and the comparison group. Variance in the negative feelings was explained by factors that were related to the quality and quantity of adolescents' friendship relations. The health status of the parents did not have an impact on the children's negative feelings toward the parents. At the same time, the positive feelings toward parents were explained only by the variable of the parents' health status. Moreover, the level of positive feelings toward parents and the discrepancy between the PFI and NFI were higher in the research group than in the comparison group. Significant differences were found between the research and comparison groups in the dominant types of feelings toward parents. Positive feelings were expressed more strongly in the research group than in the comparison group, whereas negative and indifferent feelings were expressed more strongly in the comparison group than in the research group. This finding confirmed the findings of previous studies on "carer" children, indicating that the positive feelings of these children toward their parents were higher and more intense as they grew up, while the positive feelings of children with sighted parents weakened as the children grew up (Duvdevany et al., 2005).

In the comparison group, the negative feelings toward parents were the dominant feelings, but in the research group, only 10% expressed negative feelings. This finding can be explained by the fact that negative feelings in adolescence are part of the separation process (Mahler et al., 1975), which is a normative process, but when the parents are blind, the adolescents feel less negative toward them and go through a different process of separation (Grant & Compas, 1995; Yahav, 2001).

In summary, the results of the study suggest that children whose parents are blind can grow up normally and go through the same stages that other children go through. The results shed light on the meaning of good parenting and show again that the quality of parenting is based more on personal than on external factors, such as physical disabilities.

LIMITATIONS

One major limitation of the study was related to the small sample. Most of the blind parents in the population who were approached did not allow their children to participate in the study. One can assume that those who agreed to participate differed from those who did not; the results should therefore be approached with caution. In addition, no comparison was made between children who had one parent who was blind and those who had two parents who were blind. The demographic and environmental data in our study were limited. Data on the parents' social and economical status, employment status, and parenting styles; the gender of the blind parent; and the adolescents' relationships with siblings may have yielded a greater understanding of the influence of parents' disability on child development. We suggest that future studies should consider these data in comparing the two groups.

Future research also needs to consider that the range of variables that influence the social life and emotional state of adolescents whose parents are blind is wide. For example, in the study, the adolescents' personal characteristics, differ-

ences in the timing of the occurrence of the parents' disability, and the severity and etiology of the parents' blindness were not measured.

Regardless of the limitations, the findings of this study contribute factual information on blind persons as parents. Studies in this area can assist parents who are blind and their advocates to break down faulty belief systems and misconceptions toward blind parents as parents and to guarantee parental rights.

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