People frequently portray adolescence as a time of increasing—and distressing—parent-teen conflict. Most research has focused on the antecedents and consequences of parent-adolescent conflict. Considerably less attention, however, has been paid to the strategies adolescents employ to manage conflict.

Adolescents can reduce conflict with parents by behaving in ways that parents approve of or responding differently to conflict with parents. Based on some research we recently produced, I would like to suggest yet another way that adolescents cope with such conflict: by talking about it with others. In our recent paper in New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, we offered a hypothetical model to explain who adolescents confide in about conflicts with fathers (see figure bottom left). Following are four observations from this work.

1. Adolescents do talk about their relationships with their parents. In our study, we asked 7th grade adolescents who they talk to when they “are upset or bothered” by their relationship with their co-resident fathers. (In our study, half of the co-resident fathers were stepparents.) Over 75% of adolescents said they talked to their mothers and 43% said they talked directly to dad. (Recall that almost half of our fathers were stepparents; children are less likely to seek out stepparents than biological parents.) Thus, contrary to stereotypes of brooding, distant adolescents, our results suggest that teens do talk with their parents about their relationships with their fathers.

2. Adolescents talk to parents who listen, and there is an art to getting children to talk. When we predicted whether mothers and fathers were sought out by their children to discuss the father-child relationship, a clear story emerged. Adolescents talk to mom about dad when she is a warm and accepting parent and they talk to dad when he is a warm and accepting parent. Apparently, adolescents are willing to talk to parents about the sensitive topic of conflict with a parent when that conversation is likely to be met with an open ear and accepting mind.

3. Qualities of the marital relationship are linked to whether a teen seeks out parents. We found that adolescents are less likely to talk to mom about the co-resident dad when the parents tend to disagree about parenting decisions. Specifically, when parents reported low levels of coparenting, the adolescents talked less to moms about dad. Likely, adolescents are aware that mothers and fathers disagree about parenting and they are less likely to talk to moms when they have concerns about fueling conflict between the parents.

4. When it comes to teenagers seeking counsel, there are more similarities than differences between families of European and Mexican ancestry. In our sample we had approximately equal groups of teenagers from Mexican origin and European origin. Overwhelmingly, they displayed similar patterns of seeking out sources to talk about the father-child relationship. Surprisingly, even a number of indicators of cultural values (e.g., familism, expression of respect, gender beliefs, acculturation gap) failed to explain the patterns we detected of seeking out others for support.