CHAPTER 1

Adolescents’ Agency in Information Management

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INTRODUCTION

One of the primary tasks associated with childhood and adolescence is to shift from being regulated by others to self-regulation and self-control. Because adolescents in Western cultures tend to spend increasingly more time away from their parents (Larson et al., 1996), much attention has been given to how parents continue to regulate their adolescents when the adolescents are not supervised by adults. The majority of research investigating this topic has focused on parents’ attempts to monitor their adolescents’ whereabouts and activities.

This body of research has been seriously flawed, however, assuming that parents’ monitoring provides them with information about adolescents’ whereabouts and activities. The use of invalid measures (e.g., measures of parental knowledge, rather than parents’ monitoring behaviors) and unidirectional assumptions (i.e., parent effects) led researchers to conclude prematurely that parents who monitor not only know what their adolescents are doing, but are then able to protect their adolescents from engagement in problematic activities. Recent research revealed these flaws, showing that parents’ knowledge of adolescents’ friends and activities is derived more from adolescents’ disclosure than from parents’ monitoring efforts (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In response, researchers have taken an interest in understanding the processes by which parental knowledge is generated.
In this chapter, we take the position that adolescents make strategic decisions about what information they provide to their parents about their friends and activities and act on those decisions, in a process we call information management. We began exploring this issue about the same time Stattin and Kerr were beginning to reinterpret the parental “monitoring” (knowledge) measures. In the main, these measures assess how much parents know about their adolescents’ friends and activities (e.g., Brown et al., 1993). From our perspective, the use of parents’ knowledge as a measure of monitoring assumes (1) parents who monitor know what their adolescents are doing, because they try, and (2) parents who do not monitor do not know what their adolescents are doing, because they do not try to know. We saw this as problematic in two ways. First, these assumptions do not allow for parents who try, but fail to be able to monitor their adolescents, or for parents who, through little or no effort on their part, have adolescents who divulge information. Second, measures assessing parents’ knowledge ignore what adolescents might do to preclude or enhance their parents’ monitoring efforts. We concluded that it is important to understand the ways in which adolescents manage the information their parents obtain. In other words, we are interested in the processes of adolescents’ disclosure and nondisclosure.

To make our case, we first review the existing literature, attending to the ways information management issues have been dealt with historically. We then review literature suggesting information management is indicative of a developmental progression involving social and cognitive processes. These processes include privacy boundary management and the development of autonomy. We then present evidence suggesting that adolescents’ strategically enable or preclude parents’ attempts to monitor them and some of the reasons why.

**IMPORTANT TERMINOLOGY**

The idea that individuals control information is not new and spans many areas of research. It is important, then, to establish common ground by reviewing the terminology used in the empirical literature.

**Disclosure**

Disclosure refers to the provision of information to parents, sharing of information either voluntarily or from prompting. Disclosure as an information management strategy is related to, but conceptually distinct from self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the sharing of personal or private information that others are unable to discern (Pearce & Sharp, 1973), is part of the process
through which intimacy is established, and is expected to be followed by reciprocated disclosure. None of these conditions necessarily apply to adolescents’ disclosure to parents.

**Nondisclosure**

Nondisclosure is the conceptual opposite of disclosure, meaning information is not provided, voluntarily or otherwise. There are several means through which individuals may not disclose, including simply not providing information. This may be unintentional (e.g., an oversight) or it may be intentional. Researchers have referred to two ways in which individuals may intentionally not disclose or withhold information. They may actively choose not to provide information (in whole or in part) or deliberately provide misinformation. Intentionally providing no information or only partial information has traditionally been referred to as keeping secrets, concealing information, or lying by omission (Granhand & Strömwall, 2004). The deliberate provision of misinformation has been referred to as lying, specifically lying by commission. Lying can be further classified as falsifications (total fabrications where all information provided is untruthful) or distortions (altering the truth to fit a liar’s goal). Further lies can be used to conceal the fact that information is being withheld (e.g., claiming one does not know or remember, when that is not the case) (Granhand & Strömwall, 2004).

Thus, both intentional withholding and providing misinformation can be construed as deception. Succinctly, Vrij (2000, p. 6) defined deception as “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue.” It is important to recognize that deception involves the intention to misrepresent the truth and that unsuccessful attempts are still considered deception.

The degree of maliciousness in intent is also an important consideration for understanding deception. Some intentions are to harm the listener (Sweetser, 1987) or take advantage of a specific situation (Van Manen & Levering, 1996). In contrast, “social lies” (i.e., “white lies”) are defined as untruthful statements that are not accompanied by malicious intent (Bok, 1978). The intent of social lies may be to present self or others in a positive light, prevent speakers from hurting the feelings of the listener, or avoid receiving adverse reactions from the listener if the truth is hurtful (Talwar & Lee, 2002).

**EXAMINING PRIOR RESEARCH**

Research examining adolescents’ information management is both sparse and scattered. However, at least three related areas of scholarship are concerned with the conditions under which adolescents provide or do not provide
information to their parents. We briefly review each of these, examining the contribution of each in understanding information management.

Parenting and Behavioral Control

For decades, one of the primary messages coming from parenting research has been that in order to protect adolescents from embarking on antisocial or delinquent trajectories, parents must lay down guidelines and firmly enforce them. In research terminology, adolescents need to be behaviorally controlled (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994). Because adolescents spend increasingly more time out of sight and sound of their parents, an ancillary message has been that in order to control adolescents’ behavior parents must know about their whereabouts and activities. In research terminology, adolescents need to be monitored (Steinberg, 1990).

In the body of research examining parents’ behavioral control, which includes monitoring, the assumptions have generally been that (1) behavioral control is a parent-directed process, with parents “in control” of, or controlling adolescents, and (2) the relationships between behavioral control and adolescents’ adjustment are largely linear. This suggests there are no upper limits as to how much a parent should or could monitor.

Recent empirical evidence has called the conclusions about monitoring into question. Stattin and Kerr, in a series of studies, have shown that (1) the previously used measures of monitoring were actually measuring parental knowledge (2) parental knowledge is more strongly related to adolescents’ disclosure than it is to parents’ monitoring or control efforts, and (3) when faced with delinquent and defiant adolescents, parents tend to decrease, rather than increase, their monitoring efforts (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; 2003; Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

It is clear from examining literature that has emerged since Stattin and Kerr’s thought-provoking articles that some researchers have either ignored or dismissed the empirical evidence refuting both the construct of monitoring and its purportedly protective effects. We believe this is, in part, because the agency of the adolescents in the parenting process has not been fully recognized. This orientation is evident in reconfigurations of monitoring since the seminal articles questioning its measurement. Renaming parental knowledge (i.e., a cognitive state) “monitoring knowledge” or “monitoring-relevant knowledge” (e.g., Laird et al., 2003) when it cannot be attributed to parents’ monitoring behaviors simply shifts the logical errors to a different construct and level of analysis. The use of this terminology implies, as the original monitoring literature did, that parents know where adolescents are and what they are doing because of what parents do, rather than what adolescents do.

Advocates of this perspective have suggested that adolescents’ disclosure is enhanced when parents are warm, supportive, and empathic (Fanzoi & Davis, 1985; Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1999; Norrell, 1984; Searight et al.,
1995), and undermined when parents are highly critical, rejecting, or unwilling to listen (Norrell, 1984, Rosenthal, Efklides, & Demetriou, 1988; Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). Again, however, the emphasis is upon parents’ behaviors and adolescents’ disclosure or nondisclosure is considered the result of skillful or inept parenting.

Is the emphasis on parents’ behaviors justified? Recent research suggests not. Stattin & Kerr (2000) found parents react to adolescents’ delinquency by reducing their control and support. Additionally, parents who perceive their adolescents as warm and open maintain high levels of monitoring efforts (i.e., behavioral control and solicitation of information) whereas parents who perceive their adolescents as cold and closed to communication reduce their monitoring efforts over time (Kerr, Stattin, & Tilton-Weaver, 2007). Further, they have also found parents trust adolescents because they disclose, not the other way around (Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999).

Summary

The evidence to date does not support an interpretation that parents who monitor more then know more. Instead, a picture emerges suggesting adolescents manage information to their parents and parents are knowledgeable about their adolescents’ whereabouts and activities outside of their direct supervision because adolescents either do or do not divulge the information. Therefore, what adolescents do is at least as important as what parents do and parenting is likely as reactive to adolescents’ behavior as adolescents’ behaviors are to parenting. We turn now to a related body of research, examining the development of deception.

The Development of Deception

In developmental studies examining the concealment of information, the way in which deception is treated depends on the period of the lifespan. In childhood, the emphasis is on cognitive development, where it is recognized that the intentional presentation of misinformation requires individuals to be able to represent the beliefs of others (i.e., hold a theory of mind) and understand that beliefs can be altered (Chandler & Hala, 1991). The development of the ability to conceal information from others emerges around the ages of 4 to 5 years (Peskin, 1992) and is considered a normal and important progression in cognitive development, hailing the ability to distinguish between the mind of self and others as well as a nascent understanding of morality. This same body of research demonstrates that by adolescence individuals are able to regulate information through processes such as withholding information or engaging in deception because they realize they can have knowledge not accessible to others unless they tell them (Lee & Ross, 1997).
Likewise, the focus of much of the research on adults’ deception in everyday life has been on its normative role in social relationships (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Metts, 1989). Adults report lying in one out of every five social interactions (DePaulo et al., 1996). In close relationships, adults tend to report low rates of self-centered lies (e.g., for self-protection or material gain) and higher rates of other-oriented lies (e.g., pretending to agree, artificial compliment) (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Other-oriented lies play a significant role in close relationships (Metts, 1989). Other-oriented lies are used in close relationships to (a) indicate to a partner that the speaker is supportive and caring (e.g., fake agreements, false compliments); (b) gain or maintain control over resources or gain or maintain privacy, particularly from mothers; and (c) turn a humiliating or destructive interaction into a less tense experience (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998).

In contrast, the focus of most research on nondisclosure during adolescence has been on its linkages to maladjustment (e.g., Loeber, DeLamatre, & Keenan, 1998). In these bodies of research, deceiving others (such as parents) has generally involved the explicit provision of misinformation, which has been considered problematic when manifested in conjunction with other socially undesirable behaviors such as theft or aggression (Loeber, DeLamatre & Keenan, 1998).

There are, however, a few notable exceptions in the research literature. Finkenauer and colleagues (e.g., Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Frijns et al., 2005) examined secrecy during adolescence and its potential associations with adjustment. Using cross-sectional data, Finkenauer et al. (2002) found keeping secrets from parents was linked to somatic and depressive complaints, as well as emotional autonomy. However, in a short term (6 months) longitudinal study, Frijns et al. (2005) found only linkages to maladjustment suggesting that keeping secrets from parents is largely problematic.

However, this conclusion should be tempered because the secrecy measure used in both studies is primarily negative, “assessing (a) the tendency to keep things to oneself, (b) the possession of a secret or negative thoughts not shared with others, and (c) the apprehension of the revelation of concealed personal information” (Finkenauer et al., 2002, p. 126; Frijns et al., 2005, p. 141). This measure includes aspects of shyness (i.e., keeping to oneself) and does not recognize that secrets are also something about which people can feel positively (e.g., keeping a secret about a gift, pride in the ability to keep a secret).

Perhaps the reason researchers have tended to emphasize the negative in adolescence is because of attributions about nondisclosure. The most commonly attributed reason for adolescents’ lying has been an attempt to avoid negative consequences (Ford, 1996; Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986), primarily from parents. It is not clear, however, whether adolescent lying is encouraged by certain types of parenting (e.g., extremely punitive) or whether parents cope with lying by responding punitively or by giving up.
Summary

Within the body of research on deception, there appears to be a strange developmental sequence in which the ability to deceive others has normative and important purposes in both childhood and adulthood but is primarily viewed as maladaptive in adolescence. This body of research, like the research on parental control, treats adolescents' nondisclosure as a sign or antecedent of maladaptive development. This view of adolescence does not allow us to examine the potential positive functions of nondisclosure, particularly the role information management has in normal communicative and relational processes located within important developmental trajectories. Recently, Furstenberg (2001, p. 120) argued that “learning what not to tell parents and how not to tell them” is a developmental task in adolescence. Research on the development of autonomy and maintenance of privacy boundaries within the family provides insight into why this might be the case.

Privacy Boundaries and Autonomy

From research on family dynamics and adolescent autonomy development, we gain another perspective on adolescents' management of information. Petronio & Caughlin (2006) suggest that privacy is an essential aspect of family functioning because it enables the development, maintenance, and coordination of boundaries between individuals and groups of family members. From a family systems theory perspective, boundaries help families organize the relationships between generations and between individuals (see White & Klein, 2002). Boundary violations, such as enmeshment or extreme symbiotic involvement (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) between parents and adolescent children, are related to adolescents’ emotional adjustment problems (e.g., Cohen, Vasey, & Gavazzi, 2003). Opportunities to practice keeping appropriate secrets and concealing information throughout childhood contribute to the establishment of autonomous identity in adolescence (Van Manen & Levering, 1996).

The establishment of privacy boundaries within families is understood as a normative developmental process within social domain theory (Smetana, 1988). According to this theory, the process of autonomy development entails parents and children negotiating and renegotiating behavioral control as children develop capacities for self-regulation. Negotiations over behavioral control determine whether the parents or the adolescents have the legitimate authority to make and enforce rules in a given area. In general, empirical accounts suggest in Western cultures, parents and children tend to agree with parents maintaining authority until late childhood or early adolescence, when adolescents expect some control over personal issues (e.g., Collins & Luebker, 1994). Parents generally begin to relinquish control during adolescence, first over personal issues, followed by other issues, but retaining control over
situations in which the adolescents’ safety or security could be compromised (Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

It is reasonable to expect that when adolescents perceive that they, not their parents, legitimately control a domain, privacy would be attained and maintained through management of information about that domain. Recent empirical studies have examined information management in relation to social domains. In a study examining the links between authority beliefs and information management, Smetana et al. (2006) found that adolescents feel less obligated to disclose information to their parents in domains in which they perceive they, not their parents, retain legitimate authority (e.g., less obligation to disclose personal issues than issues in other domains), suggesting adolescents make decisions about what they will and will not disclose.

In an examination of information management across social domains, Darling et al. (2006) found that most of the youth they interviewed reported some nondisclosure to their parents (97.5%). When examining the reasons for disclosure, the adolescents reported they disclosed on 51% of the issues examined because they felt obliged to, 34% because they hoped their parents would change their minds, and 15% because they felt they would not get away with nondisclosure. In contrast, the adolescents reported not disclosing for 37% of the issues because of emotional reasons (i.e., their parents would worry, be disappointed, or wouldn’t understand; or the adolescents would be embarrassed or uncomfortable), 39% because of fear of consequences (i.e., parents would be angry, would lecture or hassle, would punish or stop the activity), and 24% felt that the issue was not within their parents jurisdiction (i.e., the adolescents’ private business or the adolescents’ decision, not the parents).

Summary

The research on privacy boundaries and adolescents’ information management points to the changes that both parents and children make to promote children’s developing autonomy. In families where privacy boundaries do not accommodate children’s development, adolescents may experience adjustment difficulties. When the regulation of behavior is slowly assigned to children, not only is autonomy promoted but communication strategies are altered to maintain privacy. Adolescents make decisions about what to disclose and what not to disclose to their parents as a part of normal development within the family.

Although research indicates that adolescents’ management of information is linked to social domains as a normative developmental process, what is still missing is an account of the subtleties of information management as a normative as well as non-normative phenomenon. To expand on extant research, our research aims were twofold. First, we wanted to examine adolescents’ information management strategies and decisions: How do adolescents...
manage information to their parents about their friends and whereabouts? What choices do they make? Are there implicit “rules” or conditions that guide their information management decisions? We also wanted to examine potential links between adolescents’ strategies and decisions and information constructs such as parents’ knowledge and adolescents’ willingness to disclose.

We then aimed to determine if adolescents’ strategies and decisions were linked to adjustment (e.g., types of peers, attachments to parents) or contextual issues (e.g., parental intrusiveness).

**ADOLESCENTS’ INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

Our first study examines the reasons why adolescents have friends their parents do not know. We chose to examine this area first, because of the degree to which the monitoring literature emphasizes parents’ need to know with whom their adolescents are spending time. According to the monitoring literature, one of the avenues through which parents protect their adolescents from engaging in problem or delinquent behaviors is by intervening in their friendships and keeping adolescents away from problem peers (e.g., Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2005). In addition, domain theory suggests that friendships are a personal domain issue, and an area in which adolescents might withhold information from their parents (Smetana et al., 2006).

In our second study, we chose to focus on adolescents’ whereabouts, asking about their decisions to inform their parents about where they are going. We chose the topic of their whereabouts because where adolescents are, as well as who they are with, are two of the topics consistently targeted by measures purportedly assessing monitoring.

To generate an understanding of adolescents’ implicit rules for information management we used a qualitative analytic approach. It has been our experience that when qualitative approaches are used to examine adolescents’ perspectives of themselves and contexts of their development, that adolescents provide us with information that has not been gained elsewhere.

Although the same qualitative approach was used in both studies, the two investigations varied in how the findings were used. Study 1 is focused on a specific issue, lending itself to a mixed methods approach. Specifically, the findings from the qualitative analysis were used in quantitative analyses in order to examine individual and contextual differences. Study 2 uses the qualitative findings to generate a model.

**Qualitative Analytic Procedures**

Adolescents’ implicit rules regarding when to disclose information to parents were generated from respondents’ written answers to questions about having
friends whom their parents do not know (Study 1) and the conditions under which adolescents inform or do not inform their parents of their whereabouts and activities (Study 2). Extant information on adolescent information management was used to inform the qualitative analysis of the data. The use of prior research and theory helped to organize and assign meaning to the data in a process termed interpretive induction (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003).

The principles of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were followed during the cross-case analysis of the data. The first step in the analysis, open coding, involved an inductive approach of identifying key phrases or themes from across the written responses. Next, broader conceptual categories were identified from the recurring similarities across themes. This process is axial coding which involves stepping back from the data and looking at how themes are connected. For example, the category of “privacy and taking authority” was created in Study 1 because the privacy boundary also involves attempts to assert control over choices of friends. Similarly, the category of “assessing parental disapproval or sanctions” was created in Study 2 because it linked two types of potential parental responses (disapproval and sanctions) to engagement in prohibited behavior. Finally, the selective coding involved integrating and organizing the main categories into higher level concepts.

The sample size of Study 1 is large in order to employ quantitative analyses. The size of the sample made the use of consensus for reliability unwieldy. Therefore reliability was calculated on a subset of the data. The first author developed the categories and themes for the entire data set (using Wave 1 data) and provided the second author with the decision rules for coding. The second author coded a randomly selected 10% of the 565 cases. Bakeman & Gottman (1986) suggest that a Cohen’s kappa of 0.70 or higher reflects good interrater reliability. Interrater agreement was kappa = 0.82.

Study 2 examined a broader topic (rules for divulging information about whereabouts) with a smaller sample. For this study, open coding was conducted by both authors and any discrepancies in analyses were discussed and reconciled.

**Study 1: Information About Friends—Who Tells and Who Doesn’t?**

For our first study, we were interested in determining the relative extent to which adolescents have friends their parents do not know. Previous data suggests that some adolescents have unknown friends (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003) but the reasons for which the friends are unknown has not been fully probed. We first explore adolescents’ rationale using a qualitative approach, followed by quantitatively examining correlates of their explanations. We chose three sets of contextualizing correlates, reflecting both positive and negative aspects of adolescents’ peers and parents, including measures of
information management and parental knowledge, peers’ social orientation, and parenting or parent-adolescent relationship variables.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

A sample of 565 adolescents (246 boys, 318 girls, 1 missing data) in grades 8 to 12 (age 12 to 19, \(M = 14.16\) years, \(SD = 1.22\)) at an urban public school in western Canada participated in a computer-based survey. The students were ethnically mixed, with 53\% from European backgrounds, 30\% of East Asian heritage, 4\% from minority backgrounds (e.g., Native American, African), and 8\% from multiple ethnic backgrounds (5\% did not report their ethnicity). The majority of participants (64\%) lived with both parents, with an additional 35\% living with one parent/guardian or shared custody arrangements, and a small group (1\%) living in homestay arrangements (foreign students).

At the beginning of the school year, consent forms were distributed to parents by the school administration. Informed assent was explained to participants prior to completing the survey. No participants received remuneration for participation.

Measures

In order to reduce data, when mothers and fathers were reported on separately, we combined the reports into one mean score.

About friends. We assessed two types of information about friends: (1) if they had unknown friends and why, and (2) the prosocial or antisocial orientation of their friends. For unknown friends, we asked “Do you have any friends that your parents do not know about?” and if the response was yes, indicating unknown friends, we asked adolescents to elaborate with “Why don’t your parents know about them?” For the prosocial/antisocial orientation of friends, the adolescents rated three items assessing their friends’ prosocial orientation (e.g., “Most of my friends would jump in and help a stranger in trouble”) and four items assessing their friends’ antisocial orientation (e.g., “My friends often get into trouble with adults”). Adolescents endorsed the statements on a scale from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true), from which mean ratings were computed. These items have been used in previous studies (Galambos & Maggs, 1991; Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003) and had good psychometric properties in this sample: Cronbach’s alphas were 0.76 for prosocial orientation and 0.73 for antisocial orientation.

Information constructs. We used one of the most frequent measures of parental knowledge in the literature (previously known as monitoring, Brown et al., 1993), and altered wording to assess how much parents want to know and adolescents’ willingness to tell (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005). We also added two items to evaluate Internet use and assessed reports on mothers
and fathers separately. Thus, three scales composed of 6 items for each parent was created by asking “How much does your mother [father] really know about….” “How much does your mother [father] want to know about…” and “How much are you willing to tell your mother [father] about….” whereabouts at night, spare time and afternoon activities, spending money, who friends are, who is contacted and how much time is spent on the Internet. Mean responses to five-point Likert scales were used, with higher scores reflecting mother/father knowledge, mother/father wanting to know, and adolescents’ willingness to tell mother/father. Cronbach’s alphas for parental knowledge, parents wanting to know, and adolescents’ willingness to tell were (respectively) 0.83, 0.85, and 0.86 for mothers and 0.84, 0.87, and 0.88 for fathers.

Parental psychological control. Barber’s (1996) measure of parental psychological control is composed of eight items evaluating the adolescents’ perception of parental behaviors that are intrusive (e.g., “My mother is a person…is always trying to change how I feel or think about things”). Adolescents provided responses for each parent separately using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not like her/him) to 5 = (a lot like her/him). Internal consistency was 0.90 for mothers and 0.89 for fathers.

Attachment security. The Adolescent Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) (West et al., 1998) was used to assess adolescents’ perceptions of their attachment security to each parent separately. The AAQ consists of three questions for each of three subscales measuring availability (e.g., “I’m confident that my mother/father will listen to me”), anger (“I get annoyed at my mother/father because it seems I have to demand his/her caring and support”), and goal-corrected partnership (e.g., “I feel for my mother/father when he/she is upset”). Participants respond to items using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. As recommended by the authors of the AAQ, the mean of all nine items was calculated to reflect adolescents’ perception of attachment security (high scores portray greater security). Cronbach’s alpha were 0.85 for mothers and 0.89 for fathers.

Results
Qualitative Results

The majority of the adolescents’ responses could be classified into 12 categories. Some responses required more than one category to represent the response fully. A small percentage of the responses were too vague or ambiguous to code (n = 6; < 1 %). Table 1.1 provides a synopsis of the coded responses.

“Don’t ask/don’t tell.” Some adolescents responded that their parents did not know about their unknown friends either because their parents did not ask, e.g., “Cause they never asked,” or they did not provide information about their friends, e.g., “I just never bothered to tell them,” without further elaboration. Some responses suggested that these may not have been an important topic
or just not part of everyday conversation. As two put it, “They normally don’t bother asking” and “It never comes up in usual conversation.”

“Parents don’t care.” Others indicated, without additional explanation, that their parents did not care to know about their friends or did not care about them in general. For example, one wrote, “Because they are not concerned about who I hang out with” whereas another suggested “They don’t care about me or my friends.”

Table 1.1 Categorical coding of adolescents’ responses to being asked “do you have friends that your parents do not know about?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description of code</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t ask/ don’t tell</td>
<td>Adolescent indicates that they do not discuss with parents, either because adolescent does not tell, parent does not ask, or both. Not coded if additional explanations were provided</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents don’t care</td>
<td>Adolescent indicates that parents do not care about knowing.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not met</td>
<td>Adolescent suggests parent and friend have not met. Not coded if friends are not discussed.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network issues:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many friends</td>
<td>Adolescents’ explanation is that his/her network of friends is too large.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not close or regular friends</td>
<td>Explanation indicates that unknown friends are either new, not regular, or not close friends.</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School only friends</td>
<td>Adolescent indicates friends are only seen at school. Not coded if also indicates that these friends are not close or regular friends.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding parents’ reactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuitable friend</td>
<td>Adolescents’ justification includes indications that disapproval would be because of unsuitability or parental concerns.</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad reactions</td>
<td>Adolescent indicates that parents would react in a manner that would be embarrassing, upsetting, or uncomfortable.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description of code</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privacy and authority</td>
<td>Includes justification that suggests consideration of authority or privacy issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy/taking authority</td>
<td>Response indicates that adolescent is unwilling to cede authority over friendships to parents, or has a privacy need</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t need every detail</td>
<td>Justification suggests that parents don’t need to know all details (without additional explanation).</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents ceded authority</td>
<td>Response indicates adolescent perceives that parent has ceded authority over friends to him/her</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents retain if needed</td>
<td>Adolescent suggests that they have control over friendship issues, unless a potential prudential issue requires parental control</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“How not met.” For some adolescents, their parents’ lack of knowledge was attributable to not having met. As some suggested, this was because the friend had not been to their home, “Simply because they never come to the house so my mom never meets them” or otherwise been in contact with each other, “Because they have never seen them before.”

with someone new. It’s not a big deal so they wouldn’t actually care to know. My parents know all of my close friends.” The last network issue category, school only friends was used when adolescents’ responses implied the unknown friend was seen only at school. Many wrote that they felt that informing parents about school friends was unimportant or unnecessary because they did not spend time with them out of school. “Because it’s just friends that I see at school, I don’t hang out with them after school and it’s mostly just in classes and at lunch. It’s nothing they would need to know about and they probably don’t care anyways.” Like those with very large networks, not knowing about some friends was not only likely, but normal. “I don’t know, I just don’t tell my parents about everyone I met in school, it’s no big deal... And I don’t really see any obligation to tell my parents all the people I meet at school.”

Avoiding parents’ reactions. Another emergent theme arising from two categories was that adolescents were avoiding some type of reaction from their parents. One category unsuitable friend was used when adolescents suggested their friends would be considered unsuitable in one way or another: “Because they do drugs or drink a lot.” “Because my parents sometimes don’t want me to hang out with certain people because of their reputation or attitude.” This category also included responses where adolescents suggested their parents would disapprove of their friend or prohibit contact: “Sometimes, I think my parents might not like them and prevent me from hanging out with them.” For some, differences between their goals and parents’ goals were indicated: “Because they don’t want me to have any boyfriends.” The second category in this theme, bad reactions was used when adolescents suggested their parents would have a bad reaction to their friend other than prohibiting contact. The expected reactions included “acting weird,” being intrusive (“I don’t feel like telling them because then they just hassle me and ask pointless questions about them.”), becoming angry (“because if they knew then they would get pissed off”), and becoming overprotective (“they might get too protective”). For this theme, it was particularly evident that adolescents were evaluating their friends as well as their parents, at times disagreeing with their parents’ opinions and deeming their parents’ expected responses inappropriate. On the basis of these decisions, they would either provide no information (“They don’t trust anyone, so I’m not about to give them information about people, because no matter how awesome they are my folks would never approve”) or only partial information (“My mom may have heard me talk about her/him but not in detail, maybe because they smoke pot. I am afraid to know what my mom would think of that person from just that one detail, even though they may be extremely kind”).

Authority and privacy issues. The final group of codes reflected adolescents' perceptions of parental authority and privacy issues. Two of the codes, privacy and authority-taking and don’t need every detail fit into an emergent theme in which adolescents suggested friendships were an area where they drew boundaries themselves about privacy, suggesting that they deemed themselves the legitimate authority over friendship issues. Privacy and authority-taking was
used when adolescents indicated that they had chosen not to inform their parents, either because they deemed it their prerogative (e.g., “Because I don’t like telling my parents everything, and there are things I feel are none of their business, and I don’t like other people deciding who my friend should be”) or because they considered it a privacy issue (e.g., “I don’t think I have to tell my parents about all of my friends. I believe it is some kind of privacy”). In contrast, we coded responses as don’t need every detail when adolescents used these or very similarly worded responses, e.g., “I don’t think I need to report them everything in my life.” “Because they don’t need to know everything.” The last two categories were responses that suggested that the adolescents had assumed some authority over friendship choices but not because they disagreed with their parents. For the first of these categories, parents ceded authority the responses indicated they could make decisions about when to provide information and that their parents were not likely to be concerned. Their rationales were based on not having unsuitable friends (e.g., “My parents don’t know about some of my friends because I have nothing about my friends that I feel need to be told. But none of my friends are bad/rule-breakers. They don’t smoke, do graffiti, sexually harass someone, etc.”) or parents already knowing about friends with similar characteristics (e.g., “I didn’t tell them about it because those friends are similar to the friends that I have told my parents about”). These reflect an implicit rule for deciding which friends parents need to know about. Many of the responses coded in this category suggested that their parents had ceded authority, because of the adolescents’ good judgment: “Because I didn’t tell them and they didn’t ask me since they trust me and I am a good child so they didn’t worry about that.” And “We don’t talk much about my friends since my parents trust me.” The other category, parents retain if necessary included responses where adolescents suggested that they willingly ceded authority to their parents where necessary. They alluded to established rules or agreed-upon conditions where parents needed to know, including going somewhere with their friends or otherwise interacting with them outside of their parents’ supervisory abilities (e.g., “they don’t know all my school friends and don’t care unless I’m going to their house or chilling with them”). Others indicated that their parents only needed to know if there was reason for them to be concerned, e.g., “they won’t really care as long I don’t have any bad friends” and “they do not necessarily want to know, unless they feel suspicious.”

Summary of qualitative results
The responses from the adolescents made it clear that many of the adolescents felt there were reasonable explanations for their parents not knowing about some of their friends. From their point of view, their parents did not need detailed information about their friendships, particularly if the parents indicated a trust in the adolescent. At times, the decision not to provide full
information seemed reasonable because they were not interacting with them regularly or outside of an adult-controlled environment (e.g., school). Many indicated that if they regularly interacted with their friends, saw them outside of school, or met them away from their parents’ supervision, their parents would know or they would inform them about their friends. There were times that adolescents indicated they were taking control of the information and not providing it, for reasons that their parents might not be happy with. These, however, were only about a fifth of all of the explanations.

Thus, from the perspective of many of adolescents, revealing everything to parents about friends is an unnecessary and cumbersome process. It is reasonable to expect, then, that some would feel that attempts to gain more information about their friends would be intrusive. We might therefore infer from these data that parents could monitor too much.

Quantitative results

Descriptive statistics for information constructs, friends’ orientations, intrusiveness, and attachment security were first calculated. These are reported in Table 1.2.

Next, we examined gender and age differences in reasons for having unknown friends using logistic regression, and found none for most of the categories. However, for parents ceded authority, a significant interaction between gender and age was found ($\beta = -0.27$, Wald’s $= 5.13$, $p < 0.05$). Probing suggested that younger girls were more likely than older girls to provide this as a reason for their parents not knowing their friends ($\beta = -0.44$, Wald’s $= 7.05$, $p < 0.05$), with no age-related differences found for boys ($\beta = 0.11$, Wald’s $= 0.39$, $p > 0.10$). We note that there were no gender differences for too many friends or for unsuitable friends. This was somewhat surprising, given that girls’ peer networks are generally believed to be larger than boys (Urberg et al., 1995), and that boys tend to be engaged in more delinquency and have more antisocial friends (Piquero et al., 2005).

Table 1.2  Sample descriptive statistics

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<td>Adolescents’ attachment security</td>
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We also examined group differences in information constructs, friends’ orientation, parental intrusiveness, and adolescents’ attachment security. One-way ANOVAs with Tukey’s B post hoc probes were used to examine differences between adolescents with unknown friends, either with the explanation being examined or not, and those with known friends. The results are displayed in Table 1.3.

Many of the results have a similar pattern, where the main difference was between adolescents with unknown friends and adolescents with known friends. Where this pattern emerged, such as with all of the comparisons for “don’t ask/don’t tell” and “haven’t met,” adolescents who had an unknown friend reported having parents who knew less, parents who wanted to know less, were less willing to inform parents, had friends who were less prosocial and more antisocial, felt their parents were more intrusive, and felt less attachment security than adolescents who reported their friends were known to their parents.

When comparing codes for “Don’t care,” the pattern was different only for wanting to know prosocial friends and parental intrusiveness. For wanting to know, those with unknown friends who indicated their parents did not care reported their parents did not want to know as much as the other two categories. For prosocial friend and parent intrusiveness where those with unknown friends whose explanation was not that their parents do not care emerged as an intermediate group. Adolescents with unknown friends whose parents reportedly did not care had the least prosocial friends and most intrusive parents, whereas those with known friends had the most prosocial friends and least intrusive parents.

In contrast, the comparisons for “network issues” suggested that the adolescents with unknown friends with network issues were the intermediate group, with those with known friends having parents who knew the most, were themselves most willing to tell, reported the least antisocial friends, the least intrusive parents, and the most attachment security. Only the comparisons for wanting to know and prosocial friends had different patterns. In both cases, those reporting network issues were more similar to those with known friends than to the others with unknown friends, with parents who wanted to know more and reporting more prosocial friends than those who had unknown friends, but did not provide network issues as the reason.

The comparison for “avoiding reactions” suggested that adolescents who were avoiding their parents reactions had the parents who knew the least, were least willing to inform their parents, had the least prosocial and most antisocial friends, felt their parents were the most intrusive, and felt the least attachment security, with adolescents with known friends on the other extreme and adolescents with unknown friends who did not give this explanation in the middle.

Most of the comparisons for “privacy/authority-taking” and “parents retain if needed” had the first pattern (i.e., differences between those with and those without unknown friends). For “privacy-authority-taking” two comparisons
Table 1.3  Differences between adolescents with coded explanations, other code, and adolescents with known friends

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<th>Willing to inform</th>
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<th>Antisocial friends</th>
<th>Parent intrusive</th>
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<td>52.03</td>
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<td>26.83</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>28.06</td>
<td>18.73</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Means are reported in the following order: coded category on top, followed by unknown but other category, and known friends, with the F value on the bottom. Means sharing subscripts are homogenous subsets. Sample sizes ranged between 555 and 561. All F values are significant at the 0.001 level.
differed, with differences between all three groups. Adolescents who used this explanation had the lowest scores on parental knowledge and prosocial peers, with adolescents with unknown peers and some other explanation in the middle, and adolescents with known peers having the highest scores on parental knowledge and prosocial peers. Similarly, for “parents retain if needed,” adolescents with unknown friends who suggested their parents could retain authority reported their parents wanted to know the least, with the parents of the other two groups wanting more.

For “parents cede authority,” antisocial friends, parents’ intrusiveness, and attachment security evinced the pattern first noted (i.e., differences between those with and without unknown peers). The remaining variables had a different pattern. For parental knowledge and willingness to inform, adolescents with this explanation had intermediate scores, with adolescents with known friends having the highest, and the group with unknown friends and some other code having the lowest. For parents’ wanting to know and prosocial friends, adolescents suggesting their parents had ceded authority were different only from others with unknown friends (but similar to those with known friends), with parents who wanted to know more and having more prosocial friends.

Summary of quantitative results

Scant evidence of gender or age differences in explanations for unknown friends were found, suggesting that the types of rationale and distinctions made in this study might be found across adolescents, at least in Western contexts.

In general, the comparisons between groups suggested that those with known peers were probably better adjusted than those with unknown peers. This did not apply as much, however, to those who indicated they had network issues or who felt their parents had ceded authority to them. Notably, there were several times that they did not differ from their peers with known friends, suggesting that their information management was more normative. Indeed, even when adolescents with network issues differed from adolescents with known friends, their scores were above the sample mean on positive indicators (i.e., parental knowledge, willingness to inform, and attachment security) and below the sample mean on negative indicators (i.e., antisocial friends and parental intrusiveness). The same was true for those who indicated their parents had ceded authority. We believe this suggests that although some forms of information management may not be particularly healthy, others may be more adaptive.

However, the questions used applied only to friends. We wondered then, what type of decisions, implicit rules, and information management strategies might we find if we asked about other issues?
Study 2: When Do Adolescents Disclose and Not Disclose?

Study 2 examined information management about whereabouts and activities to illuminate adolescents’ rationale or explanations for divulging or withholding information.

Methods

Procedures

The administrative staff of two rural school districts in the northwestern USA assisted in contacting students of two senior high schools and their guardians for potential involvement in the study. Guardians were sent letters requesting indication of their consent or dissent for their adolescents’ participation in the study. No parents withheld consent. Trained assistants administered surveys to students in the classrooms.

Sample

The sample consisted of 86 older adolescents (males, \( n = 47 \); females, \( n = 39 \)) ranging in age from 16 to 19, with an average age of 17.33 (SD = 0.52) years. The majority of participants (79%) self-reported their cultural background as European but born in the USA. The remaining respondents reported themselves as Hispanic, North American Indian, or Asian. The adolescents in this sample lived with two biological parents (67.4%), a biological parent and one step-parent (12.8%), or with one parent or guardian (19.8%).

Measures

Adolescents’ rationale for telling. Adolescents’ explanations for their decisions about divulging or withholding information from parents were generated from participants’ written responses to four open-ended questions: (1) When do you feel it is important for your parents to really know where you are going? (2) When do you feel it is not important for your parents to really know where you are going? (3) Under what circumstances might you tell your parents exactly where you are going? and (4) Under what circumstances might you not tell your parents exactly where you are going?

Results

The results suggest that the participants use three broad types of assessments when considering whether or not to divulge information to parents. Adolescents report evaluating the risk of activities and locations, costs and benefits of telling, and boundaries of privacy. The three types of assessments are described
below along with subcategories derived from the axial coding and examples from representative cases.

Assessing risk. Adolescents reported estimating the safety of situations when gauging whether or not to tell parents of their whereabouts and activities. Three types of assessments emerged from the data: (1) distance from home, (2) length of time away and (3) the perceived dangers associated with the location or activity. Because distance from home and length of time often co-occur (it takes time to travel long distances), we combine these two assessments in the examples.

Distance and time. Driving long distances, staying away from home for several hours, or spending the night at friends or relatives are reported by participants as reasons for telling parents where they will be. Shorter distances, such as going to the store, or brief absences are deemed as safe and therefore do not call for the need to tell parents. For example, a female participant describes: “When I’m going to be gone for more than a couple of hours I’ll give [my parents] a buzz… or if I’m at a party or I’m going to stay after school. [But not] when I’m just out running errands.” Similarly, a male participant said “[It is important to tell them] when it’s night, when they don’t know who I’m going with, or when I go somewhere I’ve never been before. [It is not necessary] when it’s afternoon, when they know who I’m going with, when I’m going to do something I do every day.”

Safety risk. Estimations of the risk of the situation also factor into telling parents about whereabouts and activities. A male participant reports that it is important for parents to know “when there is a potential for danger. For example, if I’m going hiking in the woods they should know exactly where I am in case I get hurt or something.”

Parties are viewed by some adolescents as risky activities. A male participant notes “I feel it is important for my mom to know when I go to a party or when there’s a chance I could get in trouble.” Unlike the latter example, a portion of the sample does not judge parties as unsafe. These adolescents, while informing parents of most activities, judge themselves as able to handle parties or other such activities safely. Prohibited activities, in these cases, are not reported to parents. For example, a female participant reports how “I don’t like to let them know if I go to party or something. But I do make sure I’ll be safe. Partying doesn’t always mean getting drunk or stoned.”

The reticence to tell parents about engaging in prohibited activities does not mean that the adolescents are unaware of the importance of informing parents of whereabouts. A female participant reports that it is important to tell parents “…probably at all times because if something happened and I didn’t come home they’d want to know where I was. They should know [where I am] almost all the time…[except] if I was going somewhere I didn’t think they would approve of.”

Assessing costs/benefits of telling. Although informing parents about whereabouts and activities may enhance a sense of safety, adolescents do weigh the costs and benefits of divulging information. Two types of costs and benefits of
telling emerged from the data. Adolescents weigh the benefits of engaging in
desired but prohibited behaviors against (a) the cost of parental disapproval
or sanctions, or (b) worrying parents.

Cost of parental disapproval or sanctions. Adolescents estimate how their
parents will respond to certain types of information. Although adolescents are
well aware of the importance of parents knowing their whereabouts, there is a
cost for parents knowing about engaging in prohibited activities. Adolescents
estimate the cost of parental disapproval or sanctions for engaging in desired
but prohibited behaviors and act accordingly. As such, adolescents elect to
be selective about the information they provide to parents. For example, a
female participant reports “They have the right as parents to know where I’m
at…they have a right [to know] all the time. [I don’t tell them] if I’m going
somewhere I know they would freak out if they knew where I was.” Another
female participant said: “No, [I don’t tell] because my mom would never
approve of what I do. So I tell her I’m going to do homework and go out. It’s
none of her business what I do. For example, if I’m out with friends they don’t
need to know WHERE. At least they know I’m out and will be back later.”

Adolescents also consider the risk of withholding information from parents.
Telling parents about activities and whereabouts, for some adolescents, is
a matter of avoiding parental sanctions. One female participant reports “I
am not allowed to do anything they don’t know about and haven’t previ-
ously approved. Under no circumstances [would I not tell]. The consequences
are too high.” Another adolescent concerned with parental sanctions follows
her parents’ rules very closely by telling them where she is going and what
she is doing “…EVERY TIME I LEAVE THE HOUSE. I FEEL THAT IT IS
IMPORTANT TO LET MY PARENTS KNOW WHERE I AM GOING [caps in
original]. There is not a place I go that I can’t tell my parents. As long as I tell
them the truth and follow the rules it is o.k.”

Worrying parents. Adolescents are well aware that parents worry about the
risks of certain behaviors. It is developmentally appropriate for adolescents
to assess and interpret their parents’ emotional responses, such as worrying.
Indeed, empathic concern is an important prosocial characteristic. Raising
parental concern is viewed as unnecessary under some circumstances. Adoles-
cents assess when to withhold or divulge information to prevent what they
deem as unwarranted parental worries or concerns. For example, a male partic-
ipant reports “I’m open and honest with my parents. [I tell them where I am
going] all of the time, because then they have that sense of security.” Likewise,
a female participant notes the importance of honesty for her relationship
with her mother. However, she also notes the need to withhold information
to prevent her mother from worrying. “I don’t feel the need to lie to my
mom about what I’m doing. Trust and honesty is important……unless it’s
someplace where I think I will be safe, but my mom won’t. Then I just save
her worrying.” Another female participant states: “I think it is courteous to
tell my mom where I go (anytime) so she doesn’t worry. [I tell her] whenever
I feel comfortable doing so (almost always). Just not if I’m supposed to go to a
Assessing privacy boundaries. Learning when information is public or private is a social skill that is critically important for engaging in successful social relationships. Adolescents’ awareness of privacy boundaries and the use of these boundaries are important for autonomy development (Van Manen & Levering, 1996; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). Instances emerge from the data of adolescents not telling their parents about their whereabouts or activities because divulging information would cross privacy boundaries. Some boundaries involve keeping secrets such as gifts for family members. As one female participant notes “I feel it’s important for my parents to really know where I’m going when I actually go somewhere. I feel it’s not important for my parents to really know where I’m going when I go to get them a gift (Christmas, birthday, mother’s day, father’s day, anniversary etc.)” (underlining in original).

Other boundaries involve maintaining private information about the self such as sexual relations with a partner. A male participant explains that it is important for his mother to be able to contact him or know about prohibited activities. He assesses information about staying overnight at a girlfriend’s house as less accessible to his parent: “Well I always tell my mother where I’m going. She trusts me, so if she needed to get a hold of me she could. Sometimes when you’re doing something bad you don’t want them to know where you are but I still tell her. Well, say I went to my girl friend’s house and spent the night I might not tell her.”

Summary

Taken together, the findings may be used to outline an initial model of how adolescents calculate when and what to tell parents about their whereabouts. Adolescents in this study assess (a) the context of activities, (b) relations with parents and (c) their sense of self within relationships with parents (boundaries). These assessments appear to be linked. For example, adolescents’ understanding of safety risks are taken into account when evaluating their parents’ likely responses to prohibited activities. The implicit rules underlying adolescents’ calculations about what to tell are likely founded, in part, upon a history of interactions with their parents. Additionally, adolescents estimate the social benefits (e.g., time with peers) of experiences outside of the family.

Serendipitous Findings

In qualitative research, researchers often note findings that are unexpected because the information providing the revelations was not asked for directly or expected. These are called serendipitous findings and are important because
they provide unique insight into the topic of interest. Across our data, we found three ways in which the qualitative data revealed aspects of adolescents’ information management that may have been previously overlooked.

**Joint processes**

Although we expected information management to be a joint process between parents and adolescence, we also found evidence that it is a joint process involving peers. For example, a 17-year-old male responded that he would not tell “When they won’t let me go, we don’t explain exactly where I’m going.” The “we” suggests that this is a friend or peer, with whom he is comanaging information. If information is comanaged with peers, particularly in deviant peer groups, information management could be a form of deviancy training.

Two other adolescents responded “If something was wrong with a friend and they didn’t want me to tell anyone where we were” and “If I’m helping someone that doesn’t want people to know” (respectively). These responses again suggest that the adolescents are not making the decisions on their own. However, in these cases, it is clear that they are trying to honor someone else’s privacy boundaries and uphold the trust that the other has placed in them.

**Opposite-sex issues**

We fully expected that sexuality and contact with potential romantic partners would emerge as a reason why adolescents might withhold information about friends. What surprised us was finding that only girls reported having opposite sex friends that were unknown. Among the 196 girls who responded they had an unknown friend, 12 (6%) responded that their “unknown” friends were boys. These girls also frequently communicated that the boys were not romantic partners but that their parents did make this distinction: “My parents don’t like me to hang out with guys, they think [they’re] all crazed sex maniacs! But I can’t handle girls a lot of times. They’re too fickle and backstabbing. Guys are just easier to hang with and they also do sports that make them very physically active so often I go skiing or such with guys. None of the girls will go with me.” “Because they are guys and sometimes if I talk about guy friends they get all squealy and assume they’re boyfriends.”

In none of the cases reviewed in these studies (nor in two others studies with friendship data) did boys report having a similar issue that kept them from revealing information about a female friend. Although this might have been because parents do not bother their sons about having girls as friends, we may also not have seen it because boys do not disclose about topics involving the opposite sex. We suspect that the latter is unlikely, though, given other very personal information that boys have disclosed through these studies and others.
Internet friends

Given the rise in electronic media, it is not surprising that friends met over the Internet would be mentioned \((n = 9, 4 \text{ boys and 5 girls}, 3\% \text{ of adolescents indicating they had an unknown friend})\). This was noteworthy because some viewed these friends as something their parents did not need to be kept informed about: “They are on the internet and they are merely net friends that I play games with,” “Because I don’t bother to tell them, because I know them over the internet.” This suggests that despite warnings in the media and elsewhere that many predators contact youth through chat rooms, some of these adolescents seem to be unaware of the dangers, or judge themselves capable of making judgments about Internet contacts. In some cases, it appears that this may be justified: “It’s not necessary to let my parents know some of my friends who met me on the internet, cuz we won’t meet each other alone. If my friends on the internet want to see me, I’ll tell my parents then” (15-year-old boy).

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Adolescents manage information. They choose at times to disclose and at other times to withhold information or lie to their parents. This was established before we started this project. The reasons adolescents managed information has been less understood. These results show that although engaging in undesirable or delinquent activities is part of the picture, there is much more to adolescents’ information management. From the perspective of some of the adolescents, information management supports establishing boundaries of privacy and autonomy, as well as allowing them to preserve important relationships, all normative goals. Some indicate that they have to simultaneously consider these goals, attempting to strike a balance.

The adolescents’ responses suggest that they use complex implicit rules when managing information. Many may be rules that are laid down or negotiated within the family. They weigh safety and security concerns, issues of trust, self-presentation matters, and possible reactions of others. They treat some information as important and other information as trivial. Indeed, many suggest their parents know the “important” information and they reveal much in their everyday interactions with parents. Their understanding of managing information includes not taxing others with minor details. In the view of many, this is what their parents prefer. Although these are the interpretations of adolescents, the quantitative comparisons suggest that at least some are likely consistent with their parents’ views. However, because we did not ask how they manage information, it is not clear how adolescents retain control of information about their friends and whereabouts. We do not know when they use withholding or misinformation. It is also unclear how adolescents interpret nondisclosure. We cannot say, even from their perspective, when
they are deceiving their parents. Future research needs to explore adolescents’ subjective interpretations of withholding and lying, of disclosure and nondisclosure, of lies and white lies.

These results also suggest problems with quantitative measures of parental knowledge and information management. If parents’ reports are used, both overestimation and underestimation occur. Conversely, if adolescents’ reports are used, their interpretations color their responses. Neither tells researchers what they need to know—when “knowing a lot” means parents know enough and when “knowing nothing” is not a problem.

We acknowledge the limitations of these studies, including the lack of longitudinal data for examining causality. We also recognize the limitations for generalizing these results. Although our samples were ethnically diverse, they were still heavily weighted by European-based cultural contexts. Examining these issues in other cultures is important, particularly in cultures with less emphasis on individualism and with different interpretations of privacy and parental authority.

These issues acknowledged, we believe these results allow adolescents to speak to the debate on parental knowledge and information management. Their voices suggest that there are circumstances under which parents do not need to know, and perhaps should not know, everything about their peers and activities. Their voices demonstrate that they have a good deal of control over such information and that their agency should not be underestimated.

REFERENCES


40 WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?


