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# Messy bedrooms: issues for parents of teenagers

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
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## Errata

Page 21- MSD is Ministry of Social Development.

Page 22 -Larson, R. (1995). Secrets in the bedroom: Adolescents, private use of the media. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 24, 5, 535 – 550.

Page 31-Macdonald, K., Lambie, I., Simmonds, L., Latta, N. (1999). *Raising teenagers a guide for parents*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

Page 33- Seigel & Hartzell (2003)

Page 41-The Families Commission is separate to the Ministry of Social Development.

## **Abstract**

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The messy teenage bedroom is a phenomenon that touches a chord with many parents. This thesis reveals how parents interpret their responses to a typical family experience, the messy teenage bedroom and how they view the role of parenting a teenager. The research is conducted within the environment of everyday families and considers how the role of parent of teens is located in society.

A qualitative methodology is employed to explore parents' reality through eight individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. A focus group of teenagers provided an insight to the teen perspective of the parental response to the messy teenage bedroom.

The messy bedroom emerged as an unresearched topic though it is a familiar experience in Western cultures. Discussion about the messy teenage bedroom is most often located in popular literature and websites. The research revealed issues particular to parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The teenage bedroom has changed from a place to sleep to a space where teenagers live, play, and socialise. The teen bedroom is seen as a place for the teen to display and experiment with their identity. It was found that many teens have more 'gear' than their parents, many value neatness less than their parents, and that messiness has a style factor.

Themes emerging from the research show that several factors are involved in the degree to which the messy teenage bedroom troubles parents. These are: firstly clarity in defining what they are doing as a parent. Secondly, how the parent interprets the messy bedroom as evidence of future behaviour, and thirdly, as evidence of how well one is doing as a parent. The thesis addresses issues of power and control in the parent/teen relationship, such as the shifting of the power balance as the teenager develops to adulthood.

The thesis raises questions about the way parents acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes about the 'job' of parenting teenagers. The research revealed the following key issues. Knowledge of parenting teens is mainly learnt from one's own parents. The acquisition of parenting knowledge seems haphazard and parenting teenagers is seen as different to

parenting younger children. Parents feel a lack of support and recognition for their parenting work.

Minimal recognition is accorded to parents in policy making. Parents want more recognition and support from the wider community. Support for parents of teenagers tends to be provided when families are struggling rather than supporting parents to maintain and develop strong relationships before they are in difficulty. Parents want to do their job well but are not always clear about how they can do this. In the context of the increased attention parenting of teens is currently receiving this thesis makes a timely contribution.

Recommendations are made from this study for more research on the everyday parenting of teens and the provision of more recognition, education and support for parents of teens.

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Illustration 1: The messy bedroom

# Chapter One: Opening the Door

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## Introduction

*Standing at the door of the teenager's bedroom surveying the unmade bed, piles of clothes, books, electronic equipment, half-open drawers and wardrobes disgorging stuff, the parent thought, "Where have I gone wrong and what will become of this pigsty dweller?"*

This sentence is representative of typical parental pleas that led me to consider the factors contributing to "It's a pigsty" reaction and how parents would answer the question of where they had gone wrong. I needed to find out more about the parenting role and how this is understood by parents, particularly the parents of teenagers. In this chapter I foreground some of the underlying impressions of social responses to parenting. Then I present the research question and locate myself in terms of the interests and experiences that have contributed to my decision to choose this topic.

Over the years I have noticed that the role of parent is noticed when something goes wrong. I believe that the negative focus on parenting could be changed. I am also interested in how those who work with parents and families learn about parenting. I hope in this research to provoke some reflection on how we can support the parent to deal with the common concern of "Am I doing it right/wrong?" so that parents can feel more valued and comfortable in their parent role. The familiar statement expressed to a parent when their children/teenagers are doing well is that they are 'lucky'. This expression ignores the parents' contribution to the outcome. At the same time if someone's children are not doing well the tendency is to attribute the blame to the parents. So society's response is typically: "if you have 'bad' kids you are a bad parent, but if you have 'good' kids you are lucky". Of course neither statement is necessarily accurate, and it is this type of comment that fails to acknowledge the contribution of the work of the parent and in this way devalues their work. Munford & Sanders (1999) explore the wide range of issues that might result in "difficulty in parenting as a key concern" (Munford & Sanders 1999: 79). They have identified short-term stress due to a change in the structure of the family or more long-term stresses such as inadequate

financial resources. Munford & Sanders (1999) emphasise that any support given to parents needs to be non-judgmental. In this research I am not looking for any right or wrong ways of parenting but will endeavour to find out what it is that parents see that they need, to do their job effectively.

In discussions about education for parenting adolescents I had heard parents say that they felt it was risky to come to a parenting course because they might find out what they had done “wrong”. I became aware of the vulnerability of parents as they carry out this challenging role. The adolescent phase is often seen as particularly challenging and time consuming. The opportunity to talk about the parent role in an informal setting is often ignored as it is not seen to be a valued topic of conversation. I hope this is changing. I recall from my own experience in the 1970s, when my children were in the 10 – 15 age group, I occasionally joined my partner’s work group for Friday drinks. I was bored with the talk of rugby and telecommunications and I took a risk and initiated what became a stimulating discussion on parenting. I wondered afterwards if the group would feel negatively about this happening and was intrigued to see that the next time I joined the group I was welcomed by “Oh Jenny is here, we will be able to talk about the kids now”, and so the tradition was established. I vividly recall this as an initial validation of ‘parenting’ as a socially worthwhile topic of conversation. This experience reinforced my interest in reflecting on parenting and parenting education.

I have observed over many years of teaching human relations, community development, and social work theory and practice skills that given the opportunity in a supportive environment, parents are keen to talk about the work that they are doing often with intense interest and strong emotions. When teaching courses I noticed over time that when I called for examples of situations that could be used for an exploration of assertiveness, or anger responses or for a discussion on parenting that a common example that people used was the messy teenage bedroom. A particular aspect such as wet towels on the floor, or dirty dishes in the room might be used but I became aware that the common theme through these examples was the messy teenage bedroom. In informal situations I found the messy teenage bedroom to be a topic that people identified with easily and enthusiastically.

## **The Research Question**

The central question I explore in this research is how parents interpret their response to a typical family experience, the messy teenage bedroom, and how they view the role of parenting a teenager. In doing this research I also hope to be an advocate for the parent voice and to assist professionals engaging with the family to increase their knowledge of the parenting role. The scope of this research is to explore how parents make sense of the parent role in terms of their attitudes, beliefs, emotions and behaviours. The focus of the research is to explore the parental perspective of the messy bedroom. In this thesis the teenage perspective on the messy teenage bedroom and their analyses of the parental response is used to further contextualise the parental perspective. This research will bring the parental role into clearer focus and provide parents with another opportunity to clarify their work as parents. A clear understanding of the work of the parent can lead to greater satisfaction and enjoyment to the relationship for both parent and teenager.

Due to current social tendency to trivialise the role of parent I initially feared that this topic would not be received by my peers and others as a serious issue, a matter of real importance to society, compared with other issues such as youth suicide and child abuse. However I found that when I raised the topic it created considerable interest and provoked the sharing of personal experiences. I considered that work on the everyday family could be useful in providing additional insights into the more serious problem areas of family life. I think my fear also reflects the dilemma that many parents face daily, in that they are aware of the serious responsibility of what they are doing in contributing to the development of other human beings, but in the world around them they do not see this work validated. One of my aims in this research is to give stronger recognition, voice and support to the parent role in society and to heighten the awareness of the link between personal troubles and public issues. As a researcher undertaking a qualitative study I am aware that I need to be explicit about my position and power and how my values inevitably influence a critical inquiry (Manias & Street, 2000). The following section lays out my background in parenting and will aid both the reader and the writer of the thesis to actively reflect on how this may possibly influence my interpretation of this discourse on parenting.

## **Locating Myself in Terms of Parenting**

I have five siblings and my partner six siblings. As we were both middle children we gained a great deal of experience in assisting with our younger siblings and doing an apprenticeship in parenting before undertaking the role with our own children which helped me to be a fairly confident parent. As a 13 year old I helped my mother to care for my baby sister and by the time I had my own babies I knew a great deal about how to hold, dress and feed them. On the death of my father I played a support role to my mother in seeing my little brother and sister through their teen years before my children reached this stage. By comparison many parents might not even hold a baby before they have one of their own. So how do parents today learn about parenting teens? This question is addressed in the findings about parenting in this research.

I have had a family of four children and have raised three of them, two boys and a girl, through the teenage years. One son died before his fifth birthday. The eldest of my children/adults is now 40 years and the youngest 33 years old so it is some time since I had teenagers, though I do have a granddaughter aged 15 years. I do not recall any personal angst about teen messy bedrooms or any major difficulties with my teenagers. I operated on the principle that the more time you invest in your children in the early years the less trouble you will experience in having teens. Whether this was true or not, I do not know. I was an enthusiastic parent, as my parents had been, and attended any training event to learn as much as I could about parenting. I remember this time in my life as a parent as being a reasonably hassle-free time and where we were able to engage in serious and challenging discussions. My anxious parental memories are around waiting up at night for them to come home from a party or blue light disco, or a fear of them being hurt playing soccer, and of wanting them to achieve at school. It was a time when I was also distracted by my mother being ill and I was busy working longer hours in paid work, maintaining voluntary work and extramural study. I identified the parent/child relationship as a lifetime one that changes as each partner grows and develops. As a parent I am still trying to work out ways to be helpful and supportive to my now adult children and can still ask myself the question "Am I doing it right?" I note that the parents of teens today are working in a more complex society, where both parents and teens are faced with a greater range of choices in many areas of life.

My academic interest in parenting began in Dunedin when I went to Parents Centre ante-natal classes to prepare for the birth of my third child. I experienced highly trained professionals leading the local organisation who provided the expert perspective on birth and parenting. I found the information helpful as it gave me the vocabulary and questions to engage in debate and discussions with doctors, nurses and Plunket nurses. I recall being intimidated by the expertise of the committee members and it was not until 1974 when I shifted to Porirua and again went to ante-natal classes, this time with the purpose of meeting people in my community that I volunteered to join the committee. I found the group of parents running this branch were more like me. At this time most mothers did not work outside the home and there was no shortage of volunteers so I was advised to wait for the elections at the next Annual General meeting. I was accepted into this group of parents helping parents. I have now been involved with Parents Centres New Zealand Inc. for thirty-five years. This organisation provides education for parents, mainly around the time of birth and the early years of childhood, and has been an active lobbyist for the rights of parents. In an effort to prepare myself to be more effective in the educational domain I undertook many Adult Education courses such as Leadership and Listening Skills, till eventually in 1978 I enrolled at Massey University as an extramural student.

I began work for Mana Parents Centre in Porirua in 1975 and took on various roles leading to National President from 1984 to 1987. During my presidency I organised the review of the then lagging Committee Training Programme. I had become concerned that the volunteers hosting the educational activities needed education and support to serve parents effectively. This reflected the move in the 1980s for voluntary agencies to provide their own training in “group and community work that reflected the needs of radical and feminists workers” (Nash, O’Donoghue & Munford, 2005:19). Marie Bell, who had been instrumental in continuing training within the organisation, was my mentor. In 1987 I moved to the role of National Trainer (part-time) which involved supporting a team of regional trainers and travelling around New Zealand providing workshops for committee members. In this capacity I was billeted in the homes of many Parents Centre members and had the invaluable opportunity of observing the different ways that the parents worked with their children. A key catchphrase I recall was for Parents’ Centre to assist parents with education and information so they could make

“informed choices”. This research is intended to add to the growth of knowledge from which parents and those who work with parents can make informed choices.

These experiences led to a lifelong interest in parenting as an advocacy issue. My involvement in Parents Centre nurtured my interest in community development as a way of creating changes for parents, particularly in the vulnerable ante-natal and post-natal period. I describe my perspective as initially a humanist, and adding in the dimensions of an educationalist, a feminist and with increasing community involvement as a liberal activist.

Many people and events have influenced me over the years and I will highlight four historical events over the last thirty years that have contributed to my understanding and views of parenting. These are the 1974 New Zealand tour of James and Joyce Robertson, specialists in children in separation, and the 1975 United Women’s Convention that consolidated the ideals of feminism in New Zealand. I then refer to more recent events, the 1988 National Symposium on Parenting, which drew attention to the importance of parenting and then more recently the 2003 launch of the Parenting Council.

#### **The Robertson’s visit 1974**

From the work of John Bowlby in 1952, for the World Health Organisation, on the impact of children separated from their families in orphanages, there emerged the beginning of the advocacy work in New Zealand that was termed ‘children in hospitals’. Dobbie (1990) describes how in the 1970s most of New Zealand’s public and private hospitals children’s wards were closed to parents except for one hour on Sundays. At this time it was believed, despite the work on attachment by Bowlby, that parents visiting their children in hospital would upset the children. Actions to pressure a change in this policy culminated in a lecture tour to New Zealand by James and Joyce Robertson, an English couple, who had worked with Bowlby and had made short educational films showing the impact on young children when separated from their parents. Ainsworth initially worked with Bowlby, and then built on his work on attachment theory which in the 1970s focussed primarily on the mother as the attachment figure to which the child would form a ‘secure’ or ‘insecure’ attachment

(Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995). The concept of 'maternal deprivation' emerged as a double edged sword for women. Firstly the concept provided the freedom for the mother to meet the needs of her infant flexibly thus moving away from the regimented practices promoted by Plunket nurses. Secondly, the notion of 'maternal deprivation' was limiting for women, as the mother felt the pressure of needing to form a secure attachment by being available full-time to the infant. This was at the time when feminism was promoting the ideal of women needing freedom to return to the paid workforce. In 1984 I wrote a Massey University assignment on the topic of paternal deprivation as this seemed to me to be lacking in the literature. At least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is acknowledged that both mother and father have a role to play in developing strong, secure relationships with their children.

I remember being overwhelmed by the content of the Robertsons' films at the lack of recognition that the medical fraternity, at the time the acknowledged experts, gave to the importance of parents in the care of their children. At this time I had only been on the Mana Parents Centre committee for one year and recall that this visit fired my enthusiasm to put energy into working towards promoting changes that were in the interests of parents.

In 1974, the same year as the Robertsons' educational visit a long article was published in the Evening Post, Wellington, written by Helen Brew (a Parents Centre founder) talking about the denigration of motherhood.

In a society overtly concerned with money, power, position and prestige the universal qualities of motherhood can easily be unrecognised, devalued and pushed aside ... New Zealand women as mothers have long felt undervalued (Brew, 1974).

### **The United Women's Convention 1975**

The second event that influenced me was the United Women's Convention 1975 in Wellington. This was one of three conventions held around New Zealand. I heard speeches by stimulating women such as Dr. Margaret Mead, anthropologist, and innovative New Zealand women such as Marie Bell and Helen Brew. I was surprised to hear speeches and workshops reflecting ideals on women and parenting, similar to those held by Parents Centre. I recall feeling a mixture of shock and satisfaction on seeing a

group of women holding up a banner proclaiming their sexuality as lesbians. I think this was the first time I had seen the word 'lesbian' in a public forum.

It was amazing and unusual to be at an event for women only, and to be exposed to competent women in an era where the visible face of power and knowledge was male dominated. This was an influential event for many women in New Zealand. I revisited some of these experiences by attending a women's conference that was a part of the reflection of feminism and the role of women thirty years after the first conventions in June 2005.

### **National Symposium on Parenting 1988**

The third event that influenced me was the National Symposium on Parenting which I attended in June 1988. This was held in Wellington under the auspices of the Positive Parenting Trust, New Zealand Council of Social Services and the Department of Social Welfare. Delegates to the symposium were from those community organisations and government departments who had some engagement with parents. The following statement of purpose, which reflects the attitudes held within the parenting advocacy sector, comes from the conference brochure:

The role of parenting is a crucial one in today's society. For children to grow into balanced and happy adults they need to be well nurtured and carefully taught by their parents. Parenthood is not instinctive; one has to learn how to become a good caring parent, providing a child with all its needs. It is a demanding job and often support and help is needed and deserved ... Effective parenting is a matter of national importance (National Symposium on Parenting, 1988).

I again experienced a broadening of my horizons as I was able to mix and mingle with people who professed a similar concern and aim. The conference aimed to push the government into actioning the recommendations of the Parenting Report (New Zealand Board of Health, 1988). A further stated aim was to provide education for parenting and lobbying campaigns which would raise the profile of parenting in society. In retrospect this conference did not have a major impact in the wider community but it did support and stimulate symposium attendees. I recall listening to Georgina Kirby of the Maori Women's Welfare League talking about 'The role of parenting in the Maori community' that alerted me to the cultural differences in parenting. Dr. Peter McGeorge from the

mental health sector spoke about 'New Zealand's most urgent social problem - Parenting.'<sup>1</sup> At the symposium McGeorge (1988) described the family as the "crucible of social transformation" and yet there was a "denial of parenting as a worthwhile activity". These were strong words opening my eyes to the social construction of the family and parenting and the possibility of change as coming from small social units.

Presentations were also given on sole parenting and fathers as parents. During this era the focus was clearly on the mental health of the family and the child. This event was a total contrast to the Women's Convention as the bulk of the speakers and the convenors were men. The topic though reinforced for me the value of the work that I was involved in. At this time I was offering Effective Parenting courses, and Letting Go, a course for parents of teenagers.

### **Launch of The Parenting Council 2003**

The fourth and more recent event that has contributed to my perspective is the launch of The Parenting Council in Feb. 2003 which I attended with an initial feeling of excitement. The Council had been created by five long-standing parenting organisations, Parents Centre, Pacific Foundation, Parent to Parent, Triple P and Parenting with Confidence. As a group they expressed that there was a diminishing attention on parenting, by society in general and in government policy, and they aimed to reclaim attention and focus on this central social role. A crucial comment was that:

Parenting must be elevated from its current 'hobby' status, so that parents feel that what they are doing is important and valued (Parenting Council Launch 2003).

This comment of parenting being treated as a 'hobby' shocked me and also helped me to realise that while I was concerned over the diminishing status of parenting I would not have expressed it in so harsh a statement. I had observed the devaluation of parenting in the media and casual conversations. I had heard parenting being discussed as if it were an activity that interferes with the rest of your 'real/important life'. Attending the launch of the Council consolidated my concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> The titles of these speeches are taken from the Symposium Brochure.

## **The Thesis**

The key concepts emerging from these previously described events are the diminished regard for the role of parent, the change in the role for women, and the repeated attempts over time to create practical and attitudinal social changes to support parents. In reviewing these events now I wonder whether anything has really changed since 1974. I feel as if the same issues are still relevant and need to be addressed for the benefit of parents and children. I hope the work of this thesis can add some more pressure to the wave of change for valuing and supporting parents, especially parents of teens.

The two main themes explored in this thesis are the relationship between parent and teenager and how the role of parent is located in society. Discussion on these aspects is informed at two levels of theoretical discussion. Firstly, at the micro-level attachment theory is used to explore and explain the relationship between parent and teenager. Attachment is regarded as the central emotional component to the parenting relationship. Attachment theory is the basis of understanding social relationships through attachments formed throughout the lifespan, especially during early childhood. Four main types of attachment are used to explain the link between relationship experiences and resulting behaviours (Howe, 1998).

At the macro level it is appropriate to consider the role of the parent in the social context in which it is currently located. Therefore this thesis is informed by the critical social theory perspective and consideration is given to the power systems that are perpetuated in the discourses around parenting. Fay (1987) describes how critical social theory is an attempt to understand the oppressive features of society and that “this understanding stimulates its audience to transform their society and thereby liberate themselves” (Fay, 1987:4).

The critical social theory perspective is used to explore the dislocation of the professed conceptual valuing of parenting in society to the reality of the marginalisation experienced by parents. The critical perspective is also used to identify the tolerance or lack of a shared awareness that parents have of their position in society. The difficulty is that the role of parent that is held by the majority of adults in their lifespan seems to

have become a rather taken for granted role and rather overlooked. The attention focussed on the role of parenting teens in this thesis is intended to contribute to the change process through empowerment and advocacy, of how parents view themselves, how social services agents and how society view parents.

### **Terms used in this Thesis**

This thesis is intended as a resource that will be accessible to parents as well as to academics. I have endeavoured to reflect this in the use of accessible language and a conversational writing style.

I am defining parents as those who are the key caregivers who have responsibility for raising, or guiding, the teenager to adulthood. The term 'parent' is not used in the biological sense but rather describes the person or persons who are the key caregivers whatever their biological relationship to the teenager, including immediate and whanau/extended family members or kin, step-parents or foster parents. I use the term parent in the above sense as this is the way the role is named in the popular literature and typically used by the general population.

The context, in which the discussion is located, is everyday family life. By the term everyday I am referring to families that are not experiencing need for intervention by a professional, the majority of families. I originally saw this term used in the Parenting Symposium (1998) material. I prefer this term to other possible descriptors such as the functional family as the opposite to dysfunctional, the normal family as opposite to abnormal, I view these terms as value laden and associated with a deficit reference point.

In this thesis I mainly use the term teenager in preference to adolescent as I agree with Mellor & Mellor (2004) that this is the term that is used most frequently by the parent. At times I also use the more technical term adolescent, which is the term mainly used in the research literature although the term teenager is also found. The term teenager has developed from the word ending found in the years from *thirteen* to *nineteen*. This is the age span that is generally thought of as the teenage years though now those as young as

eleven years are being considered as teens as the physical maturation through puberty is beginning earlier.

I at times use the term 'job' to refer to the work of the parent as the use of this word acknowledges that parenting is real work that makes a contribution to society. Describing the work of the parent as a job enables the consideration of the practical applications of a job, such as the terms of employment and a job description. The term 'job' also provides a mechanism to consider the role of parent as one of the many jobs a person holds. In this thesis I explore this idea further.

### **Roadmap to the following Chapters**

To guide the reader here is a brief overview of the remaining chapters in this thesis. The following Chapter Two draws on research and other literature to provide an overview of the teenage bedroom and the messy bedroom syndrome. Changes in the recreational use of the bedroom are presented. The conflict that emerges from the question of the ownership of the bedroom space is considered. Themes and theories relating to parenting of teenagers and research on the parenting of teens are explored and a model of the functions of the parent role is presented.

Chapter Three presents the research process and covers the methodology, the research design, and addresses ethical concerns. The process of gathering the two sets of data, one from a focus group of teens and the other from interviews with parents of teens is described.

Chapters Four - Seven presents the findings and the discussion of the findings. The findings are organised into two categories. The first, Chapter Four reports on the teenage messy bedroom as a typical family situation that is representative of other teen/parent experiences. Descriptions and definitions of messiness are presented. Discussion on the ownership of the space, the changed use of the bedroom, and the change in beliefs about tidiness and messiness are explored. Chapter Five provides an analysis and discussion of the findings reported so far. The second theme the role of the parent is featured in Chapter Six which identifies how the role is viewed and what concerns the parent experiences. The way people learn the role of parent and where they gain knowledge of parenting teens is considered. Chapter Seven provides an

analysis of the findings on the role of parent. The need for adequate support for parents is highlighted.

Chapter Eight reviews the study's findings considering the original objectives and identifies major themes that have emerged. Recommendations for future research and development are proposed. These are aimed at clarifying, strengthening and supporting the parent role in society. The chapter concludes with a brief personal reflection on the research journey.

At the start of each chapter there is an illustration showing one of the photographs used in the research.



Illustration 2 Everything in its place

## Chapter Two: Messy Bedrooms and Parenting

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### Introduction

When searching the literature for research about the messy teenage bedroom it became apparent that the research on adolescents is directed to exploring areas of trauma and dysfunction. The research literature therefore is focussed on resolving problem behaviours such as depression and youth suicide, teenage pregnancy, truancy and drug addiction. There is a wealth of research material about the adolescent. There is also a wide variety of research that links teenagers to the behaviour of their parents. In the literature the parents are presented mainly as a secondary interest, with the primary interest of the research directed to the adolescent and the outcomes for the adolescent.

A formal literature review on the topic of messy teenage bedrooms is not possible as no known formal research has been done on that precise subject. The messy teenage bedroom is often used as a discussion theme in the popular media but has yet to be established as a topic of academic research. In the absence of an academic body of literature on the messy teenage bedroom extracts from the popular literature including media comments are used to contextualise the phenomenon.

This chapter begins with an historical overview on relevant research on parenting teens. This is followed by a discussion about the messy teenage bedroom, the bedroom as a physical space, then moves on to consider the literature on adolescence and being a parent. The concern about messy teenage bedrooms is typically treated as a problem with possible solutions being provided for the parent. I found this concern demonstrated a limited view of the situation and have explored a broader range of areas that provide a deeper appreciation of the complexities of this typical family scenario, the messy teenage bedroom. I found that a range of overlapping issues in society contribute toward discourses around the parenting of adolescents. The topic of parenting appears in a wide range of disciplines such as education, health, sociology, psychology, anthropology, law, social work and women's studies.

An area that has been researched is the use of bedroom space and this provides a useful background for the parent/teen interaction. The conflict that emerges from the question

of the ownership of the bedroom space is considered. Research on the use of household space by Chapman (1999), Dooley (1985), and Madigan & Munro (1999) is also considered. I also background the developmental issues for both parent and teen. I consider the role of parent, parenting styles, and resources for parents. Themes and theories relating to parenting of teenagers and research on the parenting of teens are explored. A model of the functions of the parent role is presented. Finally I explore the question of the role of parent and how it is currently supported in society.

### **The Historical Research Focus**

Historically research in the area of parenting teens has been focussed on finding solutions for problems that emerge in families rather than on considering the everyday family. The Harvard Project on Parenting of Adolescents was set up to review and analyse research on parenting, and the author Simpson (2001) reports that in the last twenty years a significant body of research, “unprecedented in both quantity and quality” has begun to accumulate on parenting and adolescence. The research literature around parenting of teens has the focus mainly on two areas of difficulty in the life of adolescents. Firstly, how adolescents cope with major life events such as, separating/divorcing parents, peer groups, death of a parent or friend, teenage pregnancy, sex and sexuality. The second area of research considers socially dysfunctional behaviours such as, depression and anxiety and the potential link to suicide, anti-social behaviours, alcohol and drugs, eating disorders, bullying, underachievement at school, truancy, runaways, and suicide and so forth (Sim 2000, Simpson 2001, Springer 1998).

I found that the parent is often analysed in terms of their parenting style and the results are focussed on the outcome/s for adolescents. A typical example is by Sallinen, Kinnunen & Ronka (2004) who explore depression in adolescence. The outcomes of this research were measured in terms of the adolescent’s well being and on his/her perception of the parent. They found that adolescents rated their working mothers as being more tired and not interested in their affairs, and getting angry easier than their fathers. Sallinen et al. (2004) suggest that this can be explained by the critical attitude that adolescents have towards their parents especially their mothers. In the exploration of the impact of the parent experiencing difficulty at work to adolescent depression the

link was less clear. Sallinen et al. (2004) suggest that the adolescent can see the parent's job more negatively if they are depressed and advise the need for more research that adds clarity to what contributes to the well being of each member of the family in view of the divergent realities for each member.

There exists extensive research examining adolescence but it was difficult to find research on the everyday life of families with teenagers, especially with regard to parenting. One exception is the work of Andrew, Munford & Sanders (2002) in which both the parent and teenage son are interviewed from those families in need and everyday families.

A common feature in the literature is the focus on the teenager with little attention given directly to the parent. The parent is discussed in a few paragraphs in a paper or just one chapter in a book. The focus on the teen and not the parent has the effect of diminishing the parental role and creating a less sharp vision of the parent. This focus seems to have developed in order to avoid 'blaming' the parent for the problems, thus locating the problems in the broader social context however it has also effected the parents absence from the literature.

### **The Messy Teenage Bedroom**

Psychologist Apter (2001), whilst researching arguments between mothers and daughters, identified the messy teenage bedroom as one of the common age-old triggers for arguments along with boyfriends, school work and curfews. James (2001) has explored the teenage girls' bedroom in terms of how they use the space for physical activity and again messiness receives a passing mention. This is typically the way the messy teenage bedroom appears in research as a peripheral aspect of some other behaviour.

The messy teenage bedroom appears as a contentious issue in arenas beyond the usual social science boundaries. Decorating columnist Kopitz refers to the topic in the Detroit News (2002) stating, messy rooms are usually a problem for parents while for the teenager the style of the room is 'messy' and that is what defines it as a teenage space. A paint retailer Resene (2004) targets the decoration of teenage bedrooms as a method

of assisting tidiness. The British Broadcasting Corporations (BBC) Video Nation London website features a video clip contributed by Mike Michaels (2003) a Dad, and visually shows the messy bedroom and comments on his despair on viewing his daughter's room "always a mess ...this is just disgusting ...this is how my daughter lives".

Magazines, websites, and television programmes, rather than professional journals, publish articles referring to the issue of messy bedrooms. These are presented in a descriptive way with practical advice given on how to remedy the situation, but with little analysis of the situation. The authors are usually professionals such as sociologists, counsellors or psychologists.

Many descriptions of the messy teenage bedroom from different parts of the world appear in the literature. The descriptions are remarkably similar with a consistent image evoked. Marris (1996), McDermott (2002), and Waterbury-Tieman (2004) provide vivid descriptions of the messy bedroom. In 'The Australian Women's Weekly' McDermott (2002:18) describes a male teenage bedroom:

The floor was a wasteland of newspapers, empty glasses, water bottle, CDs, discarded plates, half-eaten sandwiches and sports bags. Seven apple cores were lined up on the window sill...P. is perfectly content to live in this swamp of his own devising.

Similarly Marris writing for parents describes the situation graphically:

Every teenager has the capacity to turn their room into a piggery.... filthy clothes strewn together with clean ones in huge, random piles on the floor, blinds or curtains never pulled, music pounding in an unrelenting cacophony, bed linen unchanged and damp towels growing into the carpet and glued to the pile with mould (Marris, 1996:38).

Waterbury-Tieman's (2004:1) description is:

The smell engulfs you as you open the door ...the sheets look like they've been used as a picnic blanket, dirty clothes cascade from the hamper, sweaty socks hang from the chair, and dishes with remnants of food at various stages of decay are scattered across every surface.

In 'Newsweek', Miller (2000) claims that parents cite their children's messy bedrooms as being one of the 'most contentious issues facing families today.' Johnston (2001) in 'MacLean's' is concerned with the 'wall of women' that decorates her son's room.

The messy teenage bedroom is also seen to be evidence of the confusion experienced by teenagers as they grow and develop. In 'Better Homes and Gardens' Meisner (2001), quotes educational psychologist Onghai as saying:

From a developmental perspective, their room could be a reflection of what's happening inside. A lot of times, it's hard for kids to structure their physical space because internally they're going through a lot of confusion (Onghai, 2001).

Onghai suggests that messiness could be exactly what is needed by the teen as a part of their evolution to adulthood.

The messy teenage bedroom is sometimes a part of websites discussing teenage issues. The Department of Community Development in Western Australia provides a typical example with the inclusion of the following question as a part of an online quiz for teenagers about communication with their parent.

Answer this question:

You're really happy with your room being disorganised but your parents' keep on nagging you to tidy it up and especially take all the clothes off the floor. How do you sort this out with them? You would:

- a) tell them you'll clear up but really do as little as possible and hide the dirty clothes under the bed.
- b) clean up your room but feel that your privacy has been interfered with and that your room is no longer comfortable
- c) talk it over with your parents and reach a compromise (maybe agree to put the dirty clothes in the laundry basket but leave the other stuff where it is so you know where to find things and your room still feels like your own space)

Source: ([http://www.fcs.wa.gov.au/templates/being\\_a\\_teenager/](http://www.fcs.wa.gov.au/templates/being_a_teenager/))

The interest in the messy teenage bedroom is not restricted to magazines, and websites it also has been addressed on a magazine style television programme 'Family Confidential' on a New Zealand television programme (Aired, Oct 4, 2001). This

programme provided a brief segment giving practical coping strategies for parents on dealing with the mess.

As Waterbury-Tieman (2004) observes, the maintenance of a teenager's room could seem like an insignificant issue but it does highlight key dilemmas that the parents of teens face such as - Where do the teenager's rights of self-expression end and the responsibilities to the family begin? How does the parent stay informed without invading their privacy? How do you demonstrate respect for their developing individuality with teaching values and socially acceptable behaviour? These are key questions in the parenting debate.

The major themes for the parent that emerge from the literature are around who sets the standards of cleanliness, accountability for keeping the room clean, what to do if these standards are not met, negotiation around the decoration of the room, and what are the rights of the parent or the teenager in terms of privacy in the room. Themes for the teenager are usually about decoration (finding your style) and communication with the parent.

Major generational differences are highlighted by Johnston (2001), Meisner (2001) and Warren (2001), who draw attention to teenagers today having much more 'stuff' in their rooms than previous generations of teenagers and that this is a factor hindering tidiness. Warren (2001) observes that with all the electronic equipment children have nowadays the "Go to your room" command, from parents today sounds more like a reward than a punishment.

### **The Teen Bedroom as a Private Space**

A relationship that interests sociologists, human geographers, and psychologists is the human relationship to physical domestic space. The changed functions of the bedroom in the lives of contemporary teenagers are discussed in this section.

Madigan & Munro (1999) state that key changes in the domestic household such as smaller families, children having longer periods of economic dependence, has led to a change of the demands on domestic space. In New Zealand the birth rate per woman has

dropped since 1960 from an average of almost four births to 1.97 births per woman in 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). During the previous twenty years the birth rate has been fairly constant at two births per woman (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). This pattern has been similar to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Due to smaller families teenagers are more likely to have a room to themselves. Earlier maturity and more perceived risks outside the home environment have also contributed to the change of use of the home as a place of safety where teenagers are encouraged to live their lives (Madigan & Munro, 1999). Madigan & Munro (1999) note that children's rooms are very different from 20 years earlier as they are now multifunctional combining sleep, study, play, entertainment of friends and often are equipped with televisions, sound systems and computers. They quote teenagers as regarding their bedroom as "their own wee houses" Madigan & Munro (1999:67). In contrast for some families in lower socio-economic groups there has been an increased pressure on room use due to overcrowding (MSD, Social Report 2004).

The use of personal space as an expression of identity is discussed by Dooley (1985) who links the expression of individual identity with the personal space over which you have some control. One way identity is displayed, is by the artefacts within the room, which have significance to the owner. These are displays of heroes or sometimes self, in posters, photos, symbolic clothing or objects. Waterbury-Tieman (2004) connects the primary developmental task of adolescence, the building of a personal identity, with the use of the teen bedroom as a space in which they can experiment with presenting themselves and trying out different identities. The choices the teen makes about how the room looks are also seen as a part of identity experimentation. The bedroom space is described as significant by Waterbury- Tieman (2004), as it is the first individual space that a teen can call their own. Similarly James (2001:12) identifies that the teens could control the space and that they "liked being in control of the mess, the music and the memorabilia". James (2001) found that the girls in her study liked to be surrounded by their favourite things and reportedly relished the right to keep their room messy or tidy according to their taste. Dooley (1985) suggests that the identity is expressed through many senses such as touch, smell, and texture. She also comments on the room making an indirect statement about levels of compliance to accepted behavioural norms.

Dooley (1985) noted that parental bedrooms were far less cluttered and surmises that they did not have the need to mark the territory in their bedrooms as they had the rest of the house to display their style. Chapman (1999:134) comments that though it seems obvious it is important to recognise that “people’s investment in their homes is extremely significant for the projection and realisation of self-identity”.

The teenage bedroom represents a space that is unique for teenagers where they can undertake a range of activities. James (2001) and Dooley (1985) found that in a personal space people are free to express themselves more openly, with less voice modification and less self-consciousness about body language and movement. The teenage girls, researched by James (2001) rarely described their room as a non-special space, the majority of her participants described their bedroom as an important space in which they could be alone and not have to worry about what others think or say. Participants talked about how they could use their bedrooms to exercise in, to dance in, to play a musical instrument or to express their joy or frustration without having to worry about siblings or other people ridiculing them. Control of who entered their bedroom was found to be important and house rules often gave them this right. James (2001) reports that teens often described their bedrooms as a space they felt safe in, their refuge/haven, and a place to escape from mother’s nagging. James (2001) also found that the more autonomy the girls perceived themselves to have in life outside the bedroom the less concerned they were about controlling access to the bedroom. The sense of safety in having a private space to be yourself in is also referred to in popular music in the song ‘Iris’ written by Neil Finn (1983) which has the line “Back in the safety of my room”. While teenagers often see their room as a haven parents views can at times be diametrically opposed.

The two key actors in the messy bedroom scenario are the teenager and the parent so it is helpful to consider what is written about each group.

### **Adolescent Development**

The key developmental task for the 10 – 18 year old proposed by Erikson (1968) is for the adolescent to achieve a sense of identity and to find a place in the world. This view is still prevalent in the literature. Larson (1995:547) claims that, during adolescence,

children's sense of who they are begins to weaken, as they consider new persona to reinvent themselves. Marris (1996) describes the experience of puberty and 'identity confusion' as often creating an emotional roller coaster for the teen.

Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002) present the developmental tasks of adolescence as key knowledge for parents. They have identified four tasks of adolescence as being:

- 1.To form a secure and positive identity.
- 2.To achieve independence from adult carers and parents.
- 3.To establish love objects outside the family.
- 4.To find a place in the world by establishing career direction and economic independence (Carr-Gregg & Shale, 2002:72)

Carr-Gregg et al (2002: vi) suggest that the key questions that trouble adolescents are 'Am I normal?', 'Who am I?', and 'What is my place in the world?' The teenager is seen as engaging in thoughtful reflection as they struggle, with their cultural identity and how they fit in to the bigger landscape beyond their home as they begin to realise that they are moving towards adulthood where they will be expected to take more responsibility for their own decisions.

Adolescence has become extended with young people entering puberty earlier (often around 10-11 years) and they also leave home later (Madigan & Munro, 1999). Adolescence has been described in discreet stages spanning a few years. One used is a three stage development with the categories of the early adolescence 11-13 years, middle adolescence 14-15/16 years, and late adolescence 16/ 17-19 years (McDonald Lambie, Simmonds & Latta, 1999). Mellor & Mellor (2004:82) have broken these phases into smaller steps creating six sequential stages. They name these stages:

- The Baby (13 year olds),
- The Dissenter (14 year olds),
- The Fledgling (15 year olds),
- The Sweet and Sour (16 year olds),
- The Romantic (17 year olds),
- The World Leader (18-21 year olds).

Mellor & Mellor (2004) also use the analogy of the birth process to bring the child into the world, as a parallel to the process of raising teenagers, and emphasise the necessity

for parents to provide the 'contractions' that help move the teenager through the passage of adolescence to life as an adult. Fuller (2002) argues that development is not a smooth flow from stage to stage but in reality parents have to cope with teenagers displaying "developmental bouncing" where one day they are more like a 12 year old, and the next day they are like a 23 year old, and then the following day revert to the behaviour of a 3 year old (Fuller 2002:3). Marris (1999:4) recognises this by noting that "Adolescence, a time of enormous change is inevitably going to impact on the broader family system". Fuller (2002) emphasises attitudes of other people in the household need to be flexible and to be able to adapt to the needs of the teenager. Tapp, Taylor & Henaghan (2001) suggest that the work of Vygotsky with his emphasis on a Zone of Proximal Development could be the most useful approach for working with young people. In this approach the child is encouraged to extend from the point/zone of current expertise and comfort. Vygotsky's model of human development has been described as a sociocultural approach. For him, the individual's development is influenced by social interactions with others especially parents. Vygotsky studied the development of language on the formation of the perception of reality and it is this aspect that is useful for both parents and teens as they acquire the language base to adequately describe their strengths and weaknesses (Tapp, et al. 2001).

### **Pressure and Privacy for Teens**

Comments are often made on the increased pressures faced by teenagers today and that adolescents are expected to grow up emotionally too quickly. Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002) discuss how exposed young people are today with advertising directly aimed at them. Teenagers are bombarded with advertisements that prey on their emotional insecurities suggesting particular products and activities will make them more acceptable or superior to their peers. The emphasis on the perfect body and fashionable clothes has increased the social pressure on teens to strive for the 'ideal' image about how they should look and behave. Giannetti & Sagarese (1997) point out that at this age the adolescent 'craves privacy', wishing to maintain secrecy about things they do and they appear less willing to disclose feelings than when younger. One way that teenagers are able to maintain privacy with their relationships is with their skilled use of the new technologies.

## **Technology and Teens**

New research areas are emerging exploring the increased use of technology as a means of sharing information and for communication. This use is noticeable with teens and this is a new area for parents to negotiate. For example, Muburak (2004) discusses the importance teens place on interacting through internet chat rooms. Muburak (2004) describes how teens today have two sets of relationships, those in the virtual dimension and those in reality. In his research with 15-18 year olds Muburak (2004) found that teenagers spend on average 8 hours a week in chat rooms. This is an area which parents did not experience in their adolescence.

## **The Parent/Teen Relationship**

A theme in the literature is the reciprocity of the parenting relationship. The relationship has potential benefits for both participants in the relationship. Bornstein (1998), Elliot (2000), and McDonald et al. (1999), note that the parent and teen each bring distinctive characteristics to the relationship and teen and parent both change from this interaction.

One method of analysing the relationship between the parent and child is the body of work on attachment theory. Attachment theory is gaining recognition as a valuable tool for those working with parents especially social workers (Atwool 2005). Watson (2005) writing from the perspective of attachment theory, based on the work of Bowlby in the 1950s and Ainsworth in the 1970s, identifies that the relationship between a parent and child can be affected by whether or not the parent had a loving relationship with their own parent. This relationship is described in four levels of security. Watson (2005) identifies the chief characteristic of a secure child as one in which the child has learnt that their caregivers are reliable and can be trusted. A secure attachment is seen to lead to greater flexibility and resilience and the ability to take others feelings into consideration. Evans & Connolly (2005:242) explain that attachment behaviour “is considered to be any behaviour designed to evoke a close, protective relationships with attachment figures when the adolescent experiences anxiety/distress”. Secure attachment, where the parent is seen as psychologically and physically available to them is the ideal as this provides the teenager a secure base from which to explore the world and progress through developmental phases (Evans & Connolly 2005). It is my contention that the child’s perception of their caregiver as trustworthy is at the heart of

effective parenting practice and when this is not achieved can create greater hurdles for both the parent and teen to overcome. The parent/child relationship has been identified as a critical element in family life. Munford & Sanders (1999:226) research with 252 clients of a social services agency, servicing families, found that parent/child relationships were the single largest referral category.

The challenges that teenagers present help the developmental process for the parent as well. The relationship is identified as reciprocal. Each relationship is seen as unique and contributing to each person's uniqueness, "Parenting is a principal reason for why we are who we are, and why we are so different from one another" (Bornstein 1998: 2). Adding weight to this argument Macdonald, et al. (1999) stress that the adolescent years are the time you build the relationship that will continue through the adult years.

Mellor & Mellor (2004) note that a need of teenagers is more time and attention at a time when parents tend to think that they need less time as they are more capable of caring for themselves. Fuller (2002) and Bornstein (1998) describe how parents seem unaware of the full range of needs that come together in the parenting role. Fuller (2002) proposes that the advice given to parents such as to use "quality time", "tough love", "positive parenting" all devalue the relationship which is at the heart of parenting. Both people in the parent/teen relationship are facing increasing challenges in today's changing society. The biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur in adolescence necessitate significant adjustment in the parent role.

### **Being a Parent**

Roker & Coleman (2001) points out that the teen parenting role is poorly defined. Roker & Coleman (2001) maintains that we know with some clarity the role of parenting a young child but with teens this clarity becomes blurred. The parenting role as described by Simpson (2001:41) "requires continual balancing between holding on and letting go, offering flexibility and maintaining limits, offering protection and encouraging independence". Simpson (2001) maintains that negotiating this balance is a prime challenge for parents of teens.

Frameworks of parenting such as the following model do not generally distinguish the differences in parenting teenagers to the parenting of young children. A model frequently referred to in the literature is Bornstein's (1998) analysis of the parenting role in which he identifies a range of elements which together form the parenting role. He describes parental activities as nurturant, material, social and didactic caregiving.

**Nurturant caregiving** – meets the biological, physical and health needs.

**Material caregiving** – provision of the physical environment, home and local.

**Social caregiving** - includes the ways parents engage children emotionally and manage the interpersonal exchange. This helps the child to manage own social engagements to form relationships with others.

**Didactic caregiving** – consists of the ways parents stimulate the child to engage and understand the environment, mediating the interpreting, observing and learning (Bornstein 1998:22).

Bornstein's model is not specifically for the parent of a teenager but the generic role of parenting. Small & Eastman (1991) endeavour to formulate a model for parents of teens and identified a model with four dimensions. These are described by Small & Eastman (1991) as meeting basic needs, guiding development, protecting, and acting as an advocate for the teen. A simpler model is provided by Williams (1988), at that time member of the Board of Health Committee on Child Health), where the tasks of parenting are given as "Love, Limits, and Liberty" briefly referred to as the 3 L's. Williams elaborates on these as the love as being unconditional, the limits as being reasonable, and the liberty as being tempered with reason. Marris (1996) draws on the concept of trust as being critical in the parenting role, meaning trust in yourself as a parent.

In the 1980s the work of parenting generally focussed on the mother (Phillips, 1983, Gilling, 1984). In the foreword to Phillips (1983:iv) *Mothers Matter Too*, Abbott (then the Director of the Mental Health Foundation) identifies, "being a mother and a housewife is an extraordinary occupation. There is no formal job description ...seven days a week of giving". Phillips (1983) describes the struggle in balancing the reality of the role as experienced by Mums with the notion of the 'ideal' mother as portrayed in literature such as the child-rearing 'bible' of the eighties *Baby and Child Care* by Dr Spock (1968), a popular male expert on child rearing. Phillips (1983) challenged the belief that motherhood comes naturally. The struggle between the real and the ideal

image of parenting is still seen in parents today as typically the phase of life for parents of teens coincides with the time for the parent to maximise their career opportunities and to work longer hours, a rushed lifestyle.

In 2005 the role of parent is accepted as referring to both the mother and the father. Fatherhood is now described as encompassing much more than the biological and financial contribution to the household. Fletcher (2002) reflects on how fathers have historically been researched in terms of the amount of time spent by fathers in interaction with their children. Fletcher (2002) sees that this narrow focus has been widened in recognition of the greater range of activities and responsibilities that the father has today in many societies. Lamb (1997) identifies fathers' work as guiding and teaching, providing an income, being accessible and providing emotional support. Fletcher (2002) discusses how men need to have the opportunity to explore and consider the meaning of fatherhood and to be involved in the formulation of policies and definitions and to be recognised as key players with a voice. He suggests that much of the political energy for men is currently consumed by "fathers' rights" campaigns which tend to obscure the discussion on the identity of fatherhood.

Fuller (2002) presents the tasks of the father's parent role as viewed from the teens perspective. He states that young people identified the most central role expected was for their father to teach them how to have a life. Other important aspects the young people identified were, for the father to provide care (22.7%), just being there (20%), love (13%), discipline (10.7%) and security (10.7%), (Fuller, 2002:61). An additional element that Fletcher (2002) introduces from his research with Mayan and Aboriginal fathers is the role that the father has in contributing to the spirituality of the child. He concludes that a "flexible and pragmatic understanding of the father's identity needs to be one that includes both the biological and social elements" (Fletcher 2002:27).

The literature then provides a range of structures relating to the role of the parent revealing the complexity of the role. There is a similarity in the tasks described though with little reference to the attitudes or philosophies or theories of parenting held by parents themselves that would impact on how the parenting practices are applied.

## Styles of Parenting

Parenting styles are identified in research on adolescence as a framework to interpret adolescent behaviour. Bednar & Fisher (2003) for example, explored the impact of parenting style on adolescent decision making. The parenting styles most frequently referred to in the literature are the four parenting styles originally classified in 1968 by Baumrind and reviewed in 1991. Baumrind (1991) describes these four styles as, the Authoritarian style parents: who are demanding but not responsive, the Permissive parents: who are responsive but non-demanding, the Authoritative parents: who are demanding and responsive, and finally the Neglecting-rejecting parents: who are neither demanding nor responsive. In the literature the style that is referred to as being a more effective style and having better outcomes for the adolescent, is the Authoritative parent who is both demanding and responsive. These classifications provide a useful reference point for reflecting on the parenting role but need to be treated with some caution as they have no reference to cultural differences.

The complexity of the parenting role is apparent when you move beyond the skills, and styles of parenting and attempt to analyse the effectiveness of the various components of parenting practice. Strategies to assess the quality of parenting are used in clinical psychiatry, and Mrazek, Mrazek, & Klinnert (1995) claim that historically, unfair attributions have been made between parenting and causes of mental illness in children. Mrazek et al. (1995:272), argue that “parenting has remained an extraordinarily difficult construct to measure”. From their interest in making adequate assessments of parents they have summarised from the literature the following five dimensions as contributing to effective parenting:

**Emotional availability:** degree of emotional warmth.

**Control:** degree of flexibility and permission.

**Psychiatric disturbance:** presence, severity, and type

**Knowledge base:** understanding of emotional and physical development of children, as well as basic childcare principles.

**Commitment:** adequate prioritization of child care responsibilities.

(Mrazek et al. 1995:274).

As Mrazek et al. (1995) are interested in parenting from the clinical psychiatric perspective therefore include reference to psychiatric disturbance as a variable that need to be considered when assessing parenting. Repeating themes of emotional

warmth/responsiveness, control/flexibility, availability or commitment and knowledge of parenting emerge as important elements in effective parenting practice. Additionally Strom T., Van Marche, Beckert, Strom, S., & Griswald (2003) maintain that the greater the satisfaction that parents feel in their role the more committed they will remain to it and not cut the adolescent adrift.

### **‘How to do it’: The Applied Parenting Literature**

Historically literature on parenting focuses on the expectant parent and the early childhood years. Recognition that the parenting of adolescents is different has led to the development of a body of literature for the parents of teens.

Dr. Haim Ginott (1969) was one of the earliest authors to focus on parenting of adolescents in ‘Between Parent and Teenager’. Ginott’s (1969) book is a reflection of the era with the following chapter titles, ‘The healing dialogue’, ‘Criticism: a new approach’, ‘Anger without insult’, and ‘Praise: a new approach’, dealing with good communication. Twenty years after Ginott a range of books on parenting teens emerged. In the meantime parenting books continued to focus primarily on the early years of childhood.

Practical generic skills for parenting children are presented by Birch (1984). Her work formed the basis in the 1980s for parent education courses called Positive Parenting that were offered by many schools and community organisations in New Zealand. Birch herself draws on the work of Dinkmeyer’s S.T.E.P. programme and the parent effectiveness techniques promoted by Gordon (1975). Birch (1984) has an underlying theme of helping the parent to become aware of their own values and beliefs and to question themselves to check for irrationality. Birch aims to assist parents to feel confident in their parenting. New Zealand classics in these early days were Ritchie & Ritchie (1978), Birch, (1984), and Yvonne and Michael Edwards, (1989), who promote practical strategies such as problem ownership, creating contracts, timeouts, natural consequences, logical consequences, family meetings and communication skills which have mainly emerged from techniques in psychology.

From 1990 onwards a range of books on parenting the teenager emerges. The authors, both in this era and currently, are typically psychologists or counsellors who have worked with teens in trouble and their parents, for many years. A common theme in this literature is discussion on skills to manage the child /teen Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002); Mellor, K. & E. (2004). This skills focussed literature rarely considers the role of the parent, or identifies the existing strengths and knowledge of the parent. It is suggested as helpful for the parent to reflect on when they were teenagers and to recall the emotional turmoil that they experienced and to use this to empathise with their teens.

A current wave of 'how to do it' books are written specifically for parents of teens such as those by Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002); Fuller (2002), MacDonald, Lambie & Simmonds (2002); Mellor, K. & E. (2004) and Myers (1996). These are people who have worked with teens and their parents for decades and from these experiences have written books where they try to encapsulate the wisdom that they have developed. Each author is cognisant of the lack of resources for parents and is keen to provide literature for parents. They have created practical guides with checklists, useful advice and a wealth of strategies. Typically an attractive format is used in these books with a range of visual techniques such as cartoons, variations of text, and variations of colour and density of print all designed to be appealing to the parent. They address the developmental needs (social, emotional, cognitive) and stages of the teenager and how parents can meet these needs. Carr-Gregg et al. (2002) state their aim is to take some of the fear and loneliness out of parenting.

The 'how to do it' literature takes the form of guidance and advice for the parent with minimal discussion about how the parent thinks, feels or makes sense of their role. Marris (1996) describes his text as a reference book for parents and blends the 'how to do it' with a reminder to enjoy being a parent. Marris is typical of the 'how to' authors in that he does not give a voice to the parents about how they think or feel. In the 'how to do it' books it is the expert who provides the strategies that will work. The dilemma in this approach is that when the strategy works the expert is valued but when the strategy is unsuccessful it can contribute to the parents' sense of failure. There is a lack of contextualising the parenting role as being a unique experience which will be influenced by personal histories and perspectives. The lack of consideration given to the diverse contexts which inform the parents' choices of strategies tends to obscure the

complexities of parenting. Riera (1995) highlights the change for parents in the practical experience of parenting before they become parents. Riera (1995) maintains that parents now have less exposure to models of parenting which leads to parents with less 'common sense' knowledge of parenting. Therefore parents now need other ways to gain this knowledge.

Macdonald et al. (1999) provide us with another 'how to' skills book focussed on the teenage years. The authors are from different academic disciplines; Macdonald is from a social work background, while Simmonds and Latta are both clinical psychologists. These authors provide an integrated perspective of the role and tasks of parenting. Macdonald et al. (1999) propose that parents need to avoid the extremes of parenting, such as emotional over involvement or emotional distance, and excessive control or excessive freedom and they emphasise communication between parent and teenager. The parent is advised to be clear about their own beliefs and to accept disagreement in some areas. Carr-Gregg &Shale (2002) also remind the parent to use language that is congruent with the teen's language and understanding. In the literature verbal communication is frequently identified as a major strategy to use when working with teens.

A concern that Fuller (2002) highlights is that parenting has become packaged, with parents offered sets of skills and techniques which if correctly applied will result in happy children (Fuller 2002:103). Whilst Mellor & Mellor (2004) also suggest that parenting is more than a set of strategies and describe the fundamental element of parenting as being, "At the end of the day love really counts". Mellor & Mellor (2004:142).

An omission of the 'how to' books is the discussion on what values and knowledge base the parent has and how to build on this. The developmental needs of the parent are rarely mentioned. It seems that the current trend of providing information on skills and strategies has emerged as a direct response from those working with parents to the parent asking "what do I do?" More consideration is needed of the complete picture of the relationship between parent and teenager in which the developmental and emotional needs of both are acknowledged and represented. Parents want to do the best for their children and want to be 'good' parents and there are so many messages about what to

do but little opportunity for them to be encouraged to reflect on the job with someone who knows about the job.

### **The Emotions of Parenting**

In the literature there are frequent references to the emotional experiences of the role of the parent. Feelings commonly identified are guilt, anxiety, shame, confusion, conflict, anger, pride and satisfaction.

Fuller (2002:94) writes there is one word that characterises the modern parent and that is 'guilt'. Feeling guilty over not enough time, not enough money, being too strict or too lax are repeating stories from parents. Pryor, Director of the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families (Wellington) is reported as saying that the current generation of parents are better educated than their parents and yet rather than being the smartest best-adjusted generation they seem to be "gasping on the beaches of different parenting models, anxious, competitive and unsure" (Pryor cited in Blundell 2004:19). The discourse on the difficulty of parenting this age group is commonplace and maintains the expectation and the experience of anxiety. Seigel (2003:13) argues "to our role of parent we bring our own emotional baggage" in that when we become a parent we bring with us issues from our own past and this influences the choices we make as parents.

Parents troubled by the stress of wondering how to do the job of parenting, or rather doing it well, was observed by Andrew et al. (2002) as the parents talked of uncertainty and worry and "were they doing the right thing". The authors mention the increase of the emotional intensity of parenting the teenage phase. Apter (2001) maintains the parental feelings of uncertainty are reinforced by messages from experts on television and in print who suggest widely disparate methods for raising children.

Parents are not the only people to experience anxiety. Apter (2001) has found that teenagers experience anxiety. Apter argues that teenagers' anxiety flows from their need to depend on their parents for material and emotional support when they want to become more self sufficient and are considering leaving home and wondering if they can manage.

Adolescence has gained the reputation of being a difficult time and parents often do not look forward to it. Marris's description encapsulates this, "If adolescence is a turbulent, tempestuous, troubled time for teenagers, it can be just as much so for the parents" (Marris, 1996:3). Fuller (2002) argues that families are under most pressure when there are teenagers in the house. Fuller(2002) links the teens' increasing movement away from the family, as they become more socially oriented, with the struggle for parents to redefine their own roles and relationship as the children become more absent.

Mellor & Mellor (2004) through their work with parents over 30 years maintain that:

The truth is that lots of parents have difficulty coping with the great variety of emotional, practical, and other pressures that arise naturally with teenagers. Many go through years of tension, worry, anguish, anger, fear, frustration or hopelessness (Mellor & Mellor 2004, p2).

Fuller (2002) and Mellor & Mellor (2004) express their concern that parents of teens are reluctant to openly discuss their parenting practice as they fear being judged negatively. They also observe that parents of teens rarely seek help when they are struggling. The stated purpose behind the work of Carr-Gregg & Shale, (2002) is to provide information about parenting "in the hope of taking some of the fear and loneliness out of parenting". The teenage years are seen as being a mix of both the splendid and the difficult. Parenting is described by Carr-Gregg et al. (2001:vi) as "exciting and challenging and probably one of the most potentially rewarding tasks you will ever face".

Macdonald, Lambie, Simmonds, & Latta, (1999) consider the parent as an individual with their own developmental concerns and the stresses that they could be experiencing other than raising teens. The authors recommend that parents do some reflection on their own history and identify some of the rules and practices of their own parents. One way of reflecting on reactions is presented by Jones & Banet (1976) who provide a model for the analysis of emotional responses to situations. This model, evolved from a cognitive behavioural perspective, was designed to provide an understanding of potentially destructive emotional reactions to a situation. This provides the parent with a structure to locate the thoughts and feelings which occur and to link these to their previous history.

## **Power and Parenting**

In informal conversations, a typical reason given for parents' concern about messy teenage bedrooms is that it represents parental loss of control. Holdom & Smith (2004) in 'The Australian Women's Weekly' had a 14 page article, Taming the Teen. The title suggests that teenagers are wild and that the parent needs to exert some power to maintain some control over the teen. Therefore the solution often given to solve the messy teenage bedroom is for the parent to exert more control.

Miller (2003) identifies two distinct types of power, "power-to" and "power-over". Power-over is defined as "situations in which one group or person has more resources and privileges and more capacity to force or control others" Miller (2003:5). The Parent/child relationship is seen to belong to the 'power-over' category as the parent has control over resources, and legal authority in some situations. Brown (1994) through his work in the Youth Courts identifies the key words in family relationships as being "control and emotional attachment" and notes that the degree to which they are present in the relationship relates to the degree of delinquency observed. Though Brown's court work exposes him to particularly difficult parental scenarios I think that his suggestion highlights the potential relevance of power issues in parenting practice.

Parenting is acknowledged by Comstock (1994) and Williams (1988) as also being a mutual relationship where the parent begins as the more powerful member with strength, knowledge and resources and that over time this relationship moves to a more equal relationship. At the start of adolescence there is seen to be an asymmetrical relationship and that it takes about 10 years of renegotiating roles before each feels comfortable with a more symmetrical relationship. The negotiation of the new roles is often triggered by conflict. Miller (2003) explains that the ideal in relationships is "mutual empowerment" even when one person in the relationship clearly has more power as a way of dispersing the impact of the obstruction to growth of the power-over practices. This is discussed in terms of the parent/child and teacher/student relationships. Mutual empowerment is described by Miller (2003) as growth fostering for everyone in the relationship. Parents can feel the loss of control is the loss of power over and view the growing power of the adolescent as bad or dangerous or belittling to them. Miller's vision of the mutual empowerment takes away from this "loss of face". I

found Miller's work on power a useful starting point to the exploration of constructs that influence parenting behaviour. In the professional interaction with families the critical theory concept of empowerment is being adopted as a concept to inform practice in more areas such as health, community development, social work and family research.

Solomon, Warin, Lewis, & Langford, (2002) note that a high value is given to democracy and negotiation within the family today and this is a change that has added to the difficulty for the parent. They researched communication patterns between parent and teenager. From their research interviews they found that teens reported their relationships moving to a more equal status because the teen felt able to talk to parents more openly about personal things. The authors report that parents treat teens more as adults once they began to take control over their own life and establish themselves with a life outside the family. This pride in being treated as an adult helped the growth of friendship relationship between teen and parents. They explore how for some teens the more information they disclose to parents the more they risk losing control over their private lives. Solomon et al. (2002) reflect on the contradiction of the internal conflict experienced by each party in the relationship and also the conflict between the parties. The power balance between the two undergoes change as the teen gains more control of their life.

The mixed motives of parents to provide emotional support and closeness are at times subverted by a conflicting need to exercise parental control. Solomon et al. (2002) have found that the lived inequalities in the parent/teen relationship mean that mutual disclosure is undermined by the struggle for control. Though the discourse in families includes the ideals of freedom and democracy in reality Solomon et al. (2002) confirmed that openness can be compromised by the ongoing negotiation for power. There is often "Mutual ignorance of one another's lives" (Solomon et al. 2002:979).

### **Societal Valuing of Parents and Parenting**

There is agreement in the literature of the importance of effective parenting to the development of the child, and the health of society, (Birch 1984, Bornstein 1998, Gilling, 1984, Grant 1999). Gilling considers parenting as of crucial importance to a human being as "we carry our parents imprint from conception to death" (Gilling

1984:538). Grant aims to, “Raise awareness of the relationship between the critical role of parenting and the overall health of society” (Grant 1999:25). “It is the principal and continuing task of parents in each generation to prepare children of the next generation for the physical, economic, and psychosocial situation in which those children must survive and thrive” (Bornstein 1998: 1). Fuller (2002) raises the argument that parenting has become largely invisible in society. Parenting is often seen or treated as of less importance than a career and has developed a somewhat “hobby status” as identified by The Parenting Council (2003). It appears as if the role of parent is taken for granted and even with the control over conception as a lifestyle choice. This dichotomy of ideas creates stress for parents as on the one hand parenting is presented as of value to society and on the other hand that the individuals carrying out the work don't see their voice or their experiences reflected in the literature.

The proponents of the importance of the parenting role in society today also identify that an enormous burden is being placed on the role of parent and that this challenges the current capabilities of parents. Munford & Sanders (1999:79) express this concern, “the expectations are high in terms of parents providing for the emotional as well as the physical needs for their children”. Brown (1994) draws attention to the skills of parents he suggests responsibility for the development and monitoring of these skills is a *community responsibility*. Brown (1994) argues that ‘parent training courses should be stimulated’, and adolescents should be taught about family life while they are in school. He rejects the idea which kept surfacing in the 1990s that parents should be paid for the child rearing role they do, in favour of the fostering of interdependence of the schools, communities and families. Brown promotes the recognition of group obligation with the support and strengthening of families leading to stronger cooperative communities. He writes with a passion and maintains that it requires “major attitudinal and societal transformation” (Brown, 1994:6), to achieve the provision of appropriate care for youth.

Child, Youth and Family (CYF), New Zealand has as a leading position statement for parents on its website that:

Being a parent or caregiver is one of the most important and rewarding jobs we can ever have – and it can also be one of the toughest. Every day we have choices to make about how we bring up our children. Being a parent or caregiver isn't always easy – and it's a job we get little training for. But it is something we can learn (CYF, 2005).

## **Social Context for Parenting**

The changes in society today are often credited with contributing to the challenge of raising adolescents. Strom, Van Marche, Beckert, Strom, S., & Griswald, (2003) maintain that this common anxiety emerges for parents as they can no longer rely on their own memories of being an adolescent, as the basis for giving advice to teenagers, because the environment has become more complicated (Strom et al. 2003:501). As sociologists, Solomon et al. (2002), indicate that children are no longer an economic asset to the family and in fact are an economic loss as the cost of raising children, providing for their schooling and recreation is greater than ever before. In two parent families with both parents working the loss of the second income, and the pause in career development is analysed in terms of the economic value to the family. Solomon et al. (2002) point out that children are now valued as an investment of self and that parents gain not wealth from their children but identification with them and satisfaction from their successful development into adulthood.

As a consequence of the diversity of families and family formation more children experience changes in the family living arrangements (De Vaus & Gray, 2004). De Vaus & Gray (2004) suggest that in Australia at least 19 % of children now aged 15 years will have experienced changes in family arrangements, such as, sole parent, or step- parent during their childhood. The comfort and stability of their own space can have an even greater emotional importance to teens as they struggle to establish their own identity.

Munford & Sanders (1999) draw attention to the changing social context for families. The move from the problem solving, or deficit-based approach, requires a major shift in thinking for those that work with families. They strongly advise those working with families to acknowledge that families who seek support are not failed families. The shift includes the emphasis on the emancipatory role of support workers rather than the role of expert. This is being attempted in an age where the shifts in state policies aim to develop greater individual responsibilities and families are confronted with increased expectations of fending for themselves.

## **Policy and Parenting Teens**

Concern about the lack of knowledge on parenting of teenagers has been expressed in the western world, particularly as increasing recognition is given to the specialised nature of the job. Coleman & Roker (2001), and the National Council of Research, (U.S.A., 2002), drew attention to the emergence of the parenting of teenagers as a key public, political and social concern and highlight the weak link between research, policy and parenting practice. Bornstein (1998:2) warns that with the social changes in family structures that the trend is leading away from the parents as the “proximal protectors, providers and proponents of their own progeny”.

Tapp, Taylor, & Henagham, (2001) suggest that attitudes and official policy all too often reflect the ideas that children are not unique individuals who are capable of making a contribution to society but that they are “human beings in waiting, who should be seen and not heard” (Tapp et al., 2001:250). This is not as noticeable in New Zealand as real efforts have now been made to ensure that young people in society have a voice around issues of concern to them (Briar & Gill, 1998).

In New Zealand, the Department of Youth Affairs (now the Ministry of Youth Development) was established in 1988 as a means of providing some influence in the decision-making processes of policies that affect young people. A recent report, *Building Resilience* (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) presents the proposed further development of young people in New Zealand. This report evolved from the proposal for the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002). *Building Resilience* focuses on the strengths-based philosophy (Munford & Sanders 2005, Saleebey 2002) that is emerging as a way to work with social issues. Strengths-based work involves a move away from a focus on the dysfunctional aspects of the adolescent and identifying the strategies that the adolescent and the parent have used that have been effective in their lives. The report *Building Resilience* (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) states an aim to move beyond the previous focus of at risk youth, blaming others, reacting to issues as they emerge, and fixing problems in isolation. The new preventative direction covers proposals for health, employment, education and protection issues for youth. Development of strategies to support and educate youth are identified. Two examples of these programmes are a Youth Suicide Strategy and a

Youth Parliament. A website has recently been established by Youth Development called Aotearoa Youth Voices which provides a platform for youth to express and share their opinions

The Social Report from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) (2004) using data from the New Zealand census 2001 states that 83% of young people aged 12 to 19 years live with their family/whanau and for the older group of youth aged 20 to 24 years 32% live with their family/whanau. This demonstrates that for the majority of young people their base is with their family. The bulk of their physical and material support comes from this base. Data to measure emotional or cognitive support is not gathered, but I would suggest that a great deal of these young people also receive this from their families. Brown (1994) layers his analysis of family relationships with the acknowledgement of the devastating impact of social and economic deprivation.

Social connectedness is now monitored and contact between young people and their parents is an aspect of social connectedness that has been assessed for the first time in the MSD Social Report (2004:11). Information was sought from young people between 12 – 18 years in 2001, and 63% of males, and 61% of females reported that they felt they were able to spend enough time with at least one parent (MSD Social Report 2004). The link between healthy relationships growing through both the quantity and quality of time spent together is acknowledged in the report and recognition is given to the importance of social connectedness for the well-being of young people. This data was generated from the perspective of the adolescent and it would be interesting to see how parents felt if they were asked the question, were they able to spend enough time with their teenage children.

The Board of Child, Youth and Family (BCYF) in Washington (2001) also claim that research on best practices and the effectiveness of education, training, and support programs and materials is almost nonexistent for parenting of teens. The Board also notes that an understanding of the types of knowledge, skills, and supports that parents of adolescents need and desire, and the strategies and techniques that are likely to be most helpful and effective is still missing. They also noticed that:

There is an enormous gap between what is known about the effects of parenting on adolescents as it naturally occurs, and what can be done to enhance the positive effects when parents struggle (BCYF, 2001 Retrieved, June 14, 2001, from [www4.nationalacademies.org](http://www4.nationalacademies.org)).

## **Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity is identified in the MSD Social Report (2004) as being an important contributor to people's wellbeing, giving access to social networks, providing support and shared values and aspirations. For teens their cultural identity forms part of their overall identity. This is more difficult for those teens whose culture is not given recognition in the educational and recreational systems with which they interface.

## **The Families Commission**

In 2004 a Families Commission was established to advocate for families by the New Zealand Government. This development points to increasing political awareness of the contribution effective families make to a healthy society. The need to know more about families so that they can be appropriately supported is within the Commission's plans. The Families Commission has established five key objectives; surprisingly the role of parent is only mentioned in the last phrase in the objectives:

### Objective 5.

Raise public awareness and promote better understanding of family issues, including the importance of stable relationships (inclusive of marriage) and of the parenting role (MSD.2004. [www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/families-whanau/families-commission.html](http://www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/families-whanau/families-commission.html)). Retrieved September 18, 2004).

The creation by central government of the Families Commission indicates that at key levels, more serious attention is being given to families, and parenting. Prasad (2004) the Chief Commissioner, states that currently money invested in parent education needs to reach all socio-economic levels, as the current environment reflect a middle-class capture of these resources. This was also reflected in the parenting literature with the enculturalisation of middle class values. The Families Commission is also seen by parenting organisations as having the potential to develop a new "paradigm on

parenting, one in which everything will be done to help parents succeed” says Gurrey (2004). Pakura (2005) also described the emphasis on strengthening families at Child, Youth and Family as staff are now provided with training on strengths-based practice.

### **New Research Trends in Working with Families**

The strengths-based approaches which are consistent with attachment theory are also gaining support with working with families, Munford & Sanders (1999), Elliot, et al. (2000). This approach has been developed from the work of Saleebey (1997) and Rapp (1998). The last decade has seen a move from the traditional focus in research on dysfunctional aspects of families with adolescents, to giving attention to the strengths within families. The six key areas of strengths that are assessed in working with families are the parent/child relationship, the parental support system, the past support system, family history, the parent’s self-care and maturity and the child’s development (Allison, Stacy, Dadds 2003), (Katz, Spoonemore & Robinson, 2000). Fook (1999:10) identifies the strengths-based approach as one that recognises the social contribution from families rather than focussing on “families as a site of social problems”. In strengths-based approaches, “The person is encouraged to identify past experiences and skills that could be applied to the current situation” (O’Neill, 2003:122). This approach emphasises people’s ability to be their own agents of change. This is achieved by helping the parent identify and mobilise their strengths and capacities and strategise any constraints that can hinder growth. O’Neill (2003) and Munford & Sanders (2005) describe a key principle in this approach as working with self-determination and empowerment where the client is recognised as the expert.

Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002) consider an additional concept of resilience which is being discussed more by the helping professions with the move to strengths-based approaches. Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002) explain how resilience is assessed by identifying resilience characteristics within the child, and resilience characteristics from within the social context such as the family. The discussion centres on the resources available to the child and the child’s ability to access the family and social support systems.

Munford & Sanders identify that “families are part of many overlapping sets of relationships and systems including culture, the economy, political structures” (Munford

& Sanders 2005: 167). An element that would enable more effective use of strength-based work would be the development of knowledge and language that can express the subtleties of parenting and enables the parent and the support worker to discuss and reflect on their practice. There is also the difficulty noted by Katz, Spoonemore & Robinson (2000) of assessing the relationship and the degree of attachment between parent and child due to the cultural differences in patterns of communication between parent and child.

The strengths perspective still has many unresolved questions and requires more extensive research. These are: What are the strengths of families? How can they be identified? How can parents be supported to develop and strengthen their strengths? Does everyone have the capacity to develop strengths? What is the place/position of the parents in the family?

### **Parents Barely Visible**

I was part of a national committee representing organisations with an interest in children and teens that monitored government policy. The group lobbied in the 1980s for the establishment of a government service that paid special attention to young people and yet didn't envisage that when the Ministry of Youth Development emerged that such a body would give minimal attention to parents. It seems that in endeavouring to help parents, government bodies are taking greater responsibility for what happens to youth, but by not including parents are indirectly undermining parents.

No reference is made in the Building Resilience (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) report to supporting or educating the parents who could be identified as the key caregivers for teenagers. This is not unusual in the literature around teens as the role of the parent is rather taken for granted and often not included. This trend matches Bornstein's (1998) suggestion that the policy makers no longer see parents as having the responsibility for raising youth but that the structures outside the family have increasing importance. The development of external support structures for the teenager is a positive step forward but similar supports need to be provided for the parents. In 2002 I attended a Youth Conference in New Zealand sponsored by the Ministry of Youth. The

conference theme was supporting and strengthening teenagers. However, over the three days of the conference, not one session foregrounded the role of parents. There were sessions on government services, school services, youth worker services, care and protection services, justice services, church services, school guidance counselling but not one on parents. As parents are usually the key caregiver for teens and this absence illustrates the way this role is taken for granted and overlooked. The key issue from the parenting perspective is that parents form a critical part in the life of a youth yet are not visible in the plans and strategies being proposed and implemented.

### **The Support for the Role of Parent**

A theme in the literature was that parents need greater support for their work.

Parents start out with hopes and dreams for themselves and their children, yet most parents find that family life is far from simple. (Elliot, 2000: xiii)

Although it is acknowledged that parenting is an important role in society yet as Birch, (1984) comments, "Parenting, it seems, is the most important, the most hazardous job in the world – and yet it is the one for which we are least prepared" (Birch, 1984:1). It seems that in the last twenty years very little has changed. Coleman & Roker (2001) who edited a text for use by professionals, *Supporting the parents of teenagers* draw attention to the key role of the parent in enabling positive outcomes for teenagers by providing a safe and supportive environment at home and that this needs to be supported by the provision of a safe and supportive environment at school and in the community.

The Parenting Council (NZ) launched in Feb. 2003 stated in their media release: "Parents hold the future of this country in their hands" (Parenting Council, Information Pack, 2003). This organisation came into being because five long-standing parenting organisations, Parenting with Confidence, Pacific Foundation, Parent to Parent, Triple P and Parents Centre, wanted to put parenting on the nation's agenda. In their speeches at the launch Ian Grant (2003), C.E.O. of Parenting with Confidence said "If we mess up the family we mess up the nation" whilst the C.E.O. of Pacific Foundation, Max (2003) added, "Its parents who create social cohesion". These are strong statements that reinforce the notions of the importance of effective parenting to society as discussed

earlier. The following statement emphasises the current situation as viewed by these organisations.

Over the past decades we have watched the parenting environment decline. It is time that status and interests of parents were accorded the same attention as business, the environment and cultural issues. Unless parents have the skills, knowledge and resources to raise well-adjusted, motivated children, society has to pick up the pieces and the costs. When parents succeed the whole nation succeeds (Parenting Council, Information Pack, 2003).

Ann Wilkinson (2004), <sup>2</sup>the C.E.O of the Parenting Council says that they have so far been working through their set-up phase and establishing networks.

In 1994 an entire issue of the journal *Signpost* was devoted to an exploration of families in recognition of the International Year of the Family. *Signpost* is the combined journal of the New Zealand Council of Social Services and the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services. In this issue Brown (1994), working with families in difficulty as Principal Youth Court Judge, reflected on the status of a society that is “dislocated and fragmented” (Brown,1994:5) and he believed needs to develop informal community support systems for families.

Simpson (2001) in the summary of research into parenting of adolescents identifies that although research consistently shows that parents remain a powerful influence in fostering healthy teen development and preventing negative outcomes, relatively little attention has been given to supporting the critical role that parents play in the lives of adolescents (Simpson 2001:15). Today parents are seen to be overwhelmed by expert viewpoints but handicapped by the lack of a range of means and resources to explore their role. The Commissioner for Families, Prasad (2004) states that parents tend to be blamed for everything but that there are many influences outside the family that influence the teen.

Brown (1994), Coleman & Roker (2001), and Simpson (2001) identify that compared to education and support services for parents of young children there are relatively few resources for parents of teens. One key organisation in New Zealand that offers educational programmes for parents is Parents Inc.(formerly Parenting with Confidence)

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Wilkinson (personal communication, 16 Nov 2004),

established by Ian and Mary Grant. The mission statement for Parents Inc. is “Encouraging Parents to Establish Self-Nurturing and Self-Governing Families”. Other organizations such as Parents Centre New Zealand, Barnardos, Skylight, and Life Education direct their support to parents of young children, with less support for parents of adolescents. An avenue for parents experiencing difficulties with parenting is the organisation Toughlove Inc. which was originally established in U.S.A. by Phyllis and David York in 1982 and now has many branches established in New Zealand. Government sponsored programmes to educate parents of young children are Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents (SKIP), and Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) (Family & Community Services, 2005). These programmes are aimed at parenting the 0-5 year age group.

Simpson (2001:20) raises the question of the media image of parents which portrays them as ineffectual and the parent-teen relationship as inevitably troubled and stormy. Fuller (2002), Andrew et al. (2002) found that parents absorb information on parenting from their own upbringing and often model their parenting practice on either duplicating or doing better than their own parents. If this experience was not ideal, then parents tend to aim to do things differently, but this means they need to identify new strategies. Niven (2004) warns parents that eight out of ten television series (U.S.A.) portray families that are either highly dysfunctional or unrealistically functional so parents need to consider this when they endeavour to apply any learning to their own family. Parents are facing greater demands in parenting the teenager whilst there are few changes in providing support and learning opportunities.

Niven (2004) and Coleman & Roker (2001), identify sole parents as in need of greater support than in a two parent household. New Zealand has a relatively high proportion of families with children under 18 headed by sole parents (29.2%) second only to the United States ( 31%) (MSD Social Report 2004:19).

## **Conclusion**

The importance of the role of parenting to the health of a society has been presented in this chapter. The recognition of two partners in the parent teen relationship was discussed. Models and styles of parenting were identified in an attempt to understand that way parenting is discussed in the literature. This chapter establishes messy teenage bedrooms as a well-known though unresearched phenomena. Discussion of messy teenage bedrooms is more evident in popular magazines and websites than in professional journals. This suggests that the everyday/commonplace experiences of families are of less interest to the research communities of social work, education, justice, and health than the traumatic or deviant experiences on which the literature is extensive. Nevertheless, the meanings of the messy teenage bedroom are in themselves worth exploring for a better understanding of family life.

The body of knowledge about the teenager/adolescent is building and there are some very positive trends for teens. The literature highlights that in society today life for teenager and their parents is more complex with the greater social pressures and expectations for both parents and teenagers. A recurring theme in the literature is the importance of providing a secure and trusting base for the adolescent. Though there is much known about adolescence the corresponding knowledge about parents is less apparent. An analysis of the constituents of the parenting role, styles of parenting and the emotional roller coaster of parenting teens has been presented.

It seems that parents are expected to know how to parent by the time their children reach the adolescent stage. Yet parenting of teens is increasingly identified as different to parenting younger children and parenting itself is an activity to be learnt and developed. Power and control are identified as aspects of the parenting role and the way in which these are managed can contribute to effective parenting.

The emphasis on the teenager rather than the parent portrayed within the literature and in policy was noted as contributing to the lack of acknowledgement of the work of parents, though the importance of raising happy and healthy children was seen to be of vital importance to society.

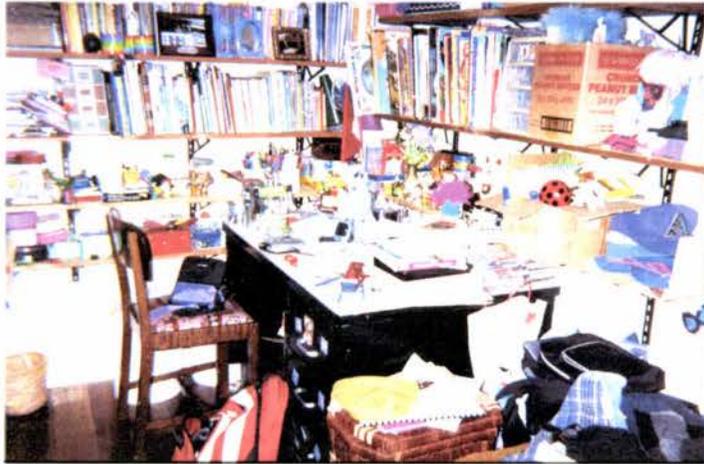


Illustration 3: A lot of stuff

## Chapter Three: The Research Process

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### Introduction

This chapter explores the research process of the study undertaken. Firstly, a brief review of the aims of the research will be presented. The scope of this research was to explore how parents interpret their emotional and cognitive responses to a typical family phenomenon, the messy teenage bedroom, to discover how the parents learnt and thought about their role of parenting a teenager. The focus is on the parental perspective of the messy bedroom though this research was informed by insight from the adolescent perspective of both the messy bedroom and the parental responses.

### Method Selection

This research was carried out using a qualitative approach which provides the means of accessing multiple perspectives. If your relationship with your subject is curiosity and an open mind then Chenail (2000), Denzin & Lincoln (1994), suggest that the preferred approach in your research will be the qualitative approach. Daly (1992) supports the use of qualitative methods, as they are consistent with family life and the exploration of how families construct individual and shared meanings of their own realities. Research as a means of gathering and making sense of information and acting responsibly with that information is seen as a key requirement by Kirby & McKenna (1989). A critical aspect of qualitative research is the placing of the participant as the subject instead of the object of the research and giving priority to the voice of the participants. This matched my aim in providing parents with a voice about how they see the work that they do. The methodological choices I have made are chosen to cohere and be consistent with this approach.

I chose to use indepth qualitative interviewing informed by participative research strategies (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, May 2002). This methodology is designed to stimulate dialogues between the researcher and the subjects of the research, in this case the parents. Denzin (1978) describes this method as an excellent way of locating the subjective meanings that people give to their experiences.

In selecting a methodology I took care to not take the research relationship for granted and was careful about being intrusive as Gilgun (1992) suggests family phenomena are complex, subjective and private. The study of any aspect of family life requires methods and perspectives that take into account this complexity and subjectivity.

A further element in this research is the critical reflection of the social context so that the findings are located in a time and place “the real, concrete context of the facts” (Friere, 1985: 51.) This will ensure that in the use of knowledge developed from this research that findings are not attached to the parents in isolation but can be reflected on as a part of the broader social discourses and constructs of the time. Discourses can be described as commonly accepted assumptions that explain reality. Wilkinson (1999) maintains that these accepted ways of explaining the world then inform the further development of knowledge.

The research is underpinned by critical social theory approaches where the relationship between people’s everyday meanings and research is valued by “not assuming that there is a truth that we can reach as researchers by concentrating on the techniques of social research” (May, 1997). Critical social theory refers to social theory which is capable of taking a critical stance of itself. That is by recognising its own perspective and assumption about its own role in the social world. Critical social theory is identified as a platform of creating a way of looking at the ideas that shape the current reality and challenges the practices and assumptions that make up this practice. Critical social theory explores the ways we are constrained by the current reality. Ife (1999:221) explains that the value of critical theory is that “it values subjective experience, and hence affirms difference and the continual reconstruction of reality, while at the same time embedding it within a more macro analysis of structural disadvantage”.

Gaining access to the private activities of family members, their roles and relationships that possibly will be conflictual or dysfunctional is described by Daly (1992) as a key problem in family research. Oakley (1981) states the importance of developing mutual trust between researcher and interviewee which will ease the sharing of information. The interview is always a two way process Oakley (1981) and it is best to acknowledge this from the outset. For this reason I used a dialogic method where I let the participants know in advance that in the interview I would participate in the discussion with them

and would assist them in clarifying their comments. I avoided the traditional research role of the hierarchical power of the researcher and the role of interviewees as subordinates from whom information is drawn (Hughson, 2003). I used the philosophical base of empowering the client (Pease & Fook 1999) as drawn from my involvement in social work practice education, to assist the process of making sense of the narrative they portrayed about their life.

The method of conducting the individual in-depth interviews was informed by feminist and participative research practices. Oakley (1981), in her seminal work on feminist research, describes this approach as when the interview is a discussion or guided conversation in which both the interviewer and the person being interviewed share information and contribute to the research process. This method is designed to stimulate dialogues between the researcher and the subject of the research, in this case the parents. Denzin (1989), Hughson (2003), describe participatory methods as an excellent way of locating the subjective meanings that people give to their experiences. Participative strategies grew from the questioning of how knowledge is constructed in research. It reframes the respondent role to position respondents as active participants in the research process. In participative research the interviewee has a shared responsibility of setting the research agenda (Reason, 1994). Participatory methods of research destabilise the power of the researcher in the research relationship. Participatory methods are often associated with social transformations particularly when the participatory action research model is used. As this project used just one interview with each participant further ongoing action which could promote change for the parent community was beyond the scope of this research project. The process of the participant contributing freely to the agenda of the interview does contain the potential for heightening personal awareness which could support change at the individual level. An inductive theoretical approach was used in the research with data gathered and working from this to determine possible themes and explanations.

My purpose is to contribute to the knowledge base of what it is like to be a parent from the parental perspective as this is not emphasised in the literature. I will consider the way that the participants describe the job of parent, and to locate the philosophies used by parents to inform their parenting practice. I anticipated that the interviews would provide an opportunity for the participants to heighten their self-awareness of the

cognitive and emotional elements and could provoke self-reflection and discussion within the family which could enhance the relationship between parent and child. Karp (1991, cited in Rice & Ezzy 1999) has found that almost all participants find the in-depth interview experience rewarding. In my research, all except one of the participants spontaneously commented on how they had enjoyed the interview and that they had found it helpful to be able to talk about and think about being a parent. In this way the interview was seen as a validation of the work of the parent.

### **Research Design and Application**

I used methodological triangulation by using two methods to focus on the messy teenage bedroom (Denzin, 1978, cited in Rice & Ezzy, 1999). This research combines a focus group with teenagers and semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents as different ways of developing data for reflection and analysis. Rice & Ezzy (1999), Opie (1995), points out that using a variety of methods enhances each method, as each method contributes something unique to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study. Fook (1999) supports the appropriateness of using both focus groups and individual interviews as they access 'multiple interpretations of events or experiences and this facilitates a critical reflective process which can be highly generative in terms of the development of new knowledge and understanding' Fook (1999:195).

The use of a focus group to explore teenagers' understandings of the messy bedroom is supported by Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, (2001) as they maintain that:

In late-modern society where identity is reflexive but behaviour remains normative, focus groups provide a valuable resource for documenting the complex and varying processes through which group norms and meaning are shaped, elaborated and applied ... they provide a mainstream method to address topics which are less open to observational methods (Bloor, et al.2001: 17).

Rice and Ezzy (1999) describe the focus group as a useful research tool when the researcher does not have a depth of knowledge of the participants. I felt that this was the case for the teenage group. My own children are at least a decade past adolescence and I felt out of touch with the current generation of teens. In considering the appropriateness of the focus group as a research tool I considered whether teens would regard the topic as a sensitive subject that would be difficult to explore in a group setting. From my

informal conversations with many age groups I did not expect that the teens would see the topic as a sensitive issue. Rice and Ezzy (1999) also state the focus groups are often used as a supplementary source of data which can be used to inform other parts of the research. I chose to carry out the focus group with the teenagers before the individual interviews with parents so I would be more informed about parents' responses, and understand a little more how teens viewed their bedrooms. I was interested to hear directly from teens instead of relying on literature or parents' interpretations of the situation. I felt this prepared me for informed participation in the dialogue with the parents.

Daly (1992) draws attention to the qualitative research dilemma of role confusion between the role of researcher and being seen as the 'expert helper'. In this research I planned to engage in discussion about parenting and encouraging the participants to clarify and express themselves and was mindful of maintaining the boundaries of the research role by not giving advice. As Oakley (1981) encourages I endeavoured to create non-hierarchical relationships. Another issue identified by Daly (1992) is the potential to confuse the personal agenda and the research agenda. To overcome this I have attempted to identify my stance and will continue to reflect on my practice during the research to acknowledge when blurring of boundaries is at risk. During the research I had supervisors who were able to support and challenge me on my reflections.

As the act of interpretation underlies the entire research process as emphasised by Kirby and McKenna, (1989) 'the research process is a social activity which is located in a specific historical and social context, and involves intentional activity' (Kirby & McKenna, 1989:23). In this research the historical and social contexts are linked to the narratives so that interpretation remains located in a particular context. The researcher's interest is focused on people's understanding and interpretation of their social surroundings (May 1997).

## **The Focus Group of Teenagers**

### **School approval**

For the recruitment of focus group participants I selected a mixed gender secondary school in the Wellington region. This location was chosen as it had a population of both

female and male teenagers in the 12-15 year age bracket. After gaining enthusiastic approval from the Principal I then negotiated the recruitment strategies that could fit the school systems. There were two methods used. Firstly the request for participants was published in the weekly school newsletter to students, and then a reminder message was announced at a school assembly. I left information sheets and consent form (Appendix One) at the school office to be given to volunteers. Interested students were invited to present themselves at the school office where they were given the information pack explaining the purpose of the research, what was required and how the information generated by the group would be used for research purposes and publication. The Principal suggested that the secretary who was administrating the information packages monitored the students to screen for potential 'trouble-makers.' I considered that this could create a barrier for potential participants and that 'trouble-makers' have a valid and possibly different viewpoint to offer the researcher. However after considering that this process could enhance the safety factor for participants, I accepted the suggestion. I was aware that as a researcher I needed to respect the local conditions at the site. The Principal expressed satisfaction with my agreement as she wanted the participation in the research project to be a positive educational experience for the students. The nine students that volunteered were deemed appropriate by the school. Each student filled in the consent form (Appendix One), and left them at the office for me to collect. I had wondered if the School Board would need to approve the involvement and discussed this with the Principal and was assured that this was not needed.

### **Parental approval**

The students also provided their parent's name, phone number and suitable contact time so I could seek approval from the parent for the student to participate in the focus group. I contacted each parent by phone. As I had a suggested contact time the contact was easily achieved. They unanimously expressed interest in the research project and were supportive in allowing their teenager to participate. Several parents wanted to talk to me about messy bedrooms and/or their teenager. I resisted this discussion as I did not want to take the focus away from the participants' perspective and kept the focus on the research topic and how I hoped to generate helpful information about parenting and explained that the focus group was taking place to find the teenagers' perspective.

### **The focus group session with teenagers**

The space allocated was a pleasant sunny seminar room, carpeted and with padded chairs, that was located in a private space near the school library. This setting was helpful in creating a comfortable setting where the participants could feel at ease. I arranged the chairs in a circle to assist the flow of interaction between the participants. On the day eight students participated in the focus group, six females and two males. Their ages ranged from 13-15 years. Rice & Ezzy (1999) state that a focus group interview is not a group interview and that the emphasis is on the interaction between participants in the group, thus producing insights that would be less accessible without the interaction. My role was to facilitate discussion, encouraging the sharing of commonalities and differences and promoting spontaneity in the discussion.

I discovered from the informal discussion as the students arrived that some had been specifically asked to participate. When they were all present I checked with the participants and found that four students had responded on their own initiative and the rest had been invited by teachers. This was the first time I had spoken to the students so to ensure an ethical approach was practised I reviewed the consent process and made sure that the students were aware that it was a voluntary commitment to participate in the focus group. I confirmed that they were free to go and that this would be confidential, assuring them that their teachers would not gain any information from the researcher about content or participation. The students appeared quite relaxed and happy to participate and all agreed to stay. I checked this variation to the agreed recruitment later and found that the Principal was aware that I was seeking 8-10 students (the ideal size for a focus group according to Rice & Ezzy, 1999) and when it was found that four only had responded the Principal then asked some form teachers to invite students directly. Rice & Ezzy (1999) maintain that the information gained might not be adequate or rich enough if there are too few people to interact.

I confirmed the approval from the group to tape-record the session which was later transcribed by a research assistant. I used a research assistant to operate the tape-recorder so I would not be distracted from the role of facilitation, and to take notes at the focus group meeting. This proved a useful back-up as some of the comments were inaudible on tape. The session began with a verbal contract about confidentiality and

reminding them of the consent that they had given and that they were free to not engage with specific stages if they felt uncomfortable. The participants seemed to all engage freely during the group session. A brief introduction of the researcher, the assistant and the participants was followed by a practical exercise, to locate them to the topic, which consisted of drawing a plan of their bedroom. Then I encouraged discussion on the topic of messy bedrooms inviting them to talk about their situations and how their parents reacted, and how they felt about their bedrooms. The group ended quite naturally after about 50 minutes as it was still in school time and the students needed to move on to another activity. This fitted well as the discussion had drawn to a close.

### **The request for photographs**

I planned to use photographs of messy teenage bedrooms as triggers for the interviews. I requested work colleagues to provide photographs by email and by displaying flyers on the notice boards (Appendix Two). I supplied two disposable cameras which were held by the office administrator at my workplace. They were packaged with an information sheet (Appendix Two) which explained that in participating in taking pictures of messy teenage bedrooms they were giving consent to use the photographs in presentations and publications that could result from the research. I also advised them to seek consent from the teenager recognising that they would view the bedroom as a personal space and could feel invaded if permission was not asked.

One camera was returned to the office administrator to preserve anonymity. One camera was not returned. One person emailed me a photograph. I checked for approval to use this as well. Several people said I should really see their teenager's room and offered to supply photographs but this was not followed through. The teenager may have refused permission for this to happen. I gathered a collection of eight resource pictures. In the interviews I used several of these as visual material at the start of the interviews.

### **Recruiting Participants for Interviews with Parents**

#### **The media release**

The Massey University journalist approached me about preparing a media release on my research topic. I agreed to this and after discussion with my supervisors it was decided

that this met the research proposal criteria for the recruitment of participants for interviewing. Therefore I included my name and contact details in the media release which was published in Massey News (10 Feb.2003) and in an article by Groser, Dominion Post (Feb.4.2003). I used a similar approach for the radio interviews I was invited to do over the next few days with the National Programme, Radio Rhema and the ZB network with Paul Holmes.

This method provided many responses from people, some of whom were interested in being participants in this research. Though I had stated the age group for the teenagers whose parents I intended to interview, I still had responses from parents who were keen to participate but their children were grown up and had left home or were older than 15 years. The parents whose children were older than needed for the research identified the messy bedroom as an ongoing issue for them. Respondents who did not fill the characteristics that I had set still wanted to talk about how it had been raising teens and wanted to tell me their stories about the strategies that they used or that were used on them as teenagers.

### **Selecting participants**

I chose to interview eight parents. The parent participants were not the parents of the teenagers in the focus group. Volunteers responded from around New Zealand and eight came from the greater Wellington region that had teenagers in the 12-15 age group that I was seeking. I purposely selected a diverse sample with as much a balance of different family types, a mix of genders, different localities, different educational backgrounds and ethnic mix. I chose a range of responses along the continuum from being a major hassle to being a mild frustration, very concerned about the messy teenage bedroom to a relaxed stance to this situation. According to Patton (1990:172) by including individuals who have had different experiences, this sampling method “aims at capturing and describing central themes and outcomes”. I was aware that parents do not all respond the same way to the messy teenage bedroom and so I evaluated the participant’s degree of frustration during the initial phone contact. This was to ensure that the research spanned a range of responses to the messy teenage bedroom, from fairly neutral to upsetting. I declined one offer from a person who was extremely agitated about the messy teenage bedroom situation and encouraged her to seek some expert help.

## **The Interviews**

I phoned each respondent to confirm their interest in participation and answered any questions they had. I then sent out an information sheet and consent form (Appendix Three). I arranged a time to meet for the interview giving them a choice of being interviewed in their home or another space of their choice or whether they wanted to come to an interview room that I could organise. Four participants chose their home, one chose to come to my home, and three chose a neutral location. The participant who came to my home had responded from one of the radio interviews. The participant had been to my home before on business with my partner and suggested this option. I considered that the safety of both the researcher and participant was not compromised and agreed to the suggestion.

I tape-recorded the interviews as Rice & Ezzy (1999) say they provide a level of accuracy and detail not obtainable by memory or taking notes. This method also frees the interviewer to be able to have more eye contact and be more observant of body language. In line with suggestions from Taylor & Bogden (1998) I used a high quality microphone that could be located at a distance from the participant to minimise intrusion into the setting. Similarly long play tapes were used to reduce the interruptions during the interview to turn over tapes. Unfortunately the machine I used did not automatically change to the other side of the tape so that I had one interruption in each interview to turn the tape. This seemed to not be disruptive to the participants but in fact gave them space to reflect. Interviews consisted of a series of relatively open questions (Appendix four) formulated on the basis of the literature review and the prior focus group with the teens. These questions invited the participants to talk about how they think, feel and act in relationship to messy teenage bedrooms. The interview contained some questions to gather data about the family such as number of parents, number of children, birth order of bedroom occupier, single or shared bedrooms, house rules re bedrooms.

At each interview I began by collecting the consent form and reminding the participants of the conditions of the consent and that they could ask for the tape recorder to be turned off. They chose a name that I could use in the research report. I taped the interviews which lasted between from 55-75 minutes. The interviews were carried out

over a period of four months. I took care to use effective listening skills, such as being attentive, using open questions, reflecting fact and feeling, noting incongruence and summarising (Egan 2002). I used my knowledge and skills of interviewing and listening to ensure that the interview was a safe experience. Oakley (1981) identifies the research dilemma of the participant asking for advice and I experienced this with the parents often wanting a strategy for solving the messiness. I reflected this question back to them in the form of “You are still wondering what to do?”

Once the physical arrangements were ready I began by laying out eight messy bedroom photos on a table near to the participant. These formed the basis of a general discussion about messiness before I moved into the semi-structured interview. A further trigger the participants were asked to comment on was a sheet of paper with a quotation from Marris:

If adolescence is a turbulent, tempestuous, troubled time for teenagers, it can be just as much so for parents as they struggle to master the strange world that their children have dragged them into (Marris, 1996: 22).

After each interview I made notes of my impressions and thoughts that had been triggered by the interview. Consistency within the interviews was maintained as they were carried out by one researcher. Interviews were transcribed by a research assistant except for one as I discovered that the research assistant was friends with a participant. To preserve the confidentiality of this person’s comments I transcribed this interview.

## **Data Analysis**

When I considered the data analysis I was captured by the phrase used by Denzin (1994) of ‘calculated chaos.’ Data analysis has a similar feel. My focus was to carry out the research with an open mind about what I would find. It seems that meanings and interpretative practices are always changing. The data analysis does not commence with the analysis of the interview material but begins, as Rice & Ezzy (1996) maintain, with the literature review and proceeds through the research process. As the researcher becomes more immersed in the topic, concepts, themes, and categories are identified and these connections are reflected in the interpretation of the hard data (Opie, 1995). I kept a journal of research notes recording ideas and concepts as they emerged during the progress of the research. These notes then fed into the analysis of the participants’ data

and the combined meanings and interpretations began to emerge. To assist in making sense of the data and to clarify the emergent themes from the interviews, the transcribed narrative interviews were thematically analysed. Thematic content analysis was used as a method because it is designed to make sense of data from semi-structured interviews (Burnard, 1991). An open coding system which involved comparison between events and interactions was used to look for similarities and differences. Following the advice of Burnard (1991) care was taken in comparing the words of one with the words of another in recognition of the different worldviews of each participant. I had the tapes transcribed only in terms of content initially but then reviewed the taped interviews and added the dimensions of the affective material present such as the tone of voice, speed of delivery, laughter as Opie (1995) had included in her research interview transcriptions. As there was a small quantity of interviews that could be managed manually I did not use a computer analysis package. I used a manual colour coding system where I identified similarities and differences. The analysis was linked to the current social context as Burnard (1991) suggests this assists in making sense of the data. In the post-modern era it is recognised that the data analysis is integrally influenced by the theories, emotions, and politics of the researcher. Therefore it has been important to be clear about the perspective of the researcher as was described in Chapter One.

One theme emerging from the interviews was the emotion of anger and frustration and this was interpreted using a cognitive behavioural Anger Model as developed by Jones & Banet (1976) as a way of showing the links between the way the parent saw their role of parent and the feelings that this triggered. I was familiar with this model and had used it in working with adults and had found it to be an effective tool to gain some insight into the way a person interprets situations that they find disturbing. I thought this model could assist in unravelling the perspective of the parent to the role of parenting.

### **Ethical Concerns Addressed**

I submitted my ethics application and gained approval (Appendix Five) from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee before I applied the research processes. This ensured that the proposed methods of recruiting participants, gathering and storing data, met the ethical standards for the participants, the researcher and the University.

I endeavoured to address possible ethical dilemmas before the research began. The confidentiality of the records was maintained by storing them in a locked cabinet. Participants were invited to provide a fictitious name, to create anonymity. The names chosen by the participants are used in this thesis and will be used in any presentation or paper, produced from the research. As the participants were from a large group in society the possibility of identifying individuals is reduced.

There is potential to cause harm to a participant during the interview if interviews are not carried out appropriately. I realised that talking about issues which were important can have an emotional impact on the participant and so I was sensitive to and respected the needs of the participants. I assured participants that they could choose to not answer questions and that was acceptable (Snyder 1992). Snyder (1992) highlighted the concern of participants that as researcher you could be judging them. To overcome this I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was interested in what was meaningful to them.

I had considered asking the participants to provide photographs of their teen bedroom but realised that this could cause difficulties for the participant/teen relationship if the teen was unwilling to have 'their' space photographed. I therefore used a separate process to gather the photographs and emphasised that permission was to be sought from the occupant of the room. For a media report on the research I was asked for the use of a photograph and refused as I had only sought approval for use of photographs under my authorship. The journalist organised a photograph herself and I later heard that the teenager sitting in the picture was furious that her name had been printed in the article without her approval.

When using interviews and focus groups the participants need to clearly know the purpose and focus of the research, the fact that material shared in the group setting is confidential and that it is not designed to be a therapeutic session for their own purposes (Fook, 1996). I made sure of this by providing each participant with an information sheet and then verbally repeating this information on contact. Consent forms were signed by all participants. Participants had been informed in the information sheet about the right to withdraw from the research at any stage and they were reminded of this at the interview.

## **Contributors to the Research**

There were two sources of data for this report, a focus group of teens and interviews with parents of teens. The eight teenagers aged from 13 years to 16 years, 6 females and two males formed the focus group. They provided an adolescent perspective on the messy teenage bedroom and their interpretations of the parental perspective on the messy teen bedroom. The focus group meeting took place before the interviews with the parents. The teenagers were not the children of the parent participants.

Eight parents of teens participated in interviews for the study. There were six individual interviews from six families and one couple who took part. All the names used are fictitious names and have been chosen by the participants. Participants were asked to talk about a particular child between the ages of 13 and 15 years but some parental comments refer to more than one child in the family.

The interview participants were:

**Andrea** (female, 34 years) a technician, with a 15 year old daughter, an only child.

**Bobbi** (female, 34 years), a student, with a 13 year old son, an only child.

Andrea and Bobbi both have partners who have been living with them between 18 months and two years duration and both described themselves as sole parents saying that they did not regard their partners as having a parenting role to this teenager.

**Mary** (female, 42 years), with a daughter of 13 years, the eldest of two children. A sole parent.

**Mere** (female, 42 years), a student, with a 14 year old daughter, the youngest of a family of three girls. The sisters are now in their late teens. This is a two parent household.

Both these participants chose the name Mere as their research name with Mary given as an alternate suggestion by one participant.

**Liminal** (male, 55 years), a manager, with a 13 year old son and 15 year old daughter. Liminal is in a two parent household and also has an older daughter of 17 years.

**Victoria** (female, 34 years) was the main respondent in the next interview with her husband **Albert** (male, 38 years) adding some comments they have a son/stepson of 14 years. They have three more sons aged 10, 6, and 3 years respectively.

**Albert** is the stepfather of the son aged 14 years.

**Debra** (female, 37 years) a nurse, who has a 15 year old daughter and two younger sons of 12 and 10 years. This is a two parent household.

There were no issues or dilemmas with completing the planned interviews. Booth & Booth (1994) suggest that two or three interviews are preferable, as in the initial interview the researcher is developing trust and rapport. This did not seem to be an issue in this project as the participants were keen to talk about the topic. Looking back on the processes used in this study I think it would have been improved if I had included a focus group of parents as their interaction with one another might have highlighted other issues not identified in this research.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter the reasons for the choice of qualitative research methods and design have been presented. Acknowledgement has been given to the potential dilemmas of undertaking this research and the mechanisms and supports that were put in place to protect the participants. The researcher dilemma that Gilgun (1992: 27) postulates though, is that due to the diversity and open-endedness of methods and data analyses qualitative researchers are prone to asking “Am I doing it right?” This is an important question to ask and to reflect on, as it helps the researcher to continue to consider why and how they are doing the work. I think that it is very appropriate to keep this in mind in this project as this is also the question that parents of adolescents ask themselves, “Am I doing it right?”

For the researcher, Gilgun (1992: 29) proposes that the bottom-line questions to ask are, how successful am I in communicating my processes and findings, and are my interpretations faithful to what my informants are telling me. In the following chapters which reflect on the findings of this research I aim to keep these questions in the forefront of my thinking.



Illustration 4: No visible carpet

## Chapter Four: “Just shut the door!”

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### Introduction

The themes that emerged from the stories the participants shared about their experiences of messy teenage bedrooms, and the stories of parenting a teenager have been organised into four chapters. This chapter focuses on the data gathered about the messy bedroom, including descriptors and definitions of the messy bedroom, worries about messiness and the ‘just shut the door’ solution. Explorations of features, which add to the understanding of possible reactions to a messy bedroom, are discussed, such as the ownership and use of the bedroom space and the changed social context of this living space. This is followed by Chapter Five which contains the discussion and interpretation of these findings. The same pattern of analysis is then repeated with Chapters Six and Seven, in which the data on the parenting role is addressed.

The typical scenario of the messy teenage bedroom is an iconic example of teenage behaviour. The messy teenage bedroom is often portrayed in humorous terms in social commentary but within the family the messy bedroom can be the source of tension and angst in the parent/child relationship. It is interesting to note that the phrase used to describe the phenomenon explored in this research is usually described as the ‘messy teenage bedroom’. The order of these words actually means the messy teenager rather than the messy bedroom. The sequence of the words is very telling and contains within it the concern of the messiness as linked to the teenager rather than the room as an example of messiness. For this reason I considered using the descriptor the ‘teenage messy bedroom’ but have chosen to stay with the commonly expressed phrase the ‘messy teenage bedroom’.

### The Interviews

As described earlier I chose the messy teenage bedroom as the topic to begin the interviews as I had noticed anecdotally that people, both parents and non-parents had stories to tell about the messy teenage bedroom and that this seemed to be a safe topic of conversation. This observation was confirmed by the participants, as they showed no difficulty in describing and expressing their feelings about the messy teenage bedroom.

On listening to the recordings of the interviews I heard a great deal of laughter from the participants. It seemed that the participants as they spoke about their situation saw some irony or humour in it. The reality that the messy bedroom can trigger many emotional responses in the parent can be seen in Chapter Six.

At the start of the interviews I showed participants a selection of photographs of messy bedrooms (Appendix Two). The participants, on viewing these, declared that their teen's room was generally worse. One participant suggested that if the photo had the smell embedded in it then it would be more accurate. One participant let me know at the end of the interview that she had felt very uneasy when she first saw the photographs and could hardly bear to touch them. As a result of the discussion she said she now realised that her teen was not 'abnormal'. She then picked the photos up again and took a careful look at them. The images portrayed in the photographs provided a starting point for discussion. These photographs are featured throughout this thesis.

### **The Messy Bedroom: "The Bombsite", "The Pigsty"**

#### **The parents' view**

To build a common understanding of 'messy', descriptions were sought from the participants. The following quotations from the participants were typical of the expressions from the parents. They saw the messy bedroom as:

*Mouldy towels, a room covered in dirty dishes ...clean and dirty clothes mixed together and the stench! (Andrea).*

*When there is a lot of rubbish around and things out of place (Mary).*

*No clear space (Mere).*

*When you can't see the floor anymore, when it is buried... (Victoria).*

*The smell, sweat mingled with underarm and smelly socks and smelly shoes that just builds up ... dirty clothes and rubbish on the floor, an unmade bed is O.K. but that rubbish on the floor and under the bed is just messy... (Bobbi).*

Debra added the plea that she wanted to see "at least some carpet". Mere described the major feature was "no room to walk on the floor" and wondered how the teen was able

to move in the room. She described how her husband did the “*bedroom shuffle*”, which meant sliding the feet across the floor as he was worried if he stepped that he would break things left on the floor. This action was also described as the “*skiing motion*” by another participant.

Victoria emphasises a difference between messy and filthy, with “*filthy referring to rotting food which could be a health hazard, to the rest of the family as it could attract ants or cockroaches*”. Both Andrea’s and Liminal’s teens’ had pet mice that were kept in the bedroom that added to the smell. The family dog in Andrea’s home also “*burrowed into the teens piles of stuff*”. Debra’s daughter kept fish in the bedroom but this did not seem to be an issue. The participants often used the words ‘pigsty’ and ‘bombsite’ to express the chaos of the scene.

All the participants referred to the mixing of clean and dirty clothes. They all mentioned the lack of care shown by their teenagers for their possessions regardless of whether they were new or expensive clothes or old and inexpensive possessions. Liminal gives examples of books left with the spines open and CDs out of their protective covers:

*...things randomly discarded with no consideration for the optimal life cycle of the object, a kind of chaotic organisation of one’s possessions (Liminal).*

*I was concerned over the money I had spent on the items, the latest gear; you work hard for the money and then they just leave things on the floor (Mere).*

From the parents descriptions of the messy bedroom the dominant themes were the mixing of clean and dirty clothes, the smell (mentioned in four interviews), the disorganisation, and the lack of care of possessions, the buried floor and the concern for rotting food or mouldy towels.

### **Parental Emotional Response**

I had noticed before I began this research that parents’ emotional energy often intensified as they became involved in telling their stories about messy teen bedroom. This was also apparent in the interviews. This section focuses on the emotional responses of the parents to the messy bedroom.

Andrea initially presented as being relatively unconcerned about the messy teenage bedroom and her initial response was “*I don't really care; I don't have to live in it*”, but as the interview proceeded she spoke about the situation with an increasing show of negative feeling about the messy room. Whilst Andrea's responses changed during the interview, Liminal who had also begun the interview as not being bothered by his teens' messy bedrooms maintains a congruency with his opening stance. “*I feel fine, it is their choice,*” says Liminal adding that he was somewhat puzzled that they liked their rooms messy. Every parent noted that their teen seemed happy with their space. Liminal suggested that a messy bedroom could be seen as an optimistic sign and that it gives an indication of the kind of adult the teen might become:

*They are not cleaning up their room to please me but they are doing it to suit themselves and that's how they can learn some self direction and not live their lives to suit other people (Liminal).*

A different picture develops from the parents who were more concerned from the start of their interviews about the mess. Mere explained that with her older daughters she used to get very upset with the messy room as, “*I wanted the whole house to be clean and tidy*” until “*I realised that I had a problem not them, and I sought help from Parentline*”. The realisation that the problem was from her own emotional response to the scene provided a real change for Mere and she added, “*Once I fully gave responsibility to them for the room it actually increased our friendship and respect for each other and improved our relationship*”.

I found that the parents emphasised that each child was different even within the same family, and each family seemed to have differences of how comfortable they were with mess. The parent often used the state of the bedroom as a means of assessing the teen. In casual conversations with people I had heard many theories about the messiness being an indicator of low self esteem, an act of rebellion, or just being plain lazy. The participants presented similar stories. In the interview with Victoria and Albert, Victoria had a positive interpretation of the situation in that she had identified the degree of messiness as an indicator of how happy her son was feeling. “*The messier it is the more he has going on in his head ... I will then take time out to talk with him about what is going on for him*”. Victoria also used messiness as an indicator for her own mental

health as she had recognised that *“if I am depressed the house is a total wreck”* and she would then seek help from her family or a counsellor or take a couple of days break from the family. Victoria described herself as a *“neat freak”* prior to having children and how she had to have *“everything perfect, a picture show home”*. Having children has forced her to modify her stance and she expresses sentiments similar to Liminal when she says *“It is his living space, and a learning environment and he has got to deal with it himself”*. Albert also describes himself as a *“neat freak”* that likes to have everything linear and in the right place. Bobbi expressed strong feelings of concern and tension from the arguments that the messy room triggered *“It hits a nerve ... it’s the only room that’s messy in my place”*.

Several participants identified that at times their reaction to a messy teenage bedroom is stronger because of other things going on in their lives and their tolerance of what was acceptable lessened. Victoria describes this *“I came home after a hard week and my tolerance level was zip and I really lost my cool ... I kicked a pile of clothes because I couldn’t even shut the door!”* In these more stressful situations participants identified the thoughts that flash into their mind such as *“I get no respect around this place”* (Andrea), *“Are you trying to make life miserable?”* (Bobbi), and *“Do you all hate me or something”* (Debra).

### **The teens’ view**

The focus group expressed similar images to the parents’ descriptions, with messy described as having many things lying around on the floor. Here are some examples the teens gave to describe their messy bedrooms:

*You walk in, you fall over ... stuff falls down like my guitar, clothes, and then my stuff and rubbish is everywhere, and its pretty messy but it’s pretty cool, sounds, songs, poems, trees and flowers and yeah it’s pretty awesome (Teen).*

*You can’t find the floor, there’s just junk, clean and messy and it’s a mixture of clean and dirty, I mean clothes and shoes and schoolwork all thrown in together (Teen).*

All the teen participants described themselves as having messy bedrooms, with three ranking themselves as having very messy bedrooms. Two had difficulty shutting the

door because of things on the floor. The synonyms they gave for the word messy were: untidy, disorganised, dirty, lazy, cluttered and busy. They reported a range of responses from their parents to the messiness. One teen identified the parent as being really concerned. The teens said that the most common term used by parents to describe their room was 'a pigsty'. A further term reported by teens was the use of "it's just a shambles".

### **The Teens' Emotional Response to their Bedrooms: Comfort**

The teens in the focus group mainly expressed a degree of comfort about their bedroom. Their comments were:

*I feel at home in my room because the mess is just like me, it is my mess not someone else's (Teen).*

*It's a place where you should be allowed to express yourself and be comfortable (Teen).*

One teenager described the bedroom as just "*the place I sleep in*". Another teenager who shared a bedroom with her sister and was soon to move to a new room by herself was keen as "*it will just feel more like my place instead of me and X's place*". The teens talked with pride about their room and that they could relax in it and be comfortable. A couple of teens said that it was annoying when they were unable to find something in their room because it was messy and one girl who was dressed in the Gothic style described the difficulty of finding a particular item as her clothes were all black and she often could not find things.

### **Teens' Perception of Parental Response**

The teens reported few stories of their parents nagging them about the state of their bedroom but all could tell of different strategies that parents have used to make them clean their room, such as letting a playful puppy loose in the bedroom.

The teens in the focus group struggled to respond to the question of what they thought their parent/s might be concerned about with the messy bedroom. The teens interpreted the parents' concerns as being connected to something being wrong for the parent such

as a bad day at work, not really connected to anything that the teen had done. *“If you clean your room they just attack you about something else”* (Teen).

One teen summed it up the situation by saying, *“they don’t really want you to be this dirty person who goes out and eats all the food and leaves everything everywhere”* (Teen). The teen understands that the parent is not approving of messiness.

### **Parental Concerns about Messiness**

The tension evoked by the messy bedroom was explored by asking the parents what they were worried about, what meaning they attached to the teen having a messy space. A range of concerns was expressed. Victoria and Albert talked of how the school work that was lost in the room led to the school ringing them, but that overall they were not worried about what others thought. Bobbi was proud of the things she had been able to provide for her teenager (e.g. Playstation) and noted that people would not be able to see these items because of the mess. Debra was worried that if her daughter could not manage her bedroom then how would she be able to manage her own house. Other explanations were:

*I worry that she has a disordered mind. With my learning, a tidy room reflects a tidy mind, everything has its place, and everything is respected and looked after. This portrays a person who is respectable and is ordered and knows exactly what to do and where to go, and with my daughter I think, well is she confused, or does she know what she is doing, can she find the things that she needs, how much time has she wasted. But yes, I know that she will come through this and she will be fine and not be a messy adult* (Mere).

*She might end up like her grandmother whose house is just a junkyard* (Andrea).

*The smell, it’s not my clean. The smell hits you, he is a clean child, washed and showered but he looks dirty because he comes from a grubby environment. The messy bedroom makes him look as a slob and I want him to do well. I know the messy look is in, grunge fashion but it is not good for them to get a job, eh* (Bobbi).

Debra, Andrea and Bobbi all commented that their worry was not always just the bedroom out of control, but that they were really worried about other things. Debra says *“So I worry about losing control and not knowing what she is doing out of the home and then I might say to go and tidy your room”*.

The concern about how others make judgements about the parent based on the messy bedroom was also mentioned:

*It doesn't make me look good; I want to be seen as a good parent (Debra).*

*As the parent that doesn't teach the child (Bobbi).*

*I find that peoples' attitudes have changed a lot too with a lot of both parents now working all day and they don't worry the same about keeping a show home, cleaning is left to the weekend (Victoria).*

Debra presented her mother-in-law's view who when she sees her granddaughter's room says "but you look such a nice girl".

Debra and Bobbi identified a further concern about the teen answering back when they were asked to clean their room, "they speak to you as well, in a disrespectful way, but they all talk like that way these days don't they?" (Debra). Bobbi described this further:

*It's more than the room. I feel he doesn't listen or respect me, or respect my wishes or wants; I try to think that it's just his age! The room is not really the issue, it's a build up of things I'm angry about and then I say, just go to your room and tidy it up. The messy bedroom means that I am not a clean parent; just that space ruins the whole flow (Bobbi).*

### **The Influence of the Previous Generation: "She wouldn't put up with this"**

Evidence emerged from this study of a reference point that parents use to make sense of the way they do their parenting job. The participants in the messy bedroom research said "I wouldn't have dared to have my room messy!"(Bobbi), or "my grandmother would be horrified to see my daughter's room" (Debra).

Participants spontaneously reflected on their own childhood and how their mother had treated them and the messy teenage bedroom. Typically their mothers expected them, as teenagers, to conform to her standards. Andrea expressed this as, "she would have come down harder on me, I remember being yelled at and told to tidy up, and she didn't put up with that sort of thing". Bobbi said:

*My mother would never let me get away with it, you had no choice, and your mother told you to do it (clean up) and you did it, you wouldn't answer back to your Mum. My son answers back and I get so tense my knuckles go white, and I want to hit him. I never argued back to my Mum, she would just say 'shut your mouth'. I swore I would not be like my mother but at times I find I am just like my mother and this is a bit scary, I want to be a modern mother (Bobbi).*

Victoria tells how:

*Mother was always ranting and raving at us because we had to pick everything up and put everything away and I found that I was doing that with my children. It was a learnt behaviour for me and I have struggled to let it go. I still feel the pressure to keep this house neat as a pin. I can hear my mother in my head. I was the oldest child and got a lot of flack when my mother wasn't well and I had to make sure the others were tidy too. So when I went out on my own and if I didn't keep my room spotless it bothered me because I could hear my mother's voice, or I worried in case she popped in (Victoria).*

Debra was raised by her grandmother and again she experienced the similar scenario of tidying her room when she was told to. *"When my grandmother visits now I just shut the door but when Grandma saw it she said 'What a disgrace' and 'you are not bringing her up properly' it 'just looks a pigsty'".* Debra emphasised that she wants to *"look good"* in her grandmother's eyes. Liminal found that his mother did not provide a reference point for him and describes his mother as not coping and that *"my mother was messy, I did most of the cleaning"*.

Several participants reported that if their mother or mother-in-law were visiting they would be horrified to see a messy bedroom and would probably think *"this is a terrible teen and that the parents are too soft on them"* (Mere).

### **Lack of Concern from Partner on the Messy Bedroom**

Some of the participants' partners who were supportive about parenting did not always share the same response to the messy bedroom. When this was the case the parent found the differing attitude of the other created additional anxiety for them. Debra's partner was *"not bothered at all by the mess, he has a messy work room at home too"* and from Bobbi:

*My partner doesn't understand why I am annoyed; it bugs him that we both (mother and son) argue about the messy room constantly, the two of us can argue for the whole weekend .... My partner is not bothered at all and this bugs me because I feel he's not on my side (Bobbi).*

Whilst Victoria's experience was at the other extreme with her partner being more concerned:

*Albert was much more concerned about the messy bedroom he is a neat freak and likes things linear, his mother was of the old school, neat as a pin, as I was in the past (Victoria).*

### **Use of the Teenage Bedroom**

All the parents commented on the difference between how they as teens used their bedroom to how bedrooms are used by teens today. The current use of the bedroom was identified by both the parents and the teens as a space where the teen plays their own music. All but one participant identified the bedroom as the area in which homework is done.

*There's a T.V., she uses the bedroom to eat in, lying around a lot - a huge amount - lots of lying around watching T.V. - and she entertains her friends in there, they do this rather than in any other room in the house (Andrea).*

Several of the teens have Playstations, and most have mobile phones. As Bobbi expressed it, "He just needs a fridge and then he is so comfortable in there he could hibernate there all day" (Bobbi).

Again the theme emerged that the teen had a well-equipped space where they can live a great deal of their life at home. Just four have computers in their bedroom and another parent was resisting supplying a computer in the bedroom due to concerns about internet access to pornography and how she would monitor this. The parents demonstrated some concern as to how they could know what is appropriate for teens and they were keen to know how much time was appropriate for a 13 or 14 year old to play electronic games. The parents were interested in more information or ideas as to how the parent could manage 'safe' internet access.

Bobbi identified a change from her life as a teen in terms of the amount of time spent lying around in the bedroom or as Victoria described it "*thinking time*" saying "*I was never allowed to laze around in my bedroom*". Debra had a similar response:

*She uses her bedroom to escape from her brothers, she has a phone, computer and stereo and spends a lot of time in her room on the phone and listening to music -*

*does her homework in her room. I used to do my homework at the kitchen table. She lies around a lot (Debra).*

When the parents spoke about the amount of time the teen spends in their bedroom they noted that this as a change but showed tolerance as one benefit for the parents was that at least they knew that this was a safe environment. The greater use of their bedroom by the teens, compared to their parents, for a wider range of activities was a strong and consistent theme in the interviews.

### **Ownership of the Space: “It’s My Room!” “It’s My House!”**

Another issue identified in the literature was the ownership of the bedroom space. This theme emerged in the interviews also. The parents’ view was that although it is the teen’s room there needs to be recognition from the teen that the parent has some responsibilities for the space also. The teens in the focus group all claimed full responsibility for how they arranged furniture and decorated the walls. The parents all reported that their teen clearly defined the space as theirs to use as they please, but the parents varied in their acceptance of this concept. Andrea’s and Debra’s daughters are reported as saying “*it’s my room; I’ll have it how I like*”. Liminal agreed that it is the teen’s space and they have a right to privacy. Whilst Victoria maintained that:

*They’ve got to distinguish themselves, and their rooms are their territory, and what better way to distinguish yourself than to decorate your room, you can see their personalities in their rooms (Victoria).*

Mere accepted that her daughter “*is creative and it is her space, and her room*” as she described the decoration on the wall of the room adding “*I can rewallpaper and repaint the room*”. The parent often expressed a reclaiming of the space after the teen was gone. Bobbi stated that her view that it is “*his room, but in my house, my domain*” has led to many arguments with her son. Victoria and Albert reiterated that it was the teen’s bedroom, “*his learning environment, and an extension of the house*”.

### **More Teenage “Stuff”**

All the participants described their teens as having a lot more stuff/gear in their rooms compared to the parent, more clothes, sports gear, electronic equipment and things. This has placed pressure on storage space in the room. As Victoria said: “*I had just one shelf for special things, a small wardrobe and a dresser in my room*”. The participants were

broadly speaking more from the middle class band of socio-economic level. Several parents though expressed real financial difficulty in providing the things that the teens wanted and expressed worry about their teens feeling excluded by their peer groups because they did not have a computer or cell phone.

### **Location of Bedroom**

I considered the location of the bedroom within the house as I wondered that if the room was able to be viewed easily by people from outside the family that this could impact on the level of concern that the parent may have about the messiness. The data gathered provided no evidence of this. In the two households where the teen bedrooms were located close to the front door it did not seem to affect the parental response to messiness.

### **Parental Tidy Preferences: “Just Clean Your Room”**

The participants’ narratives revealed that tidiness is a characteristic to be proud of and messiness often came through as a cause of shame or embarrassment. However, I found that they had a range of interpretations to explain what the mess meant for them and what having a messy bedroom revealed to them about their teen. Each parent demonstrated a varying range of acceptance of the messy bedroom. When asked if they would prefer the teenage bedroom to be tidy all answered in the affirmative. Debra described her house in general as “*pretty messy*” but she still had a preference for her daughter to have a tidy room. Mere also says: “*If it was tidy I would be shocked and pleased*”. As Andrea says:

*It would be nice if it was tidy like the rest of the house, as it was when she was 12 or 13 years old. I used to clean her room for her and I’d thought that the way it would work would be that once she was used to things being tidy that she would then not be able to cope with not being tidy and it did work up until the 12 or 13 year old and then it was a diabolical mess (Andrea).*

Bobbi’s ideal was to have the room dusted and clothes neatly folded. While Liminal preferred tidy he still restated that it was the teen’s choice. Victoria said it would be wonderful if it was tidy, but then added “*if it was exceptionally tidy then I would be taking him to a psychiatrist*”. Victoria recognised that any extreme behaviour even if it is at the desirable end of the continuum is to be treated with caution or concern. But do parents know what is ‘normal’ for teens today in terms of tidiness. Bobbi was definitely

reassured to find out that she was *'not alone'* in having a child with this *'problem'*. Liminal and Mary who were not concerned about the messy bedroom express a preference for tidiness. Mary says: *"I might say to her once a day to tidy her room and about once a month I get in and help her sort it out"*.

Some issues emerged around who tidies the room. *"If I tidied she would react very nastily, she said that this is a lack of privacy, she hates it if I come in and change the sheets"* (Mere). The focus group teens talked about how their parents generally refused to vacuum the room because of the mess (an exception was when the teen was an asthmatic). Focus group teens said they were happy with this as they did not want a parent interfering in their space. All said they tidied the room from time to time but that it did not stay that way for long. The teens talked about how they generally tidied their room a bit if friends were coming over.

The method used by the teens to tidy up was another theme that emerged. Both Andrea and Victoria say how their teens *"just dump everything in the wash basket, both clean and dirty"*. Bobbi's son: *"just throws his shit in the wardrobe, clothes not folded, or under the bed so Mum can't see it and he thinks he's cleaned it"*.

The focus group expressed no sense of guilt or shame about the messiness in any of their comments, although they were aware that their parents would prefer them to be neater and cleaner. When asked if any of their parents seemed happy with the mess, no teen claimed that but they did acknowledge that some parents were more concerned than others. They referred to rotting food, mouldy apple cores and dried egg on plates as not really a good idea but that they would sometimes tidy up this type of mess. It seemed that they saw a valid reason to do this.

### **Gender Differences**

I had wondered if a different expectation could have been set for the different genders. The parents did not discuss any different expectations for their teen on the basis of gender. In this study, which drew on the messy bedrooms of three boys and five girls, the descriptions of the mess were similar. I asked the participants if they thought they would react differently or expect anything to be different if their teen was of a different

gender and they were clear that they would not treat it any differently. The teens in the focus group also presented common themes across the genders.

### **The “Just shut the door” response**

I heard from parents during a radio talkback I hosted during the process of recruiting participants that to ‘just shut the door’ was the simplest solution for the messy teenage bedroom. I was not surprised that the ‘just shut the door’ response featured prominently as a solution to the problem in many of the participants’ narratives as it is also a theme in the popular literature. All the participants used this phrase in some form. In Andrea’s arguments with her daughter she would say: “*If you don’t want me to come in then shut the door*”, and “*as long as the door is shut it is not a big deal*”. Her final bit of advice to herself and other parents was to:

*Just shut the door – as long as its not encroaching on you, just shut the door, you can always get the commercial cleaners in when they leave home (Andrea).*

But Bobbi had tried shutting the door and says this “*I tried closing the door but it doesn’t work I still know its there*”. Victoria was able to use this strategy stating that at times, “*I will just shut the door and walk away*”. Liminal, the least troubled by the messy teen bedroom just said: “*I don’t even go there*”.

The notion that if you cannot see the mess then it will not worry you seems to not be a useful solution for all parents. Even those participants who used this strategy still expressed ongoing concerns about the mess in the bedroom.

### **Conclusion**

Several clear themes emerged from the interviews. These can be summarised as follows. First the messy teenage bedroom is a phenomenon that is experienced by New Zealand parents. Second the messy bedroom appears as a phenomenon that was not experienced to such a degree by the previous generation and parents today struggle to make an adjustment to this change. Third with regard to generational change there is a greater emphasis on the acquisition of possessions and teens generally have more gear to manage within the bedroom space. Fourth a conflict of interest between parent and child emerges over the control of the bedroom space. Finally teens are comfortable in their

space whilst parents experience some degree of discomfort with the messy teenage bedroom and what they think it means.

This chapter has demonstrated that the scenario of the messy teenage bedroom creates a range of emotional responses from parents. Some parents are anxious and concerned for the long-term outcomes for the teen based on their analysis of the current messy bedroom. Other parents accept that it is an inevitable aspect of teenager behaviour that has no long-term consequences. The interpretation that the parent places on the phenomenon is central to the emotional response triggered and this is discussed in Chapter Seven.

Parents can be concerned about parental competency and the fear of how others might judge them based on the messy teen bedroom. They were often concerned about what their own parents would think as they had generally not tolerated messiness. The importance of the parent's parent, particularly the mother, formed a reference point from which the parent reflected on their own parenting skills. The simplistic advice stated in the title to this chapter of 'just shut the door' is not helpful to a parent who was concerned about the mess. Such advice underestimates the complexities of the parenting role.



Illustration 5: Half-open drawers

## Chapter Five: “I don’t have to live in it”

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### Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the themes that emerged from the participants narratives about the messy teenage bedroom discussed in the previous chapter. The complexity of the life of a parent is revealed with this exploration of one issue that parents face in the everyday life of raising a teenager. The messy teenage bedroom was found to be popular in areas beyond the usual social science boundaries and is a topic on many websites<sup>3</sup>. One key problem in family research identified by Daly (1992) is around gaining access to the private activities of family members, their roles and relationships that could be conflictual or dysfunctional. I have found that the issue of messy teenage bedrooms, though at times conflictual, seems to fall outside the secret area and is one that parents appear able to talk freely about. Messy teen bedrooms appear as a typical feature of adolescence.

### Messiness is Typical

As discussed in the review of the literature (Marris, 1996; Waterbury-Tieman, 2004), and as seen in the findings of this study, the teen messy bedroom is a common and typical situation in families with teens today. The messy teenage bedroom emerges as a common site of controversy for families across the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand. I found that the word ‘messy’ is consistently used when discussing the teenage bedroom. Ongchai (2001) uses the term ‘messy bedroom syndrome’ to identify the phenomenon. As identified earlier the messy teenage bedroom appears as a focus in such places as an Australian website quiz on parent/teen communication and the literature on how to organise the bedroom (Morgenstern et al. (2002).

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<sup>3</sup> ([www.semissourian.com/story.html](http://www.semissourian.com/story.html), [www.youngminds.org.uk/supportingparents/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/supportingparents/))

## **Consistency of Descriptions of Messy**

As participants volunteered on the basis of an interest in messy teenage bedrooms it was not surprising that they were familiar with the concept of the messy teenage bedroom and were able to easily describe them. The two data groups in this study and the literature, Marris (1996), McDermott (2002) and Waterbury-Tieman (2004) describe the messy teenage bedroom in similar imagery. From this small sample of teens and parents both groups identified that teens seemed to treat their gear without discriminating between clean and dirty clothes, old and new possessions. The consistent image was of the floor covered with stuff, little apparent sorting of school gear, sports gear or special clothes. Explicit images of dirty plates, drawers and cupboard doors half-open and apples cores or dirty plates scattered randomly in the room came from the literature, the teens, and the parents. Each group could recognise the image created in these descriptions. Marris writing for parents described the situation graphically:

Every teenager has the capacity to turn their room into a piggery... filthy clothes strewn together with clean ones in huge, random piles on the floor, blinds or curtains never pulled, bed linen unchanged and damp towels growing into the carpet and glued to the pile with mould (Marris, 1996:38).

The difference between the parents and the teenagers was the use of derogatory adjectives attached to the descriptions by the adults, such as 'pigsty' and 'bombsite' which illustrates the negative perspective with which the parents tended to view the messy teenage bedroom. In contrast the teenagers spoke in a positive way about the mess as being the way they were, and being comfortable with the mess. Being disorganised or untidy is not presented by the teens as being negative, though they were aware that the parents generally have a negative slant on the messy bedroom. Parents tended to view the messy bedroom as something unpleasant. The teens mentioned the way the parents could nag them about the mess. The parents not only commented on the greater quantity of possessions of their teen, as Warren (2001) identified, but that the teens conveyed less respect and caring for their possessions compared to their parents. Parents tended to associate this response to the individual teen rather than recognising this as being a typical attitude expressed by this generation.

### **Tidiness / Messiness Generational Differences in Messiness**

At the beginning of the interviews when the participants were shown the photographs of messy bedrooms, those who were more concerned about messiness, were pleased to see visual data documenting that the situation exists for other parents. I surmise that as teenage bedrooms are regarded as a private space in the household, adults from outside the family often would not have the opportunity to see other messy/tidy teenage bedrooms which they can use as a reference point. This visual evidence of messiness in other households then reassured them that they were not “the only one” with a teen who is messy.

One narrative linked the idea of neatness to niceness and this notion seems to be reflected in the other narratives when messiness was evidence of a ‘not nice’ person. It brings to mind the maxim that “Cleanliness is next to Godliness”. The parents all expressed that given a choice they would prefer the room to be tidy, so it seems that tidiness emerges as a virtue that is well ingrained. I suggest that the comfort level with mess is mediated by the values from your family of origin together with the values of present day society. This could be an explanation of the different responses to messiness shown by parents and teens. The parents, now in their 30s to 50s, were raised in an era where conformity was more valued and neatness/ tidiness was seen as a virtue. The teens on the other hand are living in a post-modern or late-modern environment in which the individual is challenged to make sense of the world for themselves (Fook, 1999). The degree of conformity required in earlier eras has given way to more ad hoc interpretations of the world.

The parents who were concerned about the messy teenage bedroom asked for solutions for creating tidiness. Such solution-based rhetoric is echoed in the literature. Morgenstern & Morgenstern-Colon (2002) for example, suggest the way to solve the messy bedroom is better organisation. For Morgenstern et al. (2002) this means organising the room, organising shelving, organising time and so forth.

## **Messiness is Stylish**

The word 'messy' conjures up an image that is very familiar and not attractive to the parents. On the other hand the teenagers in this research express a sense of comfort in the 'messy' style of the room; this is seen to define the room as a teenage space. From a post-modern perspective messiness can be regarded as the teens struggle with the creation of self in a range of contexts where individuality is valued (Parton & Marshall, 1998) and difference is often demonstrated in the 'messy' style. In society today the 'messy' style is not just located in the bedroom but is extended to teens' clothing and hair styles. The plethora of hair products to create and hold messy styles testify to the messiness as style phenomenon. These culture clashes between the generations is one which the parent might be unaware and as a consequence feel their power threatened as their ideas are challenged. The parent could desire the teenager to look neat and well groomed and believe that if they appear messy that people will judge both the teen and the parent as being unable to cope. The teen though knows that they are following the fashion trend and are admired by their peer group. The transition to achieving a more balanced power in the parent/teen relationship is a central issue to the parental role and is discussed later.

## **Teen Identity Formation**

None of the parents talked about the messiness as an attempt to be different to the parent or that this could be considered a step forward in the development to adulthood. The teenagers' ability to identify, assert and act on their own needs has the potential to catch some parents by surprise.

The teen bedroom is seen as more than a sleeping space, and most of the teens and parents in this study talked about the teens marking the space<sup>45</sup> their own with the decoration and individual style. It seems as if the bedroom space is a medium for the teenager to display their emerging identity. In the literature this was described as a way that the adolescent contributed to the forging of their own identity. The teen bedroom being used as a space in that they can experiment in and find what they like and how they want to express themselves as suggested by Dooley (1985), James (2001), Waterbury-Tieman (2004), was referred to by most of the participants. Dooley (1985)

also drew attention to identity being expressed through many senses such as touch, smell, and texture. The use of artefacts such as posters and memorabilia to decorate their space and the particular smell of a teenager bedroom appeared in the narratives in this study. The teenagers here seem to be demonstrating their points of difference to the family in their bedrooms by creating their own look and smell. The parents generally recognised that the teen was expressing themselves but few located this aspect as being an important aspect for the development of teen identity.

Carr-Gregg & Shale (2002) identified that teens are striving to create their own identity with their key developmental task being the formation of a secure and positive identity and achieving independence from the parents. The participants who recognised the messy bedroom as a potential part of the teenage developmental process were able to be more relaxed about the messy bedroom. Though the parents could rationalise about the teen's right to their own décor and that the messy bedroom is a part of this, parents still struggle with this as their ideal is to have a tidy room.

To be different in a tidy house the teen is liable to be messy, and in the messy home the teen can demonstrate difference by having a tidy room. If there are several teen bedrooms in the household then each teen is liable to strive to be different from one another as well. One teen who shared a bedroom stresses how difficult this is for her, and that she could not wait to have her own room that she could decorate "*her own way*".

### **Teenage Comfort**

The findings in this study are consistent with the representation in the literature that teenagers have an emotional attachment to the bedroom space and the teenagers spoke with feeling about "their space". One male student expressed no attachment to his room and in her 2001 study James found that this response to be very rare and that most teens have an emotional attachment to their bedroom. The teenagers in this study expressed a sense of comfort with their bedroom space. The parent participants also commented how their teens seemed happy and comfortable with the look and feel of their rooms. This finding supports the outcomes from James (2001) and Dooley (1985) who found that the bedroom was seen as a space where teens could relax and express themselves

more openly without worrying about being observed by others. I suggest that the comfort and stability of their own space has an even greater emotional importance to the teen as they struggle to establish their own identity. Marris (1996) describes the experience of puberty and 'identity confusion' as often creating an emotional roller coaster for the teen.

### **Teens' Perspective**

The teens talked about the lack of space and identified that they had a "lot of stuff". Warren (2001) confirmed this saying teenagers today have more possessions than their parents, and often though they have more storage space in their rooms this does not appear sufficient.

An important point to note was that the teens struggled to give any explanation about why parents might be concerned about a messy bedroom. This reflects their stage of development (Davis & Day 2001), (Heaven, 1994) and (McDonald et al.1999) in that being so focussed on themselves and their own issues they find it difficult to make the leap to what might be going on for another, especially if the other is an adult and therefore in a completely different world. The teens tended to provide explanations for parental concern about the messy teenage bedroom that were linked to the parent not to them. A typical explanation was that the parent was in a bad mood about something going on in the parent's life such as a bad day at work.

### **Changed use of the Teenage Bedroom**

The parents as a teen had typically only used their bedroom for sleeping and reading and expressed some difficulty adapting to the way their teens used the bedroom as a central focus for a broad range of activities. Most of the parents had shared a room when they were teens and with smaller families today this was less likely to be the case. All but one of the teenagers in the focus group and the teens of the parent participants had a room to themselves. Socio-economic factors and cultural differences can mean that for many teens today they still have a shared space and for families surviving on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum the pressure on room space remains intense. The last thirty years have seen a reduction in family size in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 1998) and this is one influence that has led to a change in the use of the

family home. For many teens their bedroom is a sole occupancy. The teenage years have lengthened with puberty starting earlier and it is the norm to remain in the family until early adulthood (Coleman & Roker 2001). This prolonged stage of dependency adds to the frustration of adolescence.

A dramatic change has occurred in the use of the teenage bedroom. In the interviews the parents commented that the teenager used the bedroom more for a wider range of activities. The teens were seen to sleep, study, play music, games, and entertain friends in their bedrooms. James (2001) found that this pattern was the case in her study on the use of teen bedrooms. As Warren (2001) comments the parental threat to send a child to their bedroom now sounds to the teen as a reward not as a punishment as in the past the room was a quiet space for sleeping and now it was full of many activities that were interesting for the teenager.

A generational change commented on by the participating parents was the use of electronic equipment in the bedroom, which helps create a comfortable and desirable place to spend time in. The development of electronic equipment for personal use such as portable C.D. players, mobile phones and computers now provide teens the means to spend more recreation and study time in their bedrooms than the previous generation (Madigan & Munro, 1999, James, 2001). The virtual world, as Mubarak (2004) points out, is a regular feature in most teen's lives today and that they have both virtual friends and real friends. Mubarak (2004) drew attention to this being a new experience for today's parents to negotiate. Some of the parents were concerned about their financial resources to provide the equipment that their teens desired.

### **Parental Anxiety**

Michaels (2003) also tells how his daughter comments: "the messy bedroom shouldn't offend the parent; it's not them who live in it!"<sup>4</sup>. This study found that some parents are accepting of the messy teenage bedroom and are prepared to wait it out, whilst for others it is a source of concern, either about themselves as failing to parent well, or about their teen as not having the desire or skill to organise themselves. Parental anxiety appears to emerge from the way in which the messy bedroom is interpreted by the

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<sup>4</sup> BBC Video Clip

parents rather than the phenomenon itself. Some parents theorise that messiness is a sign of failure and generalise this as a predictor for future failure in other aspects of the teenager's life. Morgenstern et al. (2002) echo these parental concerns suggesting that a disorganised teenage bedroom indicates a disorganised adult in the making and therefore developing good organisation in the bedroom would lead to an organised adult. The parents' interest in checking for solutions to the messy room showed an underlying theme of anxiety about their teenager. Barber (1994) maintains that conflicts with teenagers do tend to involve everyday matters such as chores and appearance rather than substantive issues such as sex and drugs.

Worried parents might be fearful of articulating their concerns for other aspects of the teen's behaviour, either in thoughts or words, and by default the messy bedroom becomes the aspect of the teenager's behaviour that is criticised. I think this is because it is visible to both the parent and the teen and the parent feels that the teen can easily demonstrate competency, and even respect, by cleaning their room.

Safety outside the home was a concern for the parents. They would typically be available to provide transport their teens to keep them safe. Again for the parents this was a change from their childhood. I surmise that parents today due to more openness around serious problems are more aware of suicide, drug and alcohol, bullying and other potential problems for teens. In addition, greater concern over safety outside the home has led to closer surveillance of children and teenagers and the home was seen by the parents as a safe haven for teenagers.

Another theme of concern from the parent interviews was expressed about the general attitude of teenagers to their possessions as the parents claimed the teens demonstrate less respect and caring for their possessions than their parents' generation.

### **Control of the Teen Bedroom**

Waterbury- Tieman (2004) considers that the right to control the access or visibility of the bedroom space appears to be a negotiated right. The teenagers regarded the bedroom as their own space to organise and have control over. Access to the bedroom was often

indicated by the teen using signs such as, Forbidden Zone, or Knock before Entering. This matches Giannetti & Sagarese (1997) notion that the adolescent 'craves privacy', wishing to maintain secrecy about things they do and appears less willing to disclose feelings than when younger. The bedroom was identified by both the parents and the teens as the teen's space but there was the underlying tension that it is also seen by the parents as being a part of the whole home which is the parents' space. Parents often revealed difficulty in letting go the power of control of the space. It is my observation that the messy bedroom is a point of conflict which is connected with the process of parents letting go in other aspects of the teen's life. The trust given for the teen to the control of the bedroom seems to be linked to the trust given in other aspects of the teens' lives. The open or closed door also represents a boundary control mechanism.

James (2001) found that the more autonomy teens perceived themselves to have in life outside the bedroom the less concerned they were about controlling access to the bedroom.

### **Power Shifts**

A feature of the parent/teen relationship has been presented as the shift of power from the parent to the teen as the move from lessening dependence into independence. The teen bedroom is one context where this power shift is played out. An excerpt from the Parents' Charter (Anon), used in a Parents' Rights Seminar (offered by the Wellington Community Law Centre in June 1996), illustrates this dilemma. The Charter has eleven rights suggested, here is the bedroom one:

Parents have the right to enjoy their own homes. This becomes difficult if one of the bedrooms appears to have been converted without a building permit into an indoor piggery. You may argue that the room has nothing to do with them. A glance at the signature on the cheque that pays the bills will prove otherwise (Anon. 1996).

Dooley (1985) provides a way of making sense of the messy bedroom when she suggests that teenagers tend to make indirect statements about compliance to accepted behavioural norms and the teenage bedroom is used as a means of demonstrating nonconformity to parental wishes and exerting some power in the relationship. The parents in this study often described their teens as complying with neatness when

younger and noticing a change in behaviours around early adolescence. Coleman (2001) describes how that the power in the family lies with the adults in the earlier years of the child's life but as they move into adolescence the parent needs to take into account the changing developmental tasks of the child and surrender some of the power. Comstock (1994), and Miller (2003), also drew attention to the shift from "power-over" in the younger years moving to a more symmetrical relationship at adulthood.

The sense that the parents had succeeded in shaping their children to the 'good' behaviour of tidiness in the pre-teen stage is shattered and the parents are then uneasy and mystified if they are not aware or accepting of the developmental shift in their teens. A negative interpretation of the situation could lead to the parent viewing other teenage behaviour negatively and straining the parent/child relationship. Munford & Sanders (1999) identified the difficulties in the parent / teen relationship as being a key reason for referral to a support agency.

If the parent can recognise the shift in the teenager's behaviour as a step in the developmental growth of the teen they could reframe their thoughts about the messy teen bedroom so they can think: "Great, this is a sign of my child developing his own thoughts and ideals which are a part of becoming an adult" instead of: "I am failing in my job if I can't make my teen keep his/her room tidy".

I have found that the messy teenage bedroom appears in many aspects of life such as in the play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill (2003), when a teen asks if she can go out her mother responded with "have you tidied your room". This is a response which parents seem to use when they want to delay answering a request from the teen. The parent diverts the focus to the bedroom. Therefore the attention of concerns that the parent is feeling is focussed on the bedroom.

### **How Tidy are Boys or Girls?**

I had wondered if a different expectation might have been set for the different genders. I found that there were no gender differences in either the standards or the way parents spoke about the messy teenage bedrooms. In this study, which drew on the messy bedrooms of three boys and five girls, the descriptions of the mess were similar. I asked

the parent participants if they thought they would react differently or expect anything to be different if their teen was of a different gender and they were clear that they would not treat it any differently. It is interesting to note that the teens in the focus group also presented common themes across the genders.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has focussed on presenting aspects of the messy teenage bedroom in a changing social context as it is viewed by both teenagers and parents. The messy teenage bedroom is a phenomenon that is experienced by New Zealand parents and also is a typical parenting issue in the western world. The teenage bedroom is an example of how a space within the family home is changing and being used differently. An issue that the parent needs to grapple with is the emergence of an identity that could create a value clash between the parent and teen.

The following chapter broadens the scene beyond the lens of the messy teenage bedroom phenomenon to consider the total role of being a parent of a teenager.



Illustration 6. On holiday

## Chapter Six: Being a Parent

### “It’s easier with other peoples’ children”

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#### Introduction

This is the third chapter of the four presenting and discussing the findings of this study. This chapter presents the participants’ stories about how they talk about, and have learned and formed their view on the role of parenting teens. It includes discussion about how the parenting role is perceived and what they are hoping to achieve as a parent. Issues such as how parenting skills are learnt and acquired and the supports available for parents are discussed. This chapter also includes the parents’ perceptions of their teenager through their response to the messy teenage bedroom and to find out how they view the role of parenting. The discussion begins by considering the ideas and philosophies the parents identify as shaping the way they approach the role of parenting. The analysis of these findings is presented in the next chapter.

#### “Am I doing it right?” What is parenting?

A question that people often ask themselves as they move into a new role is what is required of them and are they doing it right. The parents expressed varied perceptions of the role of parent. Liminal described his reasoning behind how he undertook the role of parent:

*I am not here to demand a certain lifestyle from my children, I am not here to make them become something, I am here to help them achieve their own self realisation ...I am to provide a safe environment and see they are nourished but not to direct them, they have freedom to choose what they want. We are not the type to impose goals on children. We have a very democratic lifestyle, the children are involved in making decisions about every aspect of the family, I don't say this is my house, the children participate in decision making on what money will be spent on the house, the whole family decides on what will happen to the house (Liminal).*

Liminal provided a clear description of his broad overview of the parenting job. This description of the parenting role is consistent with the framework of four key categories of parenting activities as proposed by Bornstein (1998) that was introduced in Chapter Two:

- nurturant caregiving: *“I want to see they are nourished”* (Liminal)
- material caregiving: *“a safe environment”* (Liminal)
- social caregiving: *“democratic lifestyle” “participate”* (Liminal)
- didactic caregiving: *“want them to achieve their own self realisation”*  
(Liminal)

The following description of the role put forward by Mary also encompasses the complexity of the parenting role:

*To make sure she knows I love her, so that she is secure in that relationship, and to be supportive of ideas that she has, and things that she does, friendships and social life. And to facilitate the learning that she is interested in and to make sure she has the time and space and access to resources that will help, and to provide a range of stimulating recreational and educational experiences outside of school, to encourage her to make things and to hold a line of argument, to be brave and kind. I also support her identity as both Maori and Pakeha. I've tried to encourage a more spiritual kind of focus and provide a relaxing and supportive atmosphere rather than the strain of climbing ladders* (Mary).

Mere wants to *“teach her (daughter) to be independent and make her own decisions and to be responsible for what she does”*. Victoria also had a clear and concise definition of her philosophy and has worked out how she is framing the decisions she makes:

*I see my role is to be there for him and to support and guide him and apart from providing food and shelter to basically just be there* (Victoria).

These participants presented a range of expressions of the parenting role and have developed a clear conceptual framework on which to base their day-to-day decision-making.

Other participants were less clear about the role. Andrea's comment was, *“I wish I had a take on that one ...yeah I think it's mainly to be alive at the end”*. Andrea talked about the difficulties of the day-to-day problems that she experienced and did not engage with the overview of the role. Andrea's statement *“to be alive at the end”* showed how stressed she felt and that she wonders if she will survive it all. Bobbi expresses a similar sentiment when she asked *“I wonder how long it will last, I want it over quick. I find it really difficult, I can't think of anything now that's easy when just five years ago most things were easy”*.

A consistent outcome the parents desired was for the teenagers to develop responsibility for themselves. Andrea said:

*I want to see her with a smile on her face; I want her to have an education so she can get a reasonable sort of a job. I want her to be self-responsible. I have taught her how to look after herself properly, and now its up to her whether she chooses to follow the good moral guidance, and tidy guidance, and stuff ...people tell me I'm too soft... she has a good grounding on what is right or wrong and now she has to make choices (Andrea).*

Victoria also said:

*I am trying very hard to teach him to be a responsible and self-sufficient adult. To give him the tools that he needs to be a productive member of society. It's not easy (Victoria).*

Debra also emphasised, “*to be self responsible, for her to be able to look after herself*”.

### **Parent or Friend**

A conflict between the role of parent and the role of friend as children reach the teenage years is experienced by many parents, and was raised by Mary:

*I want to be her friend but there is a fine line between friend and parent, and it's quite hard to straddle that line. Being a friend but not losing respect for you when you impose decisions (Mary).*

### **It's a Strange World**

I introduced the participants to the following quotation from Marris (1996), as this was fairly typical of some of the comments made in the literature and I was interested to see if this quotation had any resonance with the parents.

If adolescence is a turbulent, tempestuous, troubled time for teenagers, it can be just as much so for parents as they struggle to master the strange world that their children have dragged them into (Marris, 1996: 22).

They responded to this sentiment in different ways. Andrea's response was:

*Yeah, it's far harder for us than it is for them. I've been fifteen and I've been a parent of some one who is a teenager and I think I prefer to be fifteen again than to be a parent of someone who is fifteen...it's really hard to be a teenager but by God it's harder to be the parent of one, just the worry of it (Andrea).*

Mere agrees as she finds that “*she asks me the strangest questions at times and I wonder what is going on in her mind, she questions things like going to school*”.

Bobbi describes some of the strange new aspects of the teenage world: “*Yes it is quite mysterious, the swearing in the music, the baggy clothes, play-stations, I don't see how they can play it for hours – they talk as if the game is real*”. These are activities that are new for the parent and which the teen takes for granted as a normal part of their world.

Liminal and Mary both disagreed with Marris's statement. Liminal explained that he:

*Expected it to be turbulent but no, that they are happy, we have moments of anxiety, anger and rudeness that come with misunderstanding and hurt feelings but those are just fleeting feelings. Adolescence is a wonderful time to grow up and experience life with not having to conform (Liminal).*

*No it's not like that for me as she is easy and even-tempered. I know it can get quite intense but if you are secure in yourself then it is easier. In my adolescence I was insecure and it was a difficult time (Mary).*

Liminal's position that he expected turbulence but that he did not experience it led me to consider that teenagers have been given some bad press. Mary had experienced turbulence herself as a teen but theorised that this was because of the context and with her daughter being secure they experienced more calm weather than turbulence.

Most of the parents discussed their aim of wanting their teens to become independent which meant that during the adolescent years there needs to be a gradual letting go of parental power. The role of the teen is to push the boundaries (Carr-Gregg & Shale, 2002). Victoria picks up on this thought. She commented that Marris's statement is wonderful but that:

*I wouldn't say that you are dragged though, you grow into it. It is a strange world. I mean that everyone is such an individual and times change, and society changes, it is a strange world. We are struggling to master his strange world only to the*

*extent that we can help him negotiate his way through it. I don't want to relive his world. You learn new skills; you have new problems that you need to solve (Victoria).*

If parents accept the idea of parenting teens as being difficult perhaps they are more likely to worry about it before it happens and overreact to any signs of difficulty, as they do not want a 'teenage rebel'. If the parent can appreciate that the teen is going through a transitional period as a part of the process to independence then the parent will accept the need to adjust their strategies without feeling threatened. This highlights the need for parents to be able to shift gears in the parent/teen relationship.

### **The Reciprocal Impact of the Parent/Teen Relationship**

Phillips (1983) identified as a key issue the fact that there are two persons in the parenting relationship, the parent and the child. Victoria identified that the parenting process is a developmental process for her as much as the teen. Mary also commented on the dual nature of development as she says:

*I think that identity issues can happen at any time not just adolescence as people are working out who they want to be and develop a set of friends that confirm that identity. They like clear boundaries and are negative about people outside these boundaries and after adolescence these boundaries breakdown and you have more mobility to move between groups especially Maori and Pakeha (Mary).*

Mary comments on the changing social context for parents "*I think our parents were too focussed on the children whereas now we are focussed on our own careers*".

### **The Teenager: "He's Morphed into Something Else"**

The findings in this study have been based on narratives about the parenting of a particular teen and it is relevant to see how the respondents viewed that teenager.

In this section I present the descriptions of the teenagers as given by the participating parents and compare these descriptions to the categories of teenage development (from 13 years to 15 years) as envisaged by Mellor & Mellor, (2004). Mellor & Mellor (2004) identify the teen years as a time of development when the individual is more inwardly directed. They describe this activity as necessary as the teen is now expanding their

horizons to accept greater responsibilities and developing relationships beyond the childhood relationships. The transition from being active and outwardly directed by external forces to becoming internally directed occurs about 13-14 year age and then continues to about 20 years of age.

**The baby** is the title Mellor & Mellor (2004) give to the 13 year old stage as they see the teen in the switch transition period in which they begin to feel childlike again and demonstrate more neediness. Some teens are seen as changing overnight and others make a smoother extended transition that the parent barely notices. Bobbi experienced a sudden transition, “*When he was a child it was fine, he did as he was asked and then bam! He’s morphed into something else*”. Bobbi described her 13 year old son as:

*He is quiet. I tell him to be more assertive outside the home, I tell him to let people know if he wants to do something or not do something, but when he does it at home I don’t like it, I’m his mother, if he’s assertive to me he is being disrespectful – I see him as a smart arse. He is a real good kid, beautiful. I could have real problems. He doesn’t need me anymore. Dropping him off at school is an embarrassment, can’t cuddle in public. But I want him independent, there I am contradicting myself. He needs me when he wants dinner (Bobbi).*

This description illustrates the contradictions that Mellor & Mellor (2004) highlight for this age group namely the swing between not needing the parent and still needing the parent. Liminal described his 13-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter in more general terms:

*They are turning out real good, so that the method works for my family. I have been warned about teenage rebellion and the angst that families go through and we don’t have that. Our children seem to be delighted to be with us, they are really warm and affectionate to each other (Liminal).*

Mary’s teenager who also fits the ‘baby’ teen stage age group is described as:

*Cheerful, resourceful and independent teenager, she is constructive and organises herself with friends and to school, and that’s great because I have been getting on with my own work and life. She is not yet worried about how she looks or the fancy labels and whatever (Mary).*

**The dissenter** is the title Mellor & Mellor (2004) give to the 14 year old as they identify that struggle is central to this phase of the adolescent’s development, claiming

that some teens become only a little irritable but others can become very uncooperative. Victoria described her 14 year old son as:

*A wonderful child, we've gone through many problems with him, and he is a lovely young man, he's articulate and doing well at school. Their world is much more complicated, it's terrifying to watch him grow up and see what's out there, but I'm proud of the way he's dealing with it (Victoria).*

It appears that as they have had difficulties with him previously that whatever is happening with him now is smoother or seems smoother in comparison. Mere's daughter fits the dissenter image as she presents herself in the Gothic style "*all black, and she is very blunt with people,*" she is also, "*very beautiful and an interesting person*" (Mere).

**The fledgling** is the title given to the fifteen year olds as the main thrust of this stage is concerned with bonding with the adult world (Mellor & Mellor (2004). The teen is curious, wanting to contribute and in need of suitable adults to bond with as they begin to distance themselves from their parent/s. Their sweetness is said to "ebb and flow" (Mellor & Mellor 2004:123). Andrea described her 15 year old daughter as:

*A genuinely nice person who seems at the moment to be hiding behind a wall of teenage bad behaviour with an attitude problem - it is very unpleasant. She is a little wee thing but in attitude and personality she is huge, larger than life.*

Andrea thinks that it is the peer pressure that once she is past this she will go back to being "*a reasonable person*". Debra describes her 15 year old daughter, "*She is lovely, athletic and assertive but has her own mind and can dig her heels in*".

The descriptors the parents gave of their teens fit fairly consistently with the stages determined by Mellor & Mellor (2004). The parents noticed changes and show awareness of the passing nature of some behaviours in their teenager but did not describe this in terms of any stage theory.

## **How The Parenting Role Is Learned:**

***“When you become a parent you don’t get a book of instructions and you need them”.***

In the interviews with the parents I found that the key means by which they learnt the parenting role was through their own experience of being a teenager and observing their parent and/or grandparent. In their parenting research Andrew et al. (2002), found that participants’ experience from their own parents’ shaped two responses, one was to use some of their experiences as a guide to follow or that they reacted and consciously chose to do things differently. This finding was reinforced in this research. When the parents talked of doing things differently they were consciously aiming to do things better than their parents. Victoria says she learnt:

*By looking back at what my parents had done, the good, the bad and the ugly and if it didn’t work I would think well I will try to do this instead. You also talk to other parents about how you cope with this; you talk to the schoolteachers if it is a school issue. I did a Positive Parenting course because I was stuck when he was about 10, I was too domineering and he was coping with issues with his natural father and I ended up getting counselling for him. The parenting course was brilliant, I went not expecting much but found where I was going drastically wrong as I had got wrapped up in it and didn’t have a sense of what he needed or wanted. I have now learned to talk with my children and listen to their point of view. Now its going real great (Victoria).*

Andrea succinctly explains the natural evolution of parenting skills *“they grow as your child grows”*. The participants also reported that they learnt from a few close friends and siblings. Bobbi acknowledged how different the role of parenting seems when you are the parent:

*It’s easier with other people’s children. It’s a mind-boggling process. I had everything planned in advance. It’s a difficult process, I didn’t realise it would be as difficult as this. Its bloody hard, he used to watch Thomas the tank engine and now he wants to watch blood and guts. He wants things that I don’t like. I’m trying to get used to the breaking voice and the pimples. When you become a parent you don’t get a book of instructions and you need them (Bobbi).*

Liminal identified his learning came from books and through his study of psychology. Liminal’s key example of good parenting is his partner who he described as:

*An extraordinarily good mother, I have learnt from her, she had a warm and supportive environment from her parents, mine was as the far end of dysfunctional, and I didn't learn anything useful from them about being a parent.*

Debra adds a further dimension of how people learn about raising teenagers. Debra has been a sports coach of children and young teens for years and identifies that she had drawn on this experience as well as from her grandmother/mother figure. Debra says:

*My grandmother raised me and I think about what she did and what she would say. I found I learnt a lot from watching other coaches working with the kids and did that with my squad, so I have worked with teens for a long time and now I sort of do the same things at home with my kids, that has been good because I'm not as patient with my own kids. My mother-in-law is good with them too. (Debra).*

In the interviews the parents, who had older children, used many examples where they reflected on the effectiveness of their parenting experiences in similar situations, and described how they modified their parenting behaviour for the next child. They had examples to draw on when considering how to behave in the current situation. These breadths of experience enabled them to think objectively and to analyse the impact of their own behaviour on the teen. They also commented on the differences between each of their children. The philosophy of parenting they had developed was not just a response to the individual child, but a considered position developed from their range of experiences that they could use with all their children with variations to suit the uniqueness of each child. The parents talked about practicing on the first child and finding that subsequent children were easier to parent as the parent is now working from an informed base.

### **The Role of the Extended Family**

Albert also talked about the importance of grandparents saying “*I learnt about my parenting from my grandparents, they were patient and were wonderful listeners*”.

The potential of grandparents to be role models was not mentioned by any of the other participants and this raises the issue of society today with increased mobility that parents often do not live near their extended family or whanau (Selby, 1994) who have a shared responsibility in raising children and often it is just Mum and the kids, or Mum

and Dad and the kids in the day-to-day life of the family. Albert presented his grandparents as helpful supporters:

*The grandparents give a balance, they are a great support to refocus and get the strength to carry on and to get another perspective, every child should have grandparents around (Albert).*

### **Family Rules around Teen Bedrooms**

The use of rules or contracts is a parenting strategy proposed in virtually all the 'how to' literature (Birch, 1984, Fuller, 2002, Mellor & Mellor, 2004, McDonald et al. 1999). These contracts or rules are negotiated and respected by both parents and children. I explored the use of rules for the teen bedroom with the parents.

Andrea had no formal rules but commented, "*She knows I don't like food in there but it's not worth getting in a fight about it*". As noted earlier Andrea expresses having a difficult time with this relationship and her comment here just repeats the pattern of going with the flow in the 'minor' matters and choosing to challenge more serious issues. Bobbi also comments "*not really, I assume he knows. The dirty washing basket is used*". Bobbi and Andrea expressed greater concern than the other participants about messiness although they seem to have not established clear agreements with their teenagers.

Liminal explained that the teen bedroom was the responsibility of the teen. As this was a clearly understood agreement Liminal stated that as the parents they felt that it was no longer their concern as to what state the room was kept. Victoria also had very clear boundaries established:

*I won't pick anything up. I check the room and if I find food or dirty underwear lying around I tell him to clean up, and if he doesn't do it then he is not allowed access to the playstation or computer and that is surprisingly effective. The rules are clear and consistent (Victoria).*

Debra has a wet towel rule, that is: "*wet towels are to be placed in the laundry tub and dirty washing in the laundry basket*". She had no consequences to reinforce this but her daughter observed this rule most of the time. All the parents had talked about not liking

dirty dishes or 'mouldy food' left in the teen bedroom but only Mere has this as a specified rule. Mary's rules were minimal as she expresses: "*not really, just no old tissues, the real things are getting on at school and socialisation and being cheerful. The room is a minor detail*".

### **Support for the role: You are not totally on you own or are you?**

Parents mainly reported that they had the support of friends with children of a similar or older age. Andrea who was struggling with her role said her key supporters were her dog and her Mum. She also had a friend with a daughter of the same age who would give her "*not advice but moral support*". Andrea stressed that "*You are not totally on you own; I have a large group of friends that I could call on if I really needed to talk to somebody*". Although Andrea acknowledges the potential support out there, from what she said she had been through "*a rough eighteen months*" and had not used this support system. Previously Andrea's expression of '*to be alive at the end of it*' revealed how draining parenting can be. Andrea found that her mother had been "*very poor and unable to provide much for me so she has done a lot, and bought a lot for the granddaughter to make up for the guilt, she even goes into the messy bedroom*".

Liminal described his partner as a key support person and how they discussed and shared the parenting role. Mere's experience was different to this:

*It is hard to be a parent because my husband does not do the same. I am also trying to teach him to be a better parent as well. He has come from a very hard family, very disciplinary and very staunch religious people and he tends to be very confrontational and oversteps the boundaries so it's very hard for me to keep the balance. I am the key holding the family together in the most stable way (Mere).*

Bobbi found a great source of support was again "*friends who had children the same age, just so we can say we've had similar experiences*". Bobbi demonstrated that the parent gains reassurance from knowing that they are not alone in what they are experiencing and that other people's teens are doing similar things.

Several parents commented on the lack of understanding from the workplace of the importance of the needs of the adolescent. There was no mention of feeling the support

of society at large and the sense was given that the raising of teens is the responsibility of the parent/s and some extended family and a few friends for comfort. Two participants referred to the help they had from Parentline, a telephone service for parents. Mere was involved in a phone network of friends when her children were younger but she comments that she seemed to have the role of teaching the others as they knew so little about parenting.

## **Conclusion**

Parents expressed their concerns wondering if they were competent in the role and a framework was given as a tool for the parent to evaluate this concern. The common desire for the parents was for the teen to develop more responsibility for themselves. The teenagers were seen as pushing the boundaries.

These findings show the seemingly haphazard ways that parents learn their job of parenting. Sources of knowledge for developing the parent role with teens come mainly from their own parents, their own experiences and reading. Although society at large recognises the need for education for people new to the role of parenting the new job of parenting a teen is overlooked.

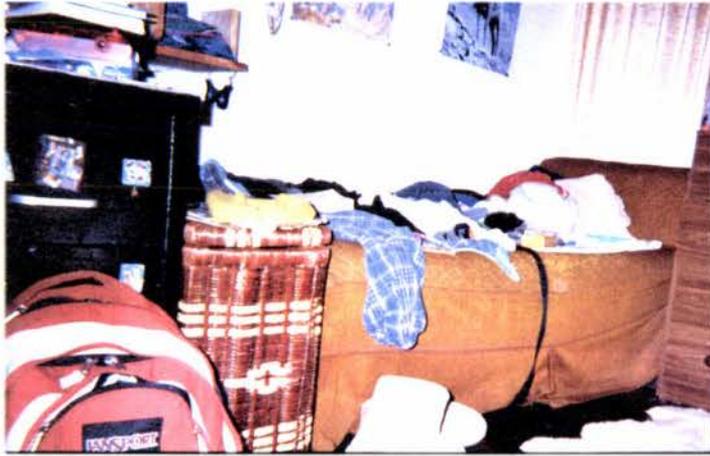


Illustration 7. Everything handy

## Chapter Seven: “It takes a village to raise a child”

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### Introduction

“Parenting is not a didactic intellectual thing, you learn parenting by watching and doing” Mary Gordon (Radio Interview, 2004).

“Parents are gasping on the beaches of different parenting models, anxious, competitive and unsure” (Pryor, 2004:19).

“Parent’s hold the future of this country in their hands” Parenting Council (Media release 20 March, 2003:1).

“Society undervalues the challenging task of parenting” (Atwool 2005:235).

These quotations capture and contextualise the parallel issues of how the role of parent is generally learnt and how it is supported, acknowledged and nourished by society. This chapter analyses the findings on parenting from the previous chapter. An analysis of how a parent defined and learnt the parent role and what support and education they had for being a parent of teens, are aspects considered in this chapter.

### Being Heard

In this study the messy bedroom appeared as a safe and non-threatening topic around which to focus the discussion of the participants’ ideas on parenting. Karp (1991, cited in Rice & Ezzy, 1999) has found that almost all participants find the in-depth interview experience rewarding. In this study all, except one, of the participants, spontaneously commented on how they had enjoyed the interview and found it helpful to be able to talk about and to reflect on being a parent. The parents were able to realise that they were not ‘the only one’ and that parents as a group/community struggle to deal with the everyday issues in the family. The interview can be seen as a validation of the work of the parent. The parents were interested in the use of the thesis and if a wider audience would hear their voice. The parents have experienced an opportunity for consciousness raising, which as Friere (1972) and Ife (1995) point out is at its most powerful and effective when it is located in the realities of day to day life.

## **Cultural Differences**

Though the data is gathered from a small sample of participants this represented a range of cultures from Maori, North American, Pakeha New Zealander, and Dutch/Pakeha. There were few differences in the responses from each different ethnicity; in fact there was a remarkable similarity in responses which revealed similar joys, issues and concerns for parents of teens. One point of difference was the naming by the Maori participants of spirituality as an important dimension in parenting. Fletcher (2002) presented spirituality as a thread to consider in the parenting role when he found that fathers in some cultures had named spirituality as a key responsibility.

## **Parents want to do well**

Despite the problems and challenges of parenting teens, a major theme which emerged from the participants and the literature was the potential pleasure and enjoyment of living and working with teenagers as they grow and develop into adults (Cosby 1986, Elliot et al. 2000, Munford & Sanders 1999, Owens 1995). Throughout the stories the parents shared it is very clear that parents want to do well and that they care about the job they are doing. *“I love being a parent; the challenge of watching him grow is amazing”* (Victoria).

As Fuller (2002) says parents do not wake up saying, today I will be a bad parent. Parents struggle with feeling guilty (Fuller 2004) and try to rationalise the tension between the image of the ‘ideal’ parent and parenting in reality. Phillips (1986) raised the idea of this often unrealised internal conflict that parents face. The parents’ self-concept and self-esteem is impacted by the way they negotiate this tension. I think that this shows that parents need opportunities to talk about their ideals and to gain a clear perception about what is realistic for them in their individual situation. Parents are struggling with trying to be the ‘perfect’ parent along with the other roles they have such as career person, sports person, creative person, homemaker. Bobbi’s concern for others judging her competency as a parent based on their perception of the behaviour of the teen is telling. Edwards (1989), Mellor & Mellor (2004) realise that parents want to do the best they can for their children.

The teen also wants the parent to do well. Mellor & Mellor expressed this well:

The secret is: teenagers want us (their parents and other adults) to succeed in managing, guiding, teaching, protecting and nurturing and supporting them, no matter how much they pretend otherwise (Mellor & Mellor 2004:66).

In this research I found that the parents reported that when they were clear about their decisions, they experienced a greater sense of control and less tension in the relationship with the teenager.

Attachment theory provides useful constructs for understanding the parent child relationship. Atwool (2005) explains that attachment to caregivers/parents provides the context in which development takes place. Attachment is identified as one of the behavioural systems operating in the parent/child relationship. Evans & Connolly (2005) emphasise how the internal organisation of emotion and behaviour emerges from the childhood years and continues through to adolescence. The security teens feel in the relationship with their parent is connected to the way the parent has been available and willing to care for the adolescent. Atwool (2005) notes that good attachment experiences are seen to generate confidence that adults will respond to the child positively. Adults will also have developed internal working models of attachment and differing capacities to respond to the challenges of parenting. In the teenage years these challenges can intensify and parents who have managed well up till this time are surprised at the tension that can emerge and question their ability to cope. The parents in this study referred to the few years prior to the 13-15 years as a time when parenting seemed straightforward and they felt they had developed as a competent parent. Then another change occurs during the early teenage years that force the parent to re-evaluate their position. In this research no attempt was made to assess attachment styles as the parents were interviewed without their teenagers present but it could be an area for future research. Attachment theory though provides a means of analysing the behaviour when either party is experiencing insecurity in the relationship.

## **The Parent/Teen Relationship**

The participant parents in this research ranged from 34 years to 55 years. Seven parents were between 34 and 42 years of age. One parent was 55 years. The 40-65 year age group is categorised as middle adulthood with the mid-life transition happening around 40 years (Harris, 2005). This phase of life is seen as a time when reflection on life occurs and there is an increase in awareness of the passage of time. Levinson (1978) considered that the mid-life transition was a time of emotional turbulence but more recent studies have disagreed with this. Eisler & Ragsdale (1992) describe how career development peaks at the end of this stage and there is often a shift of energy from the career to concerns about the family and the well being of society.

The parent of a teen is often in this mid-life stage of development where they are evaluating the possibilities of their life, noticing their physical decline, and re-evaluating their own opportunities and challenges. At the same time they are parenting a teen who is also coping with physical changes and beginning to identify future life directions. The parent often needs to put more time into their career whilst balancing the amount of time they are prepared to commit to their teen. McDonald et al. (1999) identify key issues that parents are potentially dealing with as: time, career, physical changes, and financial security. Some of the parents had difficulty adapting to the teenager emerging as a separate identity that might compromise the parents' identity. As Siegel identified the teenage years as a time that can bring to the fore a further layer of unresolved issues in the parents past "that can easily be triggered in the parent child relationship" (Siegel, 2003:14).

I notice that teenagers are encouraged at school to develop their own opinions and to question and challenge information that is presented to them and this approach is also applied to questioning and challenging the ideas of their parents. Teenagers now have access to information via the Internet, and targeted teen television programmes that provide them with knowledge of international styles and trends. Parents have not experienced this easy access to information or the intense advertising pressures when they were teens, and were more used to accepting the information provided by authority figures such as parents and teachers, and now, often feel challenged if their role is questioned by their teens.

Laursen, Coy, & Collins, (1998) propose that gradual realignments occur in the parent/teen relationships and relations are not as “bitter or contentious as widely assumed”. Laursen et al. (1998) and Coleman & Henry (1990) observe that parents interpret their teenagers’ behaviour, decide on a course of action and communicate with them differently depending on their own level of development. Ironically Steinberg (2001) claims that research has shown that adolescence also is not a turbulent or difficult for the youngsters as was once believed.

### **Learning the Parent Role**

Bornstein (1998) describes parenting as a process that formally begins at birth and continues through the lifespan. The parenting phase in the messy teenage bedrooms study focussed on parenting a teenager aged 13-15 years. The literature suggests that the typical question posed by parents when they feel stressed is “Am I doing it right?” (Fuller, 2002, Mellor & Mellor, 2004, and McDonald et al. 1999, Yancy 1998). Parents can find parenting a teen a turbulent time that challenges them both cognitively and emotionally as they work out how to do their best. Issues that parents struggle to form a clear perspective on are: changes in the attitudes of teens and the lack of clarity of the job of parent.

As discussed in Chapter Five the participants described several ways they had learnt the role of parenting teens. The participants identified their own parents as the major source of knowledge on parenting teenagers. Other sources identified were: talking things over with trusted peers, learning from your partner, learning from prior experiences with older children, studying from books or courses on parenting and from watching other role models such as sports coaches. Participants did not mention learning parenting from television programmes on families, though there have been many rather idealistic programmes.

If the parent draws on the previous generation for knowledge of parenting teens there is an element of chance about being exposed to an effective role model. The parents who have experienced less effective parenting models need to somehow construct new models of parenting if they wish to carry out the role more effectively. Society is reliant

on this hit or miss method of transferring what previously might have been described as common sense knowledge. It is important for the parent to have a clear understanding of their job as Strom, Van Marche, Beckert, Strom, & Griswald (2003) maintain that the greater satisfaction that the parent feels in their role the more committed they will remain to it and not cut the adolescent adrift. An outcome that the parents desired, in the messy bedroom study, was for the teenager to develop responsibility for themselves. This is consistent with Bornstein (1998), Grant (2003) who identified the development of self responsibility is as a key outcome that parents strive to achieve.

The contextual features of the changing social environment make the parenting situation today different from that experienced by the parent participants in their teenage years. These new situations create new dilemmas for both the parent and teen to negotiate. The changed use of the bedroom, safety issues, use of electronic equipment and the pressure from more intense marketing of goods to the teenager are all issues to work through. Coleman (2001) identifies that parents of teens are more isolated, than in earlier stages of parenting, as they no longer meet at the school and therefore receive less support from their peers as there is no obvious gathering space to share ideas. Parents could therefore benefit from some understanding of models of parenting such as Bornstein's (1998) analysis in which he identifies nurturant, material, social and didactic caregiving as key parental activities. This knowledge could provide a framework which the parent could use to evaluate their parenting and lessen the possible concern with doing the job right. The use of Bornstein's model would give them an insight into what they were doing and what they could be adding into their work with their children.

### **State of Parenting Knowledge Today**

Bill Cosby, the comedian, academic, and author of parenting books, writes:

In spite of the six thousand manuals on child raising in bookstores, child raising is a dark continent and no one really knows anything. Having five children has taught me a truth ...there are no absolutes in raising children. In any stressful situation the parent has a 50% chance of being right. The game may be messy but I have never found one with more rewards and joys. You just need a lot of love and luck and of course courage (Cosby 1986:18).

This quotation captures the feeling several participants expressed; that in the end it is up to them to work out what is appropriate for their family and their teen. They also felt that they would benefit from additional knowledge. Parents in the study said that they wanted to know more. Fuller (2002) highlighted that parenting is more than a package of skills and techniques and that at the heart of parenting is the relationship. Munford and Sanders highlight the “overwhelming effect of not feeling competent and the liberation that comes from success” (Munford and Sanders, 1999:14).

Although there is this multitude of ‘how to’ books, I think that what is less apparent is the discussion of the philosophies, principles and attitudes that underpin parenting. In this study a few participants were able to put their overarching parental philosophy into words. Philosophies, principles and attitudes are the subject of much discussion and analysis in professional occupations, such as social work, counselling and medicine. If parents had easy access to informed analysis then they would find it easier to make choices on how to proceed with the skills of parenting.

### **Media Interest in Parenting**

In New Zealand we are bombarded in the media with endless discussions and theorising about what works with our national sport rugby. Rugby fans, players and coaches have many opportunities to reflect and consider different styles of coaching and playing, and what works for different players, different weather conditions and against different opponents. Imagine if the topic of parenting was given this amount of analysis and discussion in the media. Parenting is an activity in which more people are engaged compared to rugby. The regular inclusion of discussion on rugby in the media indicates the value that it is given in New Zealand society. If a fraction of this attention was given to parenting then this would represent public acknowledgement and appreciation of the work that parents undertake in raising children. It would also provide a public forum for debate on the concepts, strategies and styles of parenting. One example of how the media could do this is with regular columnists addressing the topic of parenting as did Misa (2004, in *The New Zealand Herald*).

## **Making Sense of the Emotions**

One way of making sense of the emotional roller coaster experienced by some parents is to analyse the situation in terms of the classic Anger Model developed by Jones & Banet (1976). This model is relevant as it presents a process for making sense of the cognitions that shape a person's emotions. This model is developed from Behavioural theory which links cognition with feelings and behaviour. Prior approaches expounded in the 50s and 60s, as ways of working with anger were to suppress it as it was a 'bad' feeling, then in the 1970-1980s the venting method was favoured. Jones & Banet (1976) presented a model, which 'processes' anger and this approach is still used in many disciplines today.

The Jones & Banet (1976) Anger Model consists of three steps that are used to unravel the process of how a person comes to experience negative or angry feelings. Jones & Banet (1976) maintain that to experience anger a person responds to stimulus with the cognitive pattern as described in the model. A person can make sense of their feeling by slowly going back over the process so they are then able to reframe their thoughts or to identify more potential power that they could harness. The first step in the model is to identify the triggering of your emotion. This is described as the individual feeling a threat. The second step is to process the assumptions that the person makes and the final step in the process is the person assessing the power they have to deal with the perceived threat. Jones & Banet (1976) maintain that depending on how powerful or powerless the person assesses himself or herself to be determines the intensity of the emotion they experience. The more powerful they feel the less strength of anger, the more powerless they feel the more anger they experience. A person who feels they have the ability to take successful action will respond with a degree of calm whilst a person who feels powerless will experience a degree of anger. This model works on the belief that a person is responsible for his or her own feelings and to understand this they need to be able to analyse how a negative feeling is triggered for them.

Applied to the messy teenage bedroom scenario a picture often emerges of emotional engagement. From the participants' narratives a typical fear/threat described was the fear of "am I doing a good parenting job". The parent possibly will not be aware that this thought maybe undermining them on their ability to parent, the job that they want to

do well, and causing their uneasiness. The parent can attribute the cause of their feeling to the messy bedroom or to the teen making them angry without connecting the underlying explanation for their feelings of threat. Some parents identified their own emotional responses but did not explicitly connect them to their own fear about their parenting abilities. Bobbi noticed that she was bothered that the messy bedroom did not bother her partner. Jones & Banet (1976) maintain that the difference in emotional responses evolves from an individual's past experiences.

The second step in the model is analysing the assumptions that the person made and then checking out if there is evidence to support this assumption. The sort of assumptions that have been expressed by the participants are: "My mother wouldn't think I'm doing it right", "the teen doesn't respect me", "I'm the only one", "I am a bad parent", "I just want it all over with", and "messiness is equal to badness". These thoughts when analysed for accuracy are generally found to have a flimsy foundation. According to the model once the person has processed their thoughts they feel more in control and become more objective about the situation to hand. The third step in the model is the power assessment. The possible responses to deal with the situation of the messy bedroom are many and varied. Liminal has chosen to not be concerned or to see it as a threat. Others feel there is nothing more they can do and feel angry. Ideally the parent needs to be able to explore a range of strategies that they could put in place which would help them feel more competent and not under threat. Of course for the parent to be able to do this they need to know how they think and feel as a parent and to have a range of strategies at their fingertips. For those parents who are upset by the messy teen bedroom, a defusing of this feeling will open the door to a better experience and appreciation of the parent/teen relationship.

Another means of understanding the emotional responses of either the parent or the child can be sought from attachment theory. From this perspective the greater security experienced in the relationship the more tolerance each person has for each others differences. While attachment theory tends to focus on the formation of the attachment bond in infancy there has been recognition that attachment styles are not rigid but are open to influences across the lifespan (Harris, 2005). So during the teenage years secure relationships can be developed with a range of people within the life of the teen.

Strategies for empowering positive feelings can revolve round three key areas: changes to the self, changes to the environment or changes to the other. The solutions that I heard around the messy bedroom mainly involve changing the other, in this case, the teen. Changes to self (parent) or the environment are fruitful areas for the parent to explore. I found that the parents who took ownership of their response to the messy bedroom were more able to analyse the issue and realise that they had a choice of responses. I had also noticed this in working in parenting education that the more options a parent has the more confidence they feel in the role, and this confidence projects to the teen helping them to also feel confident.

In this study one participant gradually became aware that she was troubled by her daughter's messy room the more she talked about the messy bedroom scenario. It is more likely for a person to identify their feelings when they are given time to explore emotions and to reflect on their joys and concerns. It provides the opportunity for their feelings to emerge and cognitive connections to be made and as Seigel (2003) presents it is the self understanding that a parent develops that can help develop a thriving relationship with the teen. I think this demonstrates how useful it could be for parents to have a mentor, or similar, with whom they could meet and talk through their thoughts and feelings around being a parent in everyday situations. Given this opportunity parents could have more opportunities to discuss their concerns and as Jones & Banet (1976) suggest, identify possible triggers and assumptions, or attributions that they are making that generate negative feelings and to interpret these in more empowering ways as they identify the strengths they have to work with all the everyday family situations.

### **Parenting of Teenagers is Different to Parenting Younger Children**

The parents' stories reinforced the concept in Fuller (2002) and Mellor & Mellor (2004) that the parent role changes when children become teenagers. A general belief is that if you can parent younger children then you have mastered the parenting role. But the participants revealed that the parenting of teens requires further development and adaptation of the skills and knowledge of parenting. Coleman & Roker (2001) identify that not only does the adolescent stage have different characteristics but that parents of teenagers themselves are in a different emotional and social world. It became apparent

that the parent found that role clarity was required as the teen will challenge decisions that the parent makes and a parent can feel personally challenged if they do not have a considered philosophy of parenting.

The role of parenting teenagers provides different challenges to parenting infants, toddlers and those less than 10 years of age. In this younger age bracket there are many support services and educational programmes (e.g. S.K.I.P and P.A.F.T) for the establishment of confident and effective parenting in the everyday family but limited programmes available for parents of teens. One used within the Child Adolescent and Family mental health units is the evidence based The Incredible Years which is used for working with teenagers.

In the 80s the label given to the first challenging phase in child development was the “terrible twos”. Today there is an increased understanding of the parent/child relationship at the 2 year old stage and this term is now used with less fear as the strategies to deal with it are better understood. The current challenge for parents is in the teen years and it seems the “turbulent teens” have gained a similar reputation as a time of difficulty for the parent. With the development of further education and understanding of this relationship by both parents and teens then this label may also become less favoured.

### **Invisibility of the Role of Parents**

The literature revealed that the work of parents is invisible in the media unless something goes seriously wrong. The successful work of parents is rarely commented on in any forum. Reymer (2005) found in a survey of the members of the organisation Parents as Partners that 96% felt that their parenting work was not recognised or given value by the state, or by society. The participants in this study made similar statements about being recognised more in their other activities such as volunteer, student or work roles. The view that parenting is undervalued is widespread and reflected in the statement from the Parenting Council (2003), that it is time that status and interests of parents were accorded the same attention as business, the environment and cultural issues. This subjective experience connects with the words of Ife (1999) who draws

attention to the reconstruction of reality that is needed for those who are experiencing structural disadvantage as parents are the lack of recognition within the macro systems.

### **Parents Want More Support**

A key finding was the parents had support from just a small circle of family and friends. Though there are an increasing number of organisations providing parental support, such as Barnados, Parents' Centre, Parenting with Confidence, Parents as Partners, they are available in larger towns and are not able to serve the whole parenting population. This study confirmed the finding of Mellor & Mellor (2004) that parents rarely ask for help and that they would like more support and recognition. Gordon (2004) maintains that the support of parents has positive outcomes that have a high return as:

Society needs to hold parents in their hands to support parents ...social and emotional learning impacts on academic learning in kids, educationalists know that the higher level of satisfaction in daily relationships the more easily we learn, parents understand this (Gordon, Radio Interview 30 Nov. 2004.).

Parents' expectations have changed as is shown in the modification of the mission statement for a parenting organisation, Parents' Centre New Zealand, from 1976 which reads "...to help equip parents for their demanding but rewarding role, and to help them establish sound family relationships thus giving their children the best possible start in life" (Bulletin, June,1976:2), to now in 2004 the mission is to aim for "...informed parenting in a community where parents are supported and highly valued" (Parents Centre N.Z. 2004). The change in the mission statements demonstrates how parents want recognition and support for this parenting role. Parents today are living and coping in a world in which being a parent is one of many roles an individual is expected to undertake. I found that since the 80s parent roles have changed quite dramatically with the increased sharing between the mother and the father of the parenting role. Responsibility for making decisions, providing emotional and cognitive support and material support such as transport, shelter, food and clothes is shared by both parents in a two parent family. Tapp (1998) also identifies the dilemma of parenting as a private issue or a collaborative role between the individual the community and the state. Minority groups are often in need of additional support as Ward (2005) notes with her work with the Refugees and Migrants Service with the resettlement refugees face

changes in family structure, roles and altered informal networks. "Refugee parents are a particularly disempowered group that critically need help to develop their parenting skills in a new cultural context" (Ward, 2005:15).

### **Policy and Parenting**

Bronstein (1998) states that society needs to focus on the parent role as this is the key means of nurturing children through to develop into coping and competent adults. Today's social changes have led to policy creating quality childcare services which enable parents to take time out from the parenting role to build the other roles in their lives during the early years of parenting. To some extent the stringent rules and regulations for childcare for the under 5's as detailed in the Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations 1998, give some recognition to the role of parenting young children. In these regulations minimum of standards are set for a range of areas such as: hygiene regulations, number of staff, qualifications of staff, amount and range of learning equipment and so forth are clearly defined.

Actioning the policies proposed in the MSD (2002) report, Building Resilience, could have tremendous value for teenagers. However as the role of the parents is barely addressed in this report it would be useful to develop a further report that identifies strategies that would assist parents and recognise the role they have in raising teenagers. The Parenting Council (2003) wants all government policy to acknowledge and reflect the needs of parents giving parents a voice at the decision making table. Their ideal is:

For politicians to create a vision for parenting that is the envy of the world and that they work with the Council to make it a reality.  
(Parent Council Information Pack, p1. Feb. 2003).

It seems as if there is a long way to go to achieve the policy support that these representative parenting organisations see as a right of parents. The Parenting Council currently is endeavouring to provide policy advice and direction to government. The Families Commission is still in the early stages of development and is gathering material about parenting and developing some priorities.

For parents who struggle financially the emphasis has tended to be on solving the economic and housing issues, and assuming that if the family is relieved of these problems the parent-child relationship will be more effective. There is no denying that solving the financial issues relieves some of the pressure from the parent/teen relationship but it fails to recognise that parenting is more than providing food and shelter. It would seem ideal if the parenting process and relationship could be seen as important as housing, health and employment issues and also given some priority in policies.

### **Lack of Focus on Everyday Parenting in Research**

Discussion of messy teenage bedrooms is more evident in popular magazines and websites than professional journals. Whilst reviewing the literature for this study I found it very difficult to find research on the everyday life of families with teenagers. This suggests that the everyday/commonplace experiences of families are of less interest to the research communities of social work, education, justice and health compared to the traumatic or deviant experiences. Research literature reveals that in the social science sector the focus is on problems for the teenager/adolescent such as drug abuse, truancy, teenage pregnancy, youth suicide, low academic achievement and so forth. Funding drives areas of research, and it appears that research resources are targeting the amelioration of social problems rather than building on the unproblematic situations. A common feature in the literature is the overwhelming focus on the teenager with little attention given, maybe a few paragraphs or a chapter, directly to the parent.

The lack of focus on the everyday suggests that the skills of parenting are treated as being common knowledge. This has the effect of diminishing the parental role and creating a less sharp vision of a parent. While this was a small study it raised questions for future research that would focus on the everyday experiences of parents so ways of support could be identified which would enhance the work that parents undertake.

### **Conclusion**

The contexts of parenting today are influential in contributing to how a parent views their work as a parent. The assumption that parenting happens naturally was questioned

and the parent was shown as wanting to do well but felt the lack of support from society in the way of recognition and support for their role. The emotional roller coaster of parenthood was examined and a model applied which provided some insight into the concerns of parents. The lack of educational programmes for parents of teens was discussed and the haphazard way that parents today acquire their knowledge of parenting. In the final chapter the overview of the findings are presented and recommendations for further research and support for parents are proposed.



Illustration 8: Clear boundaries

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusions “Shutting the door”**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the research findings drawing together the threads of complexity that contribute to an understanding of the messy teenage bedroom and parenting. The messy teenage bedroom provided a typical situation in which parent and teenager have different concerns and interests, and abilities to appreciate the reasons behind the reactions of the other, as each endeavours to feel competent in the corresponding roles of parent and teenager. This study highlights the complexity of the relationship and some of the conflicting perspectives between parent and teen. The chapter links the literature and theoretical perspective and includes recommendations for those who work with parents, and for future research. It concludes with a personal statement.

### **The research question revisited**

The purpose of this study has been to unravel the relevance of the messy teenage bedroom and to use this phenomenon to explore the role of parenting teens. The scope of this research was to explore how parents make sense of the parent role in terms of their attitudes, beliefs, emotions and behaviours linked to their teenager’s messy bedroom. The focus was on the parental perspective of the messy bedroom though this research was also informed with some insight of the adolescent perspective of the messy bedroom. As I too am a parent I needed to consider my personal experiences.

The private experiences and interpretations of the participants were located in the broader social context and highlighted by the perspective of critical social theory in that social structures are seen to have shaped the daily lived experiences of the parenting role. The personal and private issues for parents of teens have been brought into focus as a public issue that can have support and solutions to improve the support that parents of teens currently have. The sense of marginalisation of the everyday parent through the research emphasis on the traumatic, and through the lack of recognition and valuing of the work of the parent in society at large was experienced by the participants in this

research. I believe is not the intention of policy makers, or society at large, to marginalise parenting. The increasing rate of change, the growing significance of difference and the opening up of individual choice and freedom that Parton & Marshall (1998) argue has occurred, has weakened community responsibility for raising children.

A stated aim of this research was to provide an impetus for change. My intention was to bring attention to the role of parenting teens and to enable parents to clarify their work as parents and enable greater satisfaction and enjoyment from the relationship for both parent and teenager. In this way I would be an advocate, along with other researchers, for the parent voice to be heard.

### **The Messy Teenage Bedroom – No Miracle Cure**

I found that the messy teenage bedroom is more prevalent than in the previous generation, and that parents are wondering how to manage the situation. The tendency was to see the messy teenage bedroom as a problem that needs fixing, and that it is a sign of something not quite right. When people heard that the topic of this study was the ‘messy teenage bedroom’ they usually assumed that I was aiming to provide some solutions to achieving a tidy teenage bedroom. I did not seek an answer to changing messy bedrooms into neat and tidy bedrooms but sought to use this phenomenon as a window through which to focus on the parenting of teenagers. This approach was very successful and provided a focus for the parents to structure their thoughts and feelings about their parenting work. The ideas shared by the parents though anchored to the messy bedroom example were generalised to the breadth of the role of parent.

I found that messy teenage bedrooms were found to be a typical scenario that teenagers were happy about but the parents had more difficulty accepting. The parents were able to rationalise that the bedroom was a space for the teenager to call their own, where they could experiment with teen identity formation and yet given the choice the parents preferred tidiness. The parents interpreted the messy bedroom in different ways, some of which increased anxiety for the parent. The parents recognised that life was different for teenagers today. The analysis of the messy bedroom was carried out by locating the

emergent themes within the social context of changed attitudes and lives for teens today, and in considering the developmental needs of both the teen and the parent.

I conclude that the messy teenage bedroom is an issue for the parent but not the teen. It is therefore a question that the parent needs to explore, with some awareness of the parenting role, to understand why they could be troubled by mess and to develop strategies to cope. At the beginning of this thesis I chose to use the popularly used phrase the 'messy teenage bedroom' which infers the mess belongs to the teenager. By popularising the use of the words in a reordered way, as the teenage messy bedroom the focus could shift the messiness to the bedroom and its place in the way we live today, and not on the teenager.

### **Parenting Teens**

In this study the notion that the role of parenting teenagers is an activity that comes naturally is challenged. When I emphasised that I was researching the role of parenting teens, people's attention still stayed with 'the messy teenage bedroom'. It seemed that this was a vivid visible topic that they could easily connect with, in contrast to the less tangible more elusive topic of being a parent. The experience of the messy bedroom capturing peoples' imagination while parenting was forgotten reminded me how difficult it is to keep the role of parenting as the point of discussion. It seems parenting is to be something rather taken for granted as something everyone does. It is rather like not seeing the 'wood for the trees'.

I found that parents learn the role of parenting teens. Parents learn from a range of sources, mainly from their own parents, and then from trusted peers, and for a few from reading. This study confirmed the view from the literature that parents of teens want to do well; they want good outcomes for their teens and often experience emotional turbulence in trying to do their best. The emotional and cognitive findings were analysed with the use of Jones & Banet's (1976) Anger Model and was linked to the theory of relationships known as attachment theory.

The position of parents in society was discussed with consideration of the expectations on parents while at the same time the sidelining of the work of parenting teens despite the pleas from the Parenting Council and others to support parents.

It was found that it is relatively easy for parents to seek support in the start up phase of the family by attending some form of ante-natal education or gaining information from family members or professionals. However in later stages of family life parenting support is not as readily available. There are many parenting programmes for parents of preschoolers such as, the Early Start, Parents as First Teachers, Triple P, and Skills for Kids Information for Parents. In New Zealand in the 2003/2004 financial year government funded parenting programmes reached approximately 14,000 families at the cost of over \$30.5 million (Hendricks & Balakrishnan, 2005). The Families Commission's review of parenting programmes recommends that a careful analysis of the needs of families and those working with parents should be undertaken to ensure effectiveness in the direction of any further parenting programmes (Hendricks & Balakrishnan, 2005). This review focuses on parenting the young child and did not mention the potential need for parents of teenagers. However due to the complex and profound changes happening in adolescence parents often need new knowledge and enhanced skills to carry out their role. Further as Davis & Day (2001:124) describe parents seem reluctant to seek help when needed as:

Parenting tends to be construed as natural, and any difficulties are frequently attributed to or blamed on the parents, without taking into account the individuality of the child, the uniqueness of the interaction between the parent and child, and the whole context of their relationship.

Parenting teens must be regarded as a serious job, a challenging job and a potentially rewarding <sup>one</sup> for the parent, the teen and society. Gilling (1984), and Grant (2003), emphasise the critical role that parents undertake that contributes to the well being of society and yet this is not overtly addressed by systems and policies. The findings of this study suggest that more support is wanted by parents and information around the work of parenting teens.

The findings emerging from this thesis provide several important features that could be focussed on to provide change for the benefit of parents and teenagers and in supporting

them this would enhance the well being of society in general. The features that have been discussed in this thesis are that parenting teens is different to parenting younger children, that everyday parenting of teens is barely visible in the media or research, that parents need support at the everyday level not just in crisis times. A notable feature impacting on parents was the increased complexity of parenting due to the novel features of the changed social context. Parents need knowledge about themselves, role models of parents, knowledge of today's context, knowledge of teenagers and knowledge of a wide range of parenting strategies.

In this study it is apparent that parenting is a passionate experience and that parents would value greater acknowledgement and support for their work, that at times they struggle to do effectively. They wanted recognition from society that they in their efforts to raise capable and confident teenagers they were contributing to a social benefit for the broader community. If this group who were able to provide security of food and accommodation find parenting so challenging then what is the experience like for others?

Involvement with this research process for both the participants and the researcher has brought attention to, and increased the awareness of the reality of the situation, and to some degree energised a re-orientation, and stimulated ways of working to create change. Friere (1972) describes this process as conscientization. Through the process of reflection and looking critically at one's world in dialogical contact both the researcher and participants have had the opportunity to gradually "perceive his personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his own reality and deal critically with it" (Shaul, 1972).

The role of parent is a specific one in society and the development of positive models of parenting to prepare people for, and assist them in, this important and taken for granted role would be beneficial for parents. The Parenting Council voiced the need to reclaim the parenting role from the current trend to be assigned a more 'hobby status'. An understanding of the different styles of parenting, how the parenting identity is formed, as well as a range of practice skills, could contribute towards more informed choices for the parent. In this study parents expressed the range of emotions and the anxiety and stress that came from parenting teens. More support from the community at large and an

increase in the breadth of educational information could increase confidence and lessen parental anxiety.

It is important to emphasise the value of working with marginalized groups, in this case parents, to achieve effective changes in the education and support for everyday parenting (Baillie, Basset-Smith, Asen, & Hewitt. 2004; Ife, 1995; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 1999). If parents are not included in such developments then parents are disempowered and undervalued in their contribution to society once again. Parents are the group responsible for carrying out the work of parenting for society. Collaboration between parents, researchers and educators needs to go beyond superficial community involvement.

Mere sums the situation up well when she says:

*There is a real need in society for parents to be educated about teenagers and to be supported through being educated about what teenagers are like, and what they do and I think parents need support, so we are so stressed out and you need to let go. No-one teaches us how to be parents do they? It is a very difficult thing. How can we prioritise parenting? (Mere).*

### **Parenting Education for Professionals**

The way in which the professional roles of others involved with the lives of teenagers are learnt, such as teachers, career counsellors, and social workers, is vastly different from the way in which the role of parenting is learnt. Also the attention given in professional education to learning about parenting is very little. I have found for example that in social work education in New Zealand and Australia that the knowledge of parenting seems assumed to be known rather than formally taught. It seems that the assumption is made that we are all parents and therefore know about everyday parenting, that it is common knowledge that is accessible without the need to be researched or published. The professional is therefore in danger of basing their practice on the basis of knowledge gained from the research focus on the traumatic and dysfunctional which might not bear any relationship to everyday parenting.

I suggest that professionals need to become aware of the parent role as being more than a private activity, and to put to the forefront the valuable work that parents can potentially contribute to society. Support services are mainly available to parents when they are experiencing some difficulty. It would be interesting to see the effect of a support worker working with families when things go 'right' and assisted them with reflection and confidence building.

### **Parents as 'Professionals'**

From this study it has become apparent that professionals engaging with the family could enhance their work with parents through increased knowledge of the parenting teens role. Parenting can be prioritised by including knowledge of parenting adolescents in the educational programmes of those who work with teenagers such as teachers, youth workers and social workers. In this way the professionals' ability to work with parents would be enhanced. Social service professional bodies developed and articulated their skills, body of knowledge, and philosophies over many decades. Now teachers and social workers are recognised in society as fulfilling a critical role in society and for them to do this work effectively and safely they are required to undertake formal training and supervision. As established in this study, parents also fulfil a critical role in society. It would seem logical therefore that parents could also benefit from similar support systems such as having access to a knowledge base about parenting, and teens, a forum where these ideas could be shared and supervision could be provided together with a more formalised process of education and support. There would be significant gains for society if more of the key workers for teenagers, the parent/s, were reassured, confident and effective in the work that they are doing.

The parent has become obscured, at times invisible, and it is timely that more attention is now given to building a deeper appreciation of how parents of teenagers can be educated and supported by professionals and society at large. There is more to learn about how to parent, how the parent constructs their role, what is best practice in the work of being a parent in the various forms of family, and the multitude of cultural contexts. There is more to learn for those who work with families about the role of parent. Opportunities could be created for parents to share best practice.

I have presented an everyday family issue as a serious topic of research and in doing this I have affirmed the value of the everyday work of the parent. I argue that the everyday work of the parent is the area that needs the greatest emphasis. If a sound knowledge base of what constitutes effective everyday parenting is developed, and shared with parents of teens, then we could prevent and reduce the issues that exist at the seriously at risk end of the spectrum.

I have endeavoured to heighten the profile of parenting of teens with this study and believe that this has already been partially achieved by media interviews about this research and a paper I have presented to an international conference on social work. A further paper based on this research focussing on the stress of the parent role has been presented at an international psychology conference. I intend to publish several papers based on this study and plan presentations both in the academic and community sector. Two have been completed, one for social work professionals and another for the academic community.

### **Limitations of this Research**

This qualitative research was effective in producing rich data on the messy teenage bedroom and the parenting of teens. There are some limitations to be considered in this study. The sample was small and therefore any conclusions drawn from this work need to take this into account. There was a range of characteristics in the participants' age, ethnicity and gender, they were from socio-economic groups not experiencing serious financial hardship and therefore the responses cannot be generalised over all socio-economic groups. I am conscious of the need expressed by Fletcher (2002) to give fathers a voice. I included fathers in this study. I also note there is not just one voice from parents that there are multi-voices to be considered.

A focus group of parents before the individual interviews could have been useful to provide an opportunity for the parents to discuss their views and bounce ideas off one another.

## **Future Research**

The role of parent is such an integral part in the fabric of society that it seems that the role of parent is taken for granted; that it is normalised and therefore is not seen as a topic to be researched. However further research to clarify with parents of teens what they think would help them with the job of parenting is a step forward. It would seem appropriate if action research methods are used, as this is a dynamic form of research, in which a group with a particular issue become active participants in the change process in collaboration with a researcher (Patton, 1990). It should not be difficult to set up further research with parents and parent advocates to further changes in parenting knowledge and resources. It would be necessary to work in a collaborative and participative way with parents as a key stakeholder before proceeding with any developmental work. As the Board of Child, Youth and Family (2001) maintain there is an enormous gap between what is known about the effects of parenting on adolescents as it naturally occurs and what can be done to enhance it when parents struggle.

A further need is in the development of theory about parenting and the link to the practice of parenting as it is a complex and changing job. Further work could be done on exploring the similarities or differences of meaning that women or men bring to the role of parent.

The following recommendations emerging from this small study could be regarded as a beginning profile of the potential needs of parents.

## **Recommendations**

### **Research**

- That research on everyday family life is prioritised by the Families Commission and social science research funders.
- That research is undertaken on parenting the teenager in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- That research on parenting is father-inclusive.
- Examine what is needed to better understand the role that parents can play in the development and wellbeing of adolescents.

**Education**

- That a range of educational materials on parenting, congruent with different educational backgrounds and different ethnicities, be made available to parents of teens.
- That face-to-face or online educational programmes are made available to all parents.
- That parenting programmes for teens are developed.
- That social workers, youth workers are educated about parenting

**Support**

- That the existing parenting organisations are asked by government departments for ways in which government strategies can support the work of parents.
- That concerned government departments and the broader community move together to provide continued recognition and support to parents.
- That a supported system that links communities of parents of teens is created by M.S.D.
- That a network of mentors/coaches be created that are available for the everyday parent to access on a regular basis.

**Policy**

- That child and family policy is monitored for the impact it could have on the role of parent.
- That policy about teenagers is inclusive of the role of the parent.

## **Reflections from the Author**

Early in this study I found that people wanted to know what my personal interest in this topic was and did I have teens, and suffer from messy teenage bedrooms. I found I could no longer remember clearly whose room had been clean or tidy. When I explained that I did not recall any major issues with my own children as teens, and that this time as a parent had, on the whole, been enjoyable I sensed a disappointed reaction. I think that one son dying influenced my philosophy of parenting, as I then learnt to appreciate the children for who they were now, and reduce my focus on building dreams on future expectations of what they might become. I feel that this helped to take some of the tension out of our relationships.

I had not realised in choosing a thesis topic how much it would connect with my lifelong interest in parenting issues. I had been deeply involved in the parenting topic for many years but for the last ten years I had moved more to the edges. When I began this study I was not fully aware of the importance to me of what I was doing. I appreciated the narratives that the participants were prepared to share but then realised that I had the responsibility to do well by parents of teens in writing this thesis, and to take care not to undermine them but instead to be a helpful advocate for parents. My involvement in working on behalf of parents began after the birth of my fourth child more than thirty years ago and it seems that the recognition and the support for parents has only moved forward in a small section of the parenting role, the early years. I hope that this study contributes to some further attention to the parenting role in the years of parenting the teenager.

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## **Appendix One: Teen information**

1. Information sheet for teenagers

## THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

### Information Sheet for Teenagers

Sociology, Social Policy  
and Social Work

Private Box 756,  
Wellington,  
New Zealand

Telephone: 64 4 801 2794  
Facsimile: 64 4 801 2796

Thanks for your interest in the research project.

This research is being undertaken by Jenny Jakobs. I am a lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. I currently lecture in the Bachelor of Social Work programme.

I am interested in recruiting teenagers, 13–15 years of age, to form a discussion group. The group would meet once for approximately 2 hours. The group will meet in a classroom at the school. I think you will find it interesting to be a part of the discussion.

I want to listen to the comments and ideas that teenagers have about the topic of 'messy bedrooms'. I have found that parents tend to show a lot of interest and have many stories to tell when the subject of 'messy bedrooms' is raised. I would like to hear what your stories are. I look forward to a lively discussion in which ideas are exchanged, considered and reviewed.

My interest in this research comes from my observation that research has tended to focus on severe family problems and the everyday situation has been ignored. The aim of the project is to add to the knowledge about the parental perspective in raising adolescents, so parents and those working with parents, and can use this knowledge

The discussion will be audiotaped and brief notes may be taken during the discussion. Dr. Michelle Lunn will be present to take responsibility for the sound recording of the focus group. Checking that recording is taking place and replacing the tape as required.

Confidentiality processes will be followed in handling and storing the notes and audiotape.

The two supervisors of this project are Professor Robyn Munford and Dr. Mary Nash. They may be contacted at School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North. Phone (04) 8012794. ex 2825 and 2827.

You are invited to request a copy of the report summary when the project has been completed.

Please note that participants have these rights: -

- ◆ To decline to participate
- ◆ To refuse to answer any particular question
- ◆ To withdraw from the study at any time
- ◆ To ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- ◆ To provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you have given permission to the researcher
- ◆ To be given access to a summary of findings of the study when it is concluded.

If you are interested in participating in the focus group please fill in the attached form which provides me with contact details so I can phone your parent/guardian to seek approval for your involvement in the project. I will then send them an information sheet also.

Further details of time and place to meet will be supplied.

Thanks again for your interest.

Jenny Jakobs

For any further information please contact Jenny at:-

Jenny Jakobs  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
PO Box 756  
Wellington.

Phone (04) 8012794 Ex 6314

Email [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/42. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email [S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz).

Please fill in and return.

Volunteers Name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Just provide the most convenient number for contacting parent/guardian*

Home Phone

Work Phone

Mobile

For any further information please contact Jenny at:-

Jenny Jakobs  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
PO Box 756  
Wellington.

Phone (04) 8012794 Ex 6314

Email [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

## Consent Form

### THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate and I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. (The information will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project).

I understand that any features or characteristics that could identify me will be removed from the research results.

I understand that I may decline to answer any question at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audiotaped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audiotape to be switched off at any time.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date.

#### **The researcher statement.**

The participant has received a brief explanation of the research, what their participation will involve, and an explanation of how the published results will be used.

Name of Researcher: Jenny Jakobs

Signature of Researcher:

## **Appendix Two: The photographs**

1. Request for photographs
2. Information sheet for photographs
3. Messy bedroom photographs

# 'MESSY' TEENAGE BEDROOMS

## DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ONE?

If so, can you assist Jenny Jakobs by volunteering to take a photo of your teenagers bedroom. Jenny is seeking images to use as triggers in her research interviews.

Jenny is exploring the parental role in raising teenagers using the example of the teenage bedroom as a typical parenting scenario.

If you want to help collect a disposable camera from Myra at SSPSW Reception (Room 7C42) has so you can take a couple of pictures and then return the camera to her. Please ask the teenager's approval to image their room.

Thanks for you help.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/42. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email [S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz).

Please return to Myra Mckay (Reception SSPSW 7C42)

Hi all,

Do you have a 'messy teenage bedroom' that you could photograph for me?

If so, please take a few photos using the camera in this bag. Remember to use the flash if needed. Then return the camera to Myra.

I am seeking a selection of images to use as trigger pictures for the interviews I am doing for research on the parent role, and how a parent describes this through the interaction in the family around a messy bedroom.

In providing photographs for me to use I am taking this as consent to use the photos in parent interviews and in any research presentation.

Thanks for you help.

Jenny Jakobs

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/42. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email [S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz).

The photographs used in the interviews



The messy bedroom



Everything in its place



A lot of stuff



No visible carpet



Half-open drawers



On holiday



Everything handy



Clear boundaries

### **Appendix Three: Parent information**

1. Information sheet for parents
2. Consent form

## THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

### Information Sheet for Parents

Thanks for your initial interest in the research project.

This research is being undertaken by Jenny Jakobs. I am a lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. I currently lecture in the Bachelor of Social Work programme, specialising in teaching social and community work practice and community development. I have been involved and interested in parenting issues for over twenty years.

The two supervisors for this project are Professor Robyn Munford and Dr. Mary Nash. They may be contacted at School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North. Phone (04) 8012794. ex 2825 and 2827.

I am interested in recruiting parents of a teenager/s of between 13 -15 years of age. I am asking you to assist the research by participating in an interview with me. I am interested in having an interactive discussion with you on the topic of teenagers' messy bedrooms. You may feel strongly or mildly interested in the topic of messy rooms. In fact I think it would be interesting to have a wide range of reactions represented in the study. I will be considering the question of how parents see their role. In the interview I would like to talk with you about how you think, feel and act in response to your teenagers 'messy bedroom'. I look forward to a lively discussion in which ideas are exchanged, considered and reviewed.

I have had many interesting discussions with parents and groups of parents on this subject and now want to explore the subject in a more formal research process. I feel that the role of parenting the adolescent has been given little attention especially in terms of typical family life and that research has tended to focus on severe family problems. I think it is time that more work is done on functional family life rather than dysfunctional family life. The aim of the project is to add to the knowledge about the parental perspective in raising adolescents, so parents and those working with parents, and can use this knowledge. I anticipate that this will be a positive experience for you providing the opportunity to reflect on your role as parent and to increase your awareness of how you respond to this one particular example of parenting an adolescent.

The interview will be taped and brief notes may be taken during the interview. The interview will be from 1- 2 hours long. The location of the interview will be negotiated with the participant and could be at their home, or workplace or at Massey University, Wellington.

You will have the opportunity to change, refine or add to your comments at any stage during the interview process.

Once the interviews are completed the themes emerging from the interviews will be analysed and discussed. This information will be presented in a thesis report. It is anticipated that papers will be written on the results of the project, and presentations

given at relevant conferences. I envisage at some later date with some additional research publishing a book on parenting.

You will be asked to provide a fictitious name for yourself that will be used in the analysis and reporting on the project so that your anonymity is maintained. For confidentiality original transcripts and tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet at Massey and will be seen only by Jenny Jakobs and by a transcriber. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement. You are invited to request a copy of the report summary when the project has been completed.

Please note that participants have these rights: -

- ◆ To decline to participate
- ◆ To refuse to answer any particular question
- ◆ To withdraw from the study at any time
- ◆ To ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- ◆ To provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you have given permission to the researcher
- ◆ To be given access to a summary of findings of the study when it is concluded.

Jenny will contact you within the coming week to discuss your participation and if you agree to participate to make an appointment at a time convenient to you for the interview.

For any further information please contact Jenny at:-

Jenny Jakobs  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
PO Box 756  
Wellington.

Phone (04) 8012794 Ex 6314

Email [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/42. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Regional Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email [S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz).

## Consent Form

### THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate and I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. (The information will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project).

I understand that any features or characteristics that could identify me will be removed from the research results.

I understand that I may decline to answer any question at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audiotaped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audiotape to be switched off at any time.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date.

#### **The researcher statement.**

The participant has received a brief explanation of the research, what their participation will involve, and an explanation of how the published results will be used.

Name of Researcher: Jenny Jakobs

Signature of Researcher:

**Appendix Four: Interview Questions**

## **Background data and trigger questions used for the parent interviews.**

### 1. Parent information

- 1.1 Sole/multiple parent situation.
- 1.2 Step parent situation.
- 1.3 Age of participant.
- 1.4 Name for research use.

### 2. Adolescent information

- 2.1 Age
- 2.2 Gender Male/Female
- 2.3 Birth order
- 2.4 Number of siblings

### 3. Bedroom information

- 3.1 Location of bedroom./size of room
- 3.2 Shared/sole use of bedroom.

### 4. Discussion information.

- 4.1 What made you respond to the research ?
- 4.2 What do you feel about 'messy bedrooms'?
- 4.3 What would you call messy?
- 4.4 What bothers you about the messy room?
- 5.6 What assumptions do you make about the meaning of a messy bedroom?
- 5.7 What does your teenager think about it your point of view ?
- 5.8 What does your teenager think about their room?
- 5.9 How would you describe your teenager/s?
- 5.10 Are there any family rules about the bedroom? Eg food, friends , clothes, decoration on walls, making bed.
- 5.11 Does the teenager being male or female make a difference to your response?
- 5.12 How does your teenager use their bedroom?

### 5. Parent role section

Use this quote for comment on.

*'If adolescence is a turbulent, tempestuous, troubled time for teenagers, it can be just as much so for the parents as they struggle to master the strange world that their children have dragged them into.'*  
(Marris, 1996)

- 5.1 Tell me about how you see the parenting of adolescent role? What are you trying to achieve in this role?
- 5.2 How easy or hard is this to do?
- 5.3 Where do you get support from for your parenting role?
- 5.6 Adolescents' tend to have more possessions these days – do you think this is true?

## **Appendix Five: Ethics**

1. Ethics application
2. Ethical approval

Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair Miss Karen A Kahukoti, Secretary  
Telephone: 64 6 350 5249 Telephone: 64 6 350 5573  
Email: S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz Email: K.A.Kahukoti@massey.ac.nz



Private Bag 11 222,  
Palmerston North,  
New Zealand  
Telephone: 64 6 356 9099

6 September 2002

Ms Jennifer Jakobs  
PG Student  
Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
WELLINGTON

Dear Jennifer

**Re: HEC: PN Protocol – 02/42**  
**The role of parent of adolescents will be considered by exploring parental responses to a family experience that typically has some tension: The adolescent's messy bedroom**

Thank you for your letter received 4 September 2002 and the amended protocol.

The amendments you have made and explanations you have given now meet the requirements of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee and the ethics of your protocol are approved.

Any departure from the approved protocol will require the researcher to return this project to the Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North for further consideration and approval.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents "This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/42. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this project, please contact Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone 06 350 5249, email S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz."

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sylvia Rumball".

Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair  
**Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North**

cc Professor Robyn Munford  
Dr Mary Nash  
Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work  
TURITEA PN320

Application for approval of proposed research procedures involving human subjects to the:

**Massey University Human Ethics Committee**

**Name:** Jennifer Jakobs

**Status of Applicant:** Masterate Student

**Department:** School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

**Email:** [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

**Employment:** Lecturer, Massey University

**Project:** The role of parent of adolescents will be considered by exploring parental responses to a family experience that typically has some tension: the adolescent's messy bedroom,

**Project Status:** Master of Philosophy (Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work) Thesis

**Funding source:** Partnership Research Fund

**Clinical Trial Status:** No.

**Attachments:** Information Sheet A  
Information Sheet B  
Consent Form

**Supervisors:** Professor Robyn Munford  
Dr. Mary Nash

**Signatures:**

**Applicant**



**Supervisors**



R. Munford  
Mary Nash.

22/4/02

**Date:**

22 April 2002

## Proposed research procedures

### 1. DESCRIPTION

#### 1.1 Justification

The emphasis in the literature tends to be on providing advice and knowledge of the skills for parenting, and provides little attention to how individuals in the role of parent make sense of the role. In an attempt to fill some of these gaps, this research will explore how parents respond to a typical scenario in family life with adolescents. Research on parenting has typically explored the early years of childhood, specifically the under five-year age group.

The bulk of research literature on parenting focuses on the deficiencies of families and dysfunctional behaviours of adolescents such as truancy, drug abuse, teen pregnancy suicide with little work done on the exploration of fairly typical parenting situations from the parents point of view. In the literature on parenting parents are typically given advice such as, to communicate more, set boundaries, without any exploration of what it feels like to be a parent or how you resolve your own responses to situation.

In contrast in this research the focus will be on a typical experience in family life, which may carry some tension in the relationship between parent and adolescent, in an attempt to gain greater clarity on the parent's worldview of parenting teenagers.

This research project has arisen from my experiences in adult education teaching human relations courses such as Understanding Anger, Speaking up for Myself, and parenting courses. I have noticed that the topic of messy rooms often emerged spontaneously as an example for discussion and that it was a topic that parents talked about very easily and animatedly. The discourse around messy rooms seems to carry with it real emotional energy. I became curious about the enthusiastic response that this topic generated for parents. I think that by using the 'messy bedroom' as a typical 'normal' aspect of family life that it will provide some insight into the practice of parenting and how parents theorise about their role, and bring to the foreground some of the tensions inherent in the parenting role.

In using one situation addressed by parents I anticipate it may give some insight into the more difficult issues that some parents face in their role as parent. By addressing this 'safe' issue the research may reveal some of the ways parents perceive their role and make parenting decisions.

The phase of parenting adolescents has gained a reputation of being a very difficult time for all involved and most parents' approach it with some trepidation. I hope that in clarifying some elements of the role of parent that this will add to the potential enjoyment of this phase of parenting.

## 1.2. Objectives

This project aims to:

- ◆ contribute to the body of knowledge about parenting teenagers.
- ◆ provide some insight into the practice of parenting and how parents theorise about their role.
- ◆ add to knowledge about family life that may be useful in the current trend to work with families with a strengths rather than deficits based approach.
- ◆ extend knowledge about ordinary experiences in family life.
- ◆ provide a positive experience for the participants.
- ◆ provide a resource for those working with parents and for parents themselves.

## 1.3 Procedures for Recruiting Participants and Obtaining Informed Consent

Flyers posted in local newsletters, supermarket and university campus noticeboards will invite people to volunteer as participants in the study. Participants with children in the 13 to 15 year age group will be sought. Ten 'messy bedroom' situations will be explored. Just one bedroom per family will be focussed on. At least one parent per situation will be interviewed. Where there are two parent households, one or both parents, may choose to participate in the research. If both parents choose to be interviewed they will choose whether to be interviewed separately or together. The researcher may select participants to provide a range of responses from those who state that they are strongly concerned about the issue to those who find it a non-issue. On response to the invitation to become involved in the research the volunteer will then be provided with Interview Information sheet (Appendix I). If they decide to continue as a participant they will be required to sign a consent form (Appendix II).

In order to gain a broader perspective on the issues a group of adolescents (13 – 15 yrs old) will be recruited through a local high school to participate in a focus group. The focus group would meet once for 2 – 3 hours. Once potential participants are identified they will be supplied with a Focus Group Information sheet (Appendix III). Prior to participating in the focus group each participant would be required to sign a consent form.

## 1.4 Procedure in which Research Participants will be involved

Information Sheet and Consent forms will be sent to all potential participants for consideration prior to the commencement of the research interviews and focus group. The information

contained in the Information Sheet and the Consent forms will be fully discussed with participants. When a person agrees to be a part of the research then an appointment will be made with the participant and an interview place arranged. Participants will be asked to provide a fictitious name for themselves.

Interviews will be semi-structured and of no more than two hours duration and will be audiotaped and brief written notes may be taken during the interview. The audiotapes will be transcribed.

In this study qualitative research methodology will be used. In particular the narrative method integrated with dialogic discussion. The use of the dialogic method is to stimulate dialogues between the researcher the participants of the research, in this case parents/adolescents. The researcher is involved in clarifying meaning with the participant. The researcher aims to minimise the power imbalance inherent in researcher/researchee relationship by emphasising and recognising the expertise of the participant.

Information Sheet and Consent forms will be given to all potential adolescent participants for consideration prior to the commencement of the focus group. The focus group will meet for up to two hours and the researcher will have a technical assistant for this phase of the research. The assistant will sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix IV ) The proceedings of the focus group will be audiotaped and notes of the discussion taken. A brainstorming exercise will be used to commence the group. The researcher is an experienced group facilitator and will be responsible for the process of the focus group. Care will be taken to protect individual members of the group.

### **1.5. Procedures for handling information and material produced in the course of the research including raw data and final research report(s)**

Names, places and other distinguishing characteristics will be changed to preserve confidentiality. Original transcripts and tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at Massey University or locked within my home. Following the completion of the thesis, interview tapes and transcripts will be destroyed or returned to the relevant participant if they so request. Research information will be used to fulfil the partial requirements for a Master of Philosophy. The information may potentially be use for subsequent publications by the researcher. No published information will indicate the identity of the participant's. Participants will be provided with a copy of the research report on request. Participants are informed of the right to withdraw from the research at anytime prior to the completion of the final research report

## **2. ETHICAL CONCERNS**

### **2.1 Access to Participants**

No ethical concern is apparent with access issues. Participants will have volunteered to participate. Participants will be able to contact me by email or phone.

Potential participants are under no obligation to take part in the project. The pool of potential participants is large.

## **2.2 Informed Consent**

The participants will be provided with an Information Sheet outlining the research. If they agree to participate their consent will be sought through the signing of a Consent Form. It will be made clear to the participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and ask the researcher any questions about the research and their involvement at any stage.

## **2.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality**

This research is designed to protect the participants and to maintain confidentiality of information they choose to share with the researcher. Participants will be known to the researcher but will be asked to choose a fictitious name for themselves in order to protect their identity. Information that could identify the participant will not be used in any report. Transcripts, and tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet. The transcriber and technical assistant will sign a confidentiality agreement.

## **2.4. Potential Harm to Participants**

As secure procedures are planned for protecting confidentiality there is no expected potential for harm to the participants.

## **2.5. Potential Harm to Researcher(s)**

The proposed research is a small-scale project, which is designed to be completed within a short time frame. An in-depth relationship with the participants will not be pursued. Due to the nature and scope of this piece of research there is little potential for harm to come to the researchers. As a Masters thesis the researcher has two supervisors to guide her as is the accepted practice for research, in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work School.

## **2.6. Potential Harm to the University**

There is no expected harm to the University.

## **2.7. Participant's Right to Decline to Take Part**

Participants are under no obligation to take part in the project and are informed of this in the information letter.

## **2.8 Uses of the Information**

Participants are informed about how the information will be used. No ethical concerns are foreseen here. All interviews will be transcribed and the transcripts will be interpreted using narrative analysis. The research process and findings will be presented and discussed in several papers to academic journals and other publications. The information gathered during the research will be used for a thesis to fulfil the requirements of a Master of Philosophy degree at Massey University.

## **2.9 Conflict of Interest/Conflict of Roles**

The researcher is unaware of any conflict of interest or conflict of roles in this project. My children are mature adults who are well beyond the teenage years. The topic being explored for this project was not an issue of particular concern to me as a parent. I am not engaged in any profitable ventures that could benefit from the research. The funding for this research has come from a neutral agent therefore there is no apparent conflict of interest in the carrying out of this project.

## **2.10 Other Ethical Concerns**

After due reflection no further ethical concerns were identified.

## **3. LEGAL CONCERNS**

Not applicable.

## **4. CULTURAL CONCERNS**

It is not expected that any cultural concerns will be raised during the research. Consideration will be given to New Zealand's cultural diversity, with particular emphasis on cultural values. However, if any cultural issues do arise the whanau group at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work will be approached for advice and/or clarification of issues.

## **5. OTHER ETHICAL BODIES RELEVANT TO THIS RESEARCH**

### **5.1 Ethics Committees.**

Not applicable.

### **5.2 Professional Codes.**

The research will be undertaken in line with the ethical standards of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers.

## THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

### Information Sheet for Parents

Thanks for your initial interest in the research project.

This research is being undertaken by Jenny Jakobs. I am a lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. I currently a lecturer in the Bachelor of Social Work programme, specialising in teaching social and community work skills and in community development. I have had a long term interest in parenting and have been involved in this arena for more than twenty years.

The two supervisors of this project are Professor Robyn Munford and Dr. Mary Nash. They may be contacted at School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North. Phone (04) 8012794. ex 2825and 2827.

I am interested in recruiting parents of a teenager/s of between 13 -15 years of age. I am asking you to assist the research by participating in an interview with me. I am interested in having an interactive discussion with you on the topic of teenagers' messy bedrooms. You may feel strongly or mildly interested in the topic of messy rooms. In fact I think it would be interesting to have a wide range of reactions represented in the study. I will be considering the question of how parents see their role. In the interview I would like to talk with you about how you think, feel and act in response to your teenagers 'messy bedroom'. I look forward to a lively discussion in which ideas are exchanged, considered and reviewed.

I have had many interesting discussions with parents and groups of parents on this subject and now want to explore the subject in a more formal research process. I feel that the role of parenting the adolescent has been given little attention especially in terms of typical family life and that research has tended to focus on severe family problems. I think it is time that more work is done on functional family life rather than dysfunctional family life. The aim of the project is to add to the knowledge about the parental perspective in raising adolescents so parents and those working with parents, and can use this knowledge. I anticipate that this will be a positive experience for you providing the opportunity to reflect on your role as parent and to increase your awareness of how you respond to this one particular example of parenting an adolescent.

The interview will be taped and brief notes may be taken during the interview. The interview will be from 1- 2 hours long. The location of the interview will be negotiated with the participant and could be at their home, or workplace or at Massey University, Wellington.

You will have the opportunity to change, refine or add to your comments at any stage during the interview process.

Once the interviews are completed the themes emerging from the interviews will be analysed and discussed. This information will be presented in a thesis report. It is anticipated that papers will be written on the results of the project, and presentations given at relevant conferences. I envisage at some later date with some additional research publishing a book on parenting.

Ethical approval to carry out this research has been given by the Human Ethics Committee, Massey University. You will be asked to provide a fictitious name for yourself that will be used in the analysis and reporting on the project so that your anonymity is maintained. For confidentiality original transcripts and tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet at Massey and will be seen only by Jenny Jakobs and by a transcriber. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement. You are invited to request a copy of the report summary when the project has been completed.

Please note that participants have these rights: -

- ◆ To decline to participate
- ◆ To refuse to answer any particular question
- ◆ To withdraw from the study at any time
- ◆ To ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- ◆ To provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you have given permission to the researcher
- ◆ To be given access to a summary of findings of the study when it is concluded.

Jenny will contact you within the coming week to discuss your participation and if you agree to participate to make an appointment at a time convenient to you for the interview.

For any further information please contact Jenny at:-

Jenny Jakobs  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
PO Box 756  
Wellington.

Phone (04) 8012794 Ex 6314

Email [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

## THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

### Information Sheet for Teenagers

Thanks for your initial interest in the research project.

This research is being undertaken by Jenny Jakobs. I am a lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. I currently lecture in the Bachelor of Social Work programme, specialising in teaching social and community work skills and in community development. I have had a longterm interest in parenting and have been involved in this arena for more than twenty years.

The two supervisors of this project are Professor Robyn Munford and Dr. Mary Nash. They may be contacted at School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North. Phone (04) 8012794. ex 2825 and 2827.

I am interested in recruiting teenager/s of between 13–15 years of age to form a discussion group. The group would meet once for approximately 2 – 3 hours. I am interested to hear the comments and ideas that teenagers have about the topic of 'messy bedrooms'. I have found that this topic comes up in conversation with parents as a point of tension in the family and I would like to hear how you view this. Is it an issue or a non-issue for teenagers? What do you think concerns parents about messy bedrooms? Or does it? I will also be carrying out interview with parents of adolescents on the same topic. I think it would be interesting to have a wide range of reactions represented in the study.

I look forward to a lively discussion in which ideas are exchanged, considered and reviewed.

I feel that the role of parenting the adolescent has been given little attention especially in terms of typical family life and that research has tended to focus on severe family problems. I think it is time that more work is done on functional family life rather than dysfunctional family life. The aim of the project is to add to the knowledge about the parental perspective in raising adolescents so parents and those working with parents, and can use this knowledge. I anticipate that this will be a positive experience for you.

The discussion will be audiotaped and brief notes may be taken during the interview. The group will meet for about 3 hours..

Ethical approval to carry out this research has been given by the Human Ethics Committee, Massey University. For confidentiality original transcripts and tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet at Massey and will be seen only by Jenny Jakobs and by a transcriber. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

You are invited to request a copy of the report summary when the project has been completed.

Please note that participants have these rights: -

- ◆ To decline to participate
- ◆ To refuse to answer any particular question
- ◆ To withdraw from the study at any time
- ◆ To ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- ◆ To provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you have given permission to the researcher
- ◆ To be given access to a summary of findings of the study when it is concluded.

If you are interested in participating in the focus group please fill in the following form which provides me with contact details so I can phone your parent/guardian to seek approval for your involvement in the project. I will then send them an information sheet also. Thanks for your interest.

Volunteers Name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Just provide the most convenient number*

Home Phone

Work Phone

Mobile

For any further information please contact Jenny at:-

Jenny Jakobs  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Block 7  
Massey University  
PO Box 756  
Wellington.

Phone (04) 8012794 Ex 6314

Email [J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.V.Jakobs@massey.ac.nz)

## Consent Form

### THE 'MESSY BEDROOM' PARENTING PROJECT

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to me satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate and I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. (The information will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project).

I understand that any features or characteristics that could identify me will be removed from the research results.

I understand that I may decline to answer any question at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audiotaped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audiotape to be switched off at any time.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date.

#### **The researcher statement.**

The participant has received a brief explanation of the research, what their participation will involve, and an explanation of how the published results will be used.

Name of Researcher: Jenny Jakobs

Signature of Researcher:

Confidentiality Agreement.

I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the Messy Bedrooms Parenting research project .

During the time that any research data is in my control I will store this in a locked cabinet.

I agree to not discuss any part of this research with anyone except the researcher Jenny Jakobs.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_