

**Miriam Pattie, Anna Žilová, Alena Novotná**

---

**The Factors of Informal Background  
Related to the Youth Value  
Orientation in the USA : part one**

---

Pedagogika Rodziny 3/2, 139-149

---

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Miriam Pattie  
Anna Žilová  
Alena Novotná

## The Factors of Informal Background Related to the Youth Value Orientation in the USA. Part one

**Abstract:** The results of the researches which have been carried out in the conditions of the USA are in the centre of attention. The researches have been focused on the factors of formal background related to the youth value orientation.

**Key-words:** Youth value orientation, youth, values, social background

Within the bounds of the article we are not able to devote our attention to all factors of formal and informal youth background which have affected the process of youth's socialisation in the socio/cultural background in their residence and the residence of their families.

We have chosen those cases which are the most surveyed and considered to be the most significant determinants of the socialisation of the adolescents, i.e. family, school, mass media, religion, and a semi/formal factor of ethics and morality.

### Family

*Twenty-five percent of the people polled in a recent national inquiry into American morality said that for \$10 million they would abandon their entire family; a large number of people are evidently willing to do the same thing for free. [Coonz]*

Selfishness of parents reflects a growing trend of parents placing their own needs ahead of those of their own child. Obviously, there are many solid, supportive parents and families in American society. Their children are the strongest and healthiest adolescents and are able to find relatively stable path through solving

any problems.

The concept of the family has undergone an intense and disputable change. The opinion offering the concept of homosexual partners has been changed. Some parents support the idea that lesbians and gay men should have the right to raise children from birth and that therefore the more traditional understanding of the family (one man, one woman, their children) was an oppressive social construct that needed to be dismantled. The data regarding the influence of parents on child and adolescent development reveals that the most place of safety for a young person is a supportive dual/partner setting. [Richardson, Mc Cabe 2001, pp. 467-489] Children need that kind of environment where the adolescent process is provided by a family with a rationally committed father and loving mother and a home that is a place of safety and security and where, even during conflicts and rocky circumstances, an adolescent knows that he or she is unconditionally accepted and loved. The observations confirmed that the mid-adolescent students who struggled many pitfalls during their development, e.g. self-concept, sexual behaviour, substance abuse, etc. came from a less than a safe and supportive family environment. For example, mid-adolescents known as sexually “loose” often come from families in which the father is not present. Those who had learned to use their bodies to find comfort and connection through sexual play were trying to prove to themselves and to the world that they were worthy of love. Most adolescents came to the conclusion that they desperately long for affection they could not receive at home. The effects have not been limited to external behaviours such as sexuality, substance abuse, or partying. They also have related to attitudes, confidence, and almost every other aspect of personal life.

There is no longer a standard definition of family. Families today can take many forms – single parent, shared custody, adoptive, blended, foster, traditional dual parent family. [Solarz, 2002, p. 25] Here are some of the ways the word *family* was used among students:

- *Geri lived with her little sister and mother and her mother's latest boyfriend in his house with his three children. Her family was her mother, sister, and the boyfriend (but not his children).*
- *The man Kim calls Dad is actually her mother's former boyfriend. Kim never met her real dad, and she refers to the man she now lives with, her legal stepfather, by his first name. She says she does not have a family.*
- *Kara lives with her mother, older sister (occasionally her boyfriend lives with them), and the grandfather of one of her closest friends. The word family is used only to talk about her mother's family, meaning Kara's maternal grandparents, aunts, and uncles.*
- *Greg, the youngest child of a twice divorcée, lives next door to his mother's boyfriend of ten or so years, and his mum forces him to call this man Dad. His mother refers to both households, his immediate family (his mother and himself) and the family next*

*door, as “their family”, but this usually happens only during holidays when some of them gather for “family holidays”.*

- *Sam lives with two mums and has never had a dad. His two mums are his family.*

The concept of family is fluid for the developing of mid-adolescent. The family is the primary source for the relational and emotional stability necessary for healthy development. What happens in the family of mid-adolescent spills over and affects every person who comes in contact with this adolescent. The changing definition of family does not simply affect the adolescent. It affects the entire society.

*What I have to say about being a high schoolchild may seem confusing or contradictory. But then again, what about high school isn't confusing and contradictory at times? First of all, I almost agree with parents when they say their teen “knows everything”. I often feel like I know more than my mom and her not letting me do something is ridiculous. Teens reach a point when they will disregard what their parents say and will do what they want to do. Parents try to protect us because they think we are too young to make big decision on our own. I firmly believe that you have to make your own decisions about things and learn from your own experiences to ever truly learn and grow. There's no way that I would feel the way I do about smoking, drinking, dating, and other relationships if it hadn't been for my own experiences. Now, I know I just said how I believe I know a lot, but there is so much I don't know. Lately, I've realized how very much of a child I am. I have so much to learn so much desire for consistency, and a great need for a happy, secure place I can call my home. I am not a child; I am much younger than that. So yes, this does contradict my frustration when I am spoken to as though I'm a child. This may not make much sense to you, but it doesn't even always make sense to me.*

*high school student*

The parents seem to be fragmented. The time they need to keep their lives in order affects their ability to be there for their children. There are many healthy and involved parents, but there are many stressed-out and stretched-thin parents. These uninvolved, disengaged, and self-focused parents had pushed their children into a world they were not prepared to handle. Many adolescents, even those from involved and nurturing homes, may take advantage of the freedom and lack of rules. Familial environment contributes to delinquency in all its forms. [Matherne and Thomas, p. 663] Another observation is the intensity and amount of conflicts between parents and their children can influence the development of adolescents. Conflicts with parents are almost a daily concern for majority of students. These conflicts can be divided into two categories: the nagging skirmishes that seem to take place on a daily basis (day to day matters such as clothes, homework, use of the computer, the shape of one's room, and a basic lack of communication) and arguments over important issues (conflict based on parental concern regarding some things that might affect the child's future, such as driving habits, substance abuse, grades, dating, and friendships). [Solarz 2002, p. 26]

Some students suggested that conflicts between adolescents and their parents are almost always about trust. The majority of conflicts seem to be about the dynamics of the relationship rather than a particular issue. What matters most in the life of adolescents is how their parents deal with a growing adolescent rather than in a specific issue. But parents are not so resilient. Even simple conflicts can push their buttons and drive a wedge in the relationship with their children. Or parents respond by backing down to avoid the conflict and becoming relationally disengaged. Regular misunderstandings may cause a distant relationship between parents and adolescents. Students rated not having enough time together with their parents as one of their top problems.

Peers have more influence on adolescents than family and parents do. [Regrenus 2002, pp. 681-706] Teens have a desire to find safe and satisfactory relationships at home. They actually desire the approval of the family system for the way they live and the choices they make. If parents want to provide such a home they have to understand the world of adolescents, love them and learn them to recognise the secure boundaries of their actions. Parents need to realize that adolescence lasts up to fifteen or more years. They need to build a relationship in which their child trusts them and this is more important than whether they trust their child. Teenagers need room to develop into who they re going to be. This does not mean any separation from the community that they believe will always be there for them. The peer cluster is important. At the same time, most adolescents recognize that this peer system is fraught with performance and conformity demands, making it a less than ideal place. Even the most independent adolescent needs to know that the family is a safe place. Parents must provide a safe, warm environment, and flexible and reasonable boundaries of social behaviour. This is the only way their children become stronger, healthier, interdependent adults.

### **School**

Being a teacher is limited by one's personality, a professional preparation, practice, and also by external conditions such as peace of mind, school equipment, social working environment, etc. Being an outstanding teacher is a gift. Most teachers are overwhelmed with the demands of their job, fed up with the constant criticism (mostly from parents) and discouraged by students who are not interested in anything. Secondary school education is a tough calling. It demands flexibility, openness, retooling, a kind of temperament and psychological health to be able to handle students, parental and administrative critique as well as the lack of motivation and even disrespect of adolescents. To many contemporary students school is anything but one continuous adventure. School-based influences play a role in the healthy development of children and adolescents and in the attitudes and behaviours of students.

According to the attitudes and behaviours of teachers there are three basic issu-

es that can directly impact the lives and development of most mid-adolescents:

- 1) Most teachers believe that learning for its own sake should be enough to motivate students. Teachers who are passionate about their subject are more effective teachers. To mid-adolescents, however, the only pleasurable experiences are those that bring instant and immediately recognizable benefits. Overwhelming majority of students, even those who were deemed smart by their teachers, could not find anything pleasurable about the academic element of the secondary school experience.
- 2) Far too many teachers pigeonhole students to the detriment of their developmental health and progress. They do not take other qualities in consideration. Then the assessment is not fair. For many teachers the litmus test of a “good” young person is how much respect the student shows the teachers.
- 3) Teachers feel overburdened and overwhelmed, and the consequences of this spill over into their teaching. The role of teachers today is more about the developmental trajectory of adolescents than about the observable or measurable behaviour or academic achievement of a student at any particular time.

Teachers expect more involvement from parents. But in some events parents who show much interest in working with teachers may be seen as threat. The parent – teacher relationship is complex. Teachers are often apprehensive towards parents. This fear can communicate to a parent that the teacher is not interested in parent’s perspective. Most parents are concerned about their children’s education, but for many it is not the highest priority. Influenced by the Internet and media, they have to worry about their children’s sexual behaviour, substance use, abuse. A teacher never knows anything about the dynamics of the family system of the student, his or her friendships, internal struggles, how other adults perceive him or her as he or she lives in the multiple layers created by postmodern society. All too often a teacher makes a snap judgement about a student, and the student and parents are forced to live under that label until the end of the semester.

From the students’ point of view, their approaches to school and academic performances four areas can be recognized:

- 1) *Attitudes towards teachers and the respect they deserve.* This group of students studies seriously; to get to top schools they need A grades. They believe that respect is something to be earned, not granted. Some of them actually enter the classroom prepared not to respect a teacher unless that teacher wins their respect.
- 2) *The motivation behind academic achievement.* Mid-adolescents are not prepared to recognize that education is a gift not only for them but also for society at large. They do only necessary things to get the grades. Most maintain grades and relatively stable relationships with teachers because it suits their idea of how best to survive secondary school.

- 
- 3) *The prevalence and morality of cheating.* Cheating is so widespread at secondary schools that it is considered by many to be a norm. Many simply do what is necessary to fulfil the expectations of the role they are playing. Cheating is rarely considered a moral problem, but when it is, a student is also never seen as the culprit. He or she is an unfortunate victim who had no other option. As for the adolescent cheating is acceptable and even relatively moral option for the student who needs to perform. The most frequent reason given by students for cheating is injustice of teachers. They do not matter they cheat. They are outraged because somebody cheated off them. Denis Clark Pope points out that successful students learned to devise various strategies to stay ahead of their peers and to please those in power position. Unsuccessful students, for a variety of reasons, were not as adepts at playing the survival game. [Pope 2001, p. 150]
- 4) *The high level of anxiety that the competitive environment of the classroom can produce.* Some students have, for whatever reason, made the decision to compete with others and to do as well in school as possible. For some of them it is good grades, for others it is taking the SAT as early as the eighth grade. Another group of students is trying to maintain only A or A-average to be accepted into the school they or their parents want. What adds to the stress level of these students is a lot of homework, voluntary work in communities, circles, and extracurricular activities. These students are often exhausted, hurried, and frazzled.

The school has often been described as a place where students feel anonymous and powerless. Adolescents must learn how to behave properly in various situations to achieve the kind of support they ultimately need to become successful adults. [Pope 2001, p. 150] Actually they are learning how to beat the system. Those who lag behind academically usually fall into the category of “average” or “unsuccessful”. Each young person has a unique potential and needs and deserves a deliberate, proactive, and nurturing school environment. Each adolescent needs individual attention in every aspect of his or her life, including education.

### **Mass Media**

Mass media and media technology have passed a long process during its development. We can observe different perceptiveness of values and media in the past and today. Before introducing the Internet and mobile phones people could get new information mostly from newspapers, radio and television. Currently, the computer and the Internet have become common things. They present the source of countless amount of information from all over the world.

Vrabec [2003, p. 3] has identified the development of media and their influence on adolescents' value orientation. Mass media and media communication are a significant source of experience and knowledge for a large number of recipients.

These days are saturated with many impulses rushing from all sorts of printed or electronic media. The influence of mass media is evident. They have become an important tool of socialisation and have formed our attitudes, opinions, judgements, and evaluations. Young people belong to active users of all kinds of media technologies. On the other hand, young people are also the most attractive target group of media industry. They have become the primary group for computer game sellers, advertisement creators, TV programmes, teenage magazines, radio channels, and new media working in the milieu of the Internet. Majority of young people consider media to be an integral part of their lives and it gets more and more difficult to face this pressure. Lack of information is not the main problem of young people in this global society. They can get any information from various sources, of various quality and formats. The ability to look up any necessary information has become the key skill which enables adolescents to integrate into social, study and work life, to communicate with peers and adults effectively, to find opportunities for their personal development, to be emphatic and respect cultural variety, human rights, etc. To be successful, young people cannot find themselves in the position of passive users of media and accept sophisticated marketing strategy related to media production automatically.

However, mass media can communicate negative thoughts and media contents of poor quality. Parents play an important role in teaching their children how to judge the quality of broadcast contents and select them. Children have to learn to identify valuable media contents and their positive influence on their growth. They also must be able to recognise harmful influence on their personality and eliminate it. That is why parents are responsible for delimiting and mediating the measuring criteria which children will be able to use in the interaction with media contents. Strong family values help to demarcate these criteria which can be consequently applied by children when judging the values of media contents.

### **Ethics and Morality**

*The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches and even religious educators have not been able to stem the tide. The scary thing is that so many kids are entering the workforce to become corporate executives, politicians, airplane mechanics and nuclear inspectors with the dispositions and skills of cheaters and thieves. [Josephson 2002]*

Ethics and morality are two things which are rapidly changing in adolescence. Adolescents believe that ethics is irrelevant in the light of unavoidable death. They are too preoccupied with the pleasure of immediate because they have a driving commitment to create for themselves a world that makes life easier and more satisfying.

*When I got to high school, I was ready to experience things. I tried weed and got pretty into it. It felt like a getaway. I began to drink and smoke as well. I lied to my parents almost every time I left the house. When I went to see my family,*



---

*I would put on a big front. I felt so bad about it but would always try to give myself  
a reason why it was okay.  
high school student*

The ethical system of adolescents is limited to those primary ethical issues that affect mid-adolescents' abilities to feel safe, protected, and fulfilled. They can see the acceptance of disposing ethics and morals if it serves a need. They see it OK to do what you want to do as long as you meet your personal requirements. Mid-adolescents have grown up in a world in which adults say one thing and do another. The young have learned how little selfless ethical standards mean.

Two issues as examples of how adolescents view their standards of ethics differently than adults are lying and cheating. They do represent a sustained, regular and even daily rejection on the ethical definitions of the adults who raised and trained them. When it comes to adolescent ethics, issues such as sexuality, alcohol, drugs, justice, racism, etc. are viewed through similar lens. Moral development refers to the development of a sense of values and ethical behaviour. Adolescents' cognitive development, in part, lays the groundwork for moral reasoning, honesty, and pro-social behaviours such as helping, volunteerism, or caring for others. [Solarz 2002, p. 11] Mid-adolescents believe they must be in a constant mode of self-protection. A strong survivalist mentality exists under this surface and affects their ability to move toward more advanced stages of development, especially moral development.

Lying and cheating has become a natural reflex of daily living. Pervasive and unchecked lying has become a central reality to almost every adolescent. Girls lie more to parents about sex and more often to their dads than do boys; boys lie more often than girls to their mums. They are both highly successful in their lying – only 5 percent say they were often caught. Mid-adolescents reshaped the idea of lying to the point where a justified deception, including an outright, bald-faced lie, is not actually lying. These same students also believe that they are highly moral, ethical and honest people! One student said: "I lie because I have never truly found a person to be honest with. Most likely I lie because I find it likely that any feelings that I can convey to that person would eventually come back to haunt me, whether my parents, or even my friends, school, or church. I just can't trust anybody, so I need to protect myself. If I have to lie now and then to do that, so be it." It remains unknown whether the perceived need to lie is based on a fear of shame within the peer groups, or it is simply an example of the limitations of the cognitive abilities and developmental reality of mid-adolescents. [Lashbrook 2000, p 747-757]

Some people believe that cheating have become an epidemic widespread among secondary school and college students. Students have a number of rationalities and reasons for cheating [Mc Cabe 1999, pp. 681-687] and mid-adolescents tend to blame their cheating on parents, teachers, the school itself, or even society.

[Anderrmann 1998, pp. 84-93] The definition of cheating varies from situation to situation. If a teacher was well liked and was seen as an honest, respectful and fair person, then most students would self-police their own against too much cheating in that class. In another situation, when a student who was relatively respected felt that he or she had the right to cheat for one reason or another, it is up to the class to protect and defend that student's choice. Gerald L. Zelizer was chastened by this student's opinion: "Don't you know, rabbi, cheating is pretty much the norm in high school? Besides, most of the teachers don't really care." [Zeliger 2001]

*I know students cheat, or most of them, but I don't think I can do much about it. If I started pushing too hard, I would get in real hot water with parents. Parents are so clueless. They think, "My Johnny would never cheat. It had to be some other kid who set him up." I am sick of the whole thing, and I have learned that the best way to handle most of the small stuff is just to look the other way.*

*high school teacher*

A system of ethics is operating in the world of adolescents. Unfortunately, it is filled with inconsistency, self-centred justice, and relativistic ethical opportunism. If adults commit to train the young to care for others instead of just themselves and reinforce this view with commitment to integrity and honesty, then we have the best chance of influencing their moral development in a positive way.

## Religion

America is the country of many religions and teenagers express their attitude to religion in various ways. The parent-child relationships influence the formation of concepts of God. Children attend church schools or religious after-school activities. Some religions have adopted distinctive features of youth culture to get closer to young people. Therefore, it is not unusual to see a Christian rock band, Muslim rappers or church ceremonies focused on young people.

*I express my belief in everyday situations. I am trying to be an example for others and act in harmony with my strong virtues. Attending a catholic school has had a great impact on the way of expressing my faith and helped me solve all problems at school. My faith has formed my attitudes and has become an important part of my life. [Boyle]*

*People must learn spiritually where they come from, how they got here, where they are going. Americans are lucky because of religious freedom. I grew up in a strong and loyal Christian family. During adolescence, I have not excessively changed the values, which were impressed on me by my parents in my childhood. My best friend has also had strong religious faith and it makes us inseparable. If people know you are able to command your values they do not force you to do what you rather do not want to do. [Voigtlander]*

*My behaviour has strongly been influenced by my faith. Being a Jewish girl made me seek and find the significance in the Old Testament not only to accept common views on things that people find unchangeable. Children are too influenced by faith because they had accepted it in their childhood and they do not mind if things are changing or not. Even in America, where many religious stereotypes are we discuss the matters of faith. We learn from each other and we can find out that these stereotypes are really true. [Holden]*

### Conclusion

Teenagers face many challenges on their way to adulthood. Most American teenagers are able to stand up to pitfalls and cope with this pressure. Their desire to become independent and break off their parents is often followed by signs of contrition. Mass media usually exaggerate the problem and make it a sensation but we must confirm that the problem has existed and its consequences might be destructive. Teenagers' willingness to try new things and test their limits might make their behaviour risky. According to the US government statistics (2003) 30.5% from 12-17 aged teenagers said that they had tried illegal drugs at least once with marijuana on the first place. Teenagers who had tried premature sexual intercourse were afraid of pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other venereal diseases. Therefore many non-government organisations have been established to help parent, schools, religious congregations and courts to solve these problems.

### Bibliography

- Andermann, E.M.: Motivation and Cheating During the Early Adolescence, *Journal of Educational Psychology* 90, 1998, p 84-93
- Boyle, M.: 16, Saint Mary's Ryken, Leonardtown, Maryland, <http://www.smrhs.org>
- Coonz, S.: *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*
- Hplden, C.: !\$, West Springfield High School, Springfield, Virginia, <http://fcps.edu/westspringfieldhs>
- Josephson, M: Josephson Institute of Ethics, [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org) (October 24, 2002)
- Lashbrook, J.: Fitting In: Exploring the Emotional Dimension of Adolescent Peer Pressure, *Adolescence* 35, 2000, p 747-757
- Matherne and Thomas: *Family Environment*, p 663
- Mc Cabe, .L.: *Academic Dishonesty Among High School Students*, *Adolescence* 34, 1999, p 681-687
- Pope, D.C.: *Doing School: How we are creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, p 150

---

Regrenus, M.D.: *Friends' Influence on Adolescent Theft and Minor Delinquency: A Developmental Test of Peer: Report de Effects*. Social Science Research 13, No 4, 2002, p 681-706

Richardson, S.: Mc Cabe M.P.: *Parental Divorce During Adolescence and Adjustment in Early Adulthood*, Adolescence 36, 201, p 467/489

Solarz, A.: *American Psychological Association Healthy Adolescent Project: Adolescent Development Project*, Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2002, p 25

Voigtlander, A.: !\*, Centennial High School, Lino Lakes, Minnesota, <http://www.cenennial.kl.2.mn.u./chs>

Zelizer, G.L.: USA Today, November 20, 2002,21A