

## Taking it out on their parents (or vice versa)

It isn't easy being an adolescent. But a new video may heighten self-awareness in the young (and their parents) and lessen the ordeal of growing up. Clare Thomson talks to the psychologist who created the film

"Parents are nose. They never stop asking questions. They're always nagging." Such are the comments adolescents make about their hapless parents in *Au Fil des Relations*, a documentary video first shown last month at the Espace Delvaux in Watermael-Boitsfort.

A French-language co-production from the Brussels Video Centre, the research and training centre for child care called Fraje; Question Santé, and the child abuse prevention group Respect, the video is the second in a series about parent-child relationships.

"People need so much energy to become parents," says Monique Meyfroet, a Belgian child psychologist and therapist who put the film together with director Jacques Borzykowski. "They try hard and many are so involved that they find it impossible to stand back."

All too often, as the child reaches adolescence, the atmosphere at home becomes stifling. Parents think there is something wrong with their children. The children think there is something wrong with their parents. And neither side gives way.

*Au Fil des Relations*, a patchwork of interviews with ordinary, not especially eloquent or analytical people, is designed to be straightforward and accessible in order to gain as wide an audience as possible. "The sincerity and honesty is one of the best things about it," says

Meyfroet who hopes it will help parents, children and would-be parents to avoid some of the problems that arise with adolescence.

"Young people need reassurance and trust from their parents," she insists. "Without this they may find it difficult to develop their self-esteem and become extremely anxious as a result." The video suggests that an adolescent can be seriously unbalanced by inconsistency or uncertainty in his or her parents' approach.

"I had to give myself limits because my mother didn't make things clear," says one 18-year-old looking back on this rocky period. "If she was angry because I came home late, she would launch into a great tirade and say my room was a mess and so on, all in one breath. The first reproach was OK, but then she'd go too far." Feeling unreasonably provoked, he in turn became increasingly unruly.

"Adolescents know they have to become independent - it's one of their goals," says Meyfroet. "The closer they are to their parents, the more distance they then want to create. It's not so much that they're rebelling against their parents as against their past selves. When they become provocative their parents have to try and be consistent. It's

one of the toughest things for them to do because adolescents have a talent for finding their weak spots. It may look aggressive, but all they really want to do is get their parents to change their attitudes."

The video dwells on school failure, something which often occurs during this period. "If there is a problem at home, children are not really free to work well at school," explains Meyfroet. "Doing badly is also one of the obvious ways to get back at parents who are usually so desperate for you to do well. They worry so much about their own role, and about their children's performance that it drives adolescents mad. The adolescents lose self-confidence and then they lose interest in school work. They go around saying, 'I'm dumb, I'm a nobody.'"

One of the most surprising things about the video, also for those who worked on it, is not so much the criticisms adolescents make, but the extent to which they go out of their way to protect their parents when they are not there. "We don't have a right to criticize them," says one teenager whose parents are divorced. "After all, they try to do everything they can for us."

Equally moving in the film is the sincerity with which parents admit that

they have made mistakes. One penitent Moroccan father, who used to hit his son for not doing well at school and confiscate his pocket money, confesses that this was a dead-end policy, even though it was the one he himself had experienced in childhood. Eventually, he realized that the relationship could only improve if he showed his son that he did, after all, trust him.

Meyfroet hopes health professionals, educationalists and social workers may find the video useful, as well as the accompanying information booklet that can be used to encourage discussion. The film ends with the touchy issue of leaving home.

"I want to be freer, but it seems they don't want this because they are afraid that I'll leave," says one adolescent, describing his sense of suffocation. "But their reaction makes me want to leave because they are too protective. It makes me think, if they don't have faith in me, why should I have faith in myself?"

One of the main messages that comes across for parents is the need to find a balance between convincing their offspring that emotional support is always there while creating a sense of space and respect. Communication breakdowns abound. "No, we didn't talk about it," is one of the most familiar comments interviewees make when discussing family tensions.

"It's not easy talking about such things at home," admits Meyfroet, who believes the video may encourage at least some families to communicate better. "If I talked about a problem, I would be afraid of what it might be like at home afterwards," says another interviewed teenager, reluctant to open up. That, no doubt, is a fear that many viewers will identify with.

Finding people who were willing to be filmed and discuss family problems was the hardest aspect of making the video. "We felt it was very important to respect the wishes of both sides. For example, if the children accepted but the parents refused, we didn't push them," says Meyfroet. Indeed, a key word throughout *Au Fil des Relations* is respect.

For further information, contact the Centre Vidéo de Bruxelles, telephone 216.80.39; Fraje, 643.03.12; Question Santé, 512.41.74, or Respect, 521.78.08.



Unruly adolescents have a natural talent for finding their parents' weak spots

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