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Trajectories of Perceived Support in Mother-Adolescent Relationships: The Poor (Quality) Get Poorer

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This investigation examines the rate of decline across the early adolescent years in perceived support from mothers, to determine whether the rate of change differs as a function of the initial amount of perceived negativity in the mother-child relationship. Diminished closeness between mothers and children is a hallmark of the early adolescent years. Longitudinal studies reveal declines across early adolescence in perceived warmth. The question remains, do all families experience similar changes in relationship quality? Participants included 313 students from public middle schools. Adolescents completed a 33-item Network of Relationships inventory in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Mothers completed a similar instrument at the outset of the study. The initial level of perceived negativity was associated with the initial level of perceived support; higher levels of one were associated with lower levels of the other. Perceived support decreased over time and perceived negativity increased. Child reported and mother-reported perceived negativity at age 11 predicted the rate of change in child-reported perceived support from ages 11 to 13. Greater initial levels of perceived negativity were linked to increasingly steep declines in perceived support. Put simply, poor quality relationships got poorer. Interaction patterns during the adolescent years must accommodate the adolescent's emerging need for individuation and autonomy. Most families adapt to the demands of early adolescence with minimal disruption to family bonds, but mothers and children with a history of relationship difficulties are ill-suited to the task of establishing new forms of closeness during these years.