More Teens Say They Like Their Parents

By LISA BELKIN

Good news for parents. Your teenagers like you!

Or, they do if you live in Canada.

The latest chapter in a decades-long study of Canadian children finds that today’s teens have stronger ties to their parents, “than any teen cohort in the past 30 years.”

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge, has been working on Project Teen Canada since 1984, asking similar questions of teenagers every eight years. The results of his most recent survey, of 5,500 teenagers, can be found in his new book, “The Emerging Millennials: How Canada’s Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice.”

The portrait he paints is one of relative respect and calm. Nine out of 10 teens describe their mothers as having a high level of influence in their lives, he reports, while 8 in 10 say the same of their fathers. Similarly, today’s teens seem to squabble less with their parents: 52 percent reported weekly arguments in 1992, but only 42 percent do today. And while 58 percent in the 1992 survey said they felt misunderstood by their parents, only 39 percent said the same when asked in 2008.

It follows from all this that teens are enjoying spending time with their parents more than they used to. Eighty percent reported “receiving high levels of enjoyment” from their moms (up from 70 percent in the 1992 and 2000 surveys) while 75 percent said the same about their dads (after having dipped below 65 percent in 1992 and 2000).

Why the change? Bibby thinks it’s because today’s parents are doing a better job. “Younger Boomer and post-Boomer parents of teens are doing much better than their older Boomer counterparts of balancing careers and family life,” he said during an e-mail interview. “Simply put, relational enjoyment requires focusing and focusing takes time. My deduction is that parents, collectively, are doing a much better job of taking time to focus on their teenagers. The result is more enjoyment, more influence, less stress.”
The major economic shift of the past 40 years, he says, is the increase in the percentage of women employed outside the home, to 60 percent in 2000 from 30 percent in 1960. The fallout from that change took parents by surprise, and took a while for families to figure out.

“Those of us who were older Boomers were pretty naïve about it all,” he wrote. “We assumed we could do it all and have it all. We were wrong. The older Boomer cohort experienced the highest level of divorce of any generation in Canadian – and, I gather, North American – history. What’s more, while parents felt they were doing a pretty good job of balancing careers and family, their daughters and sons were not as quick to agree. ‘Quality time’ became a euphemism for ‘too little time.”

But now, he continued, “those same Boomer offspring are emerging as the parents of their own teenagers,” and have “learned a lot from their own experiences about the necessity of doing a better job of combining careers and family life. We see these aspirations in our adult surveys; we see the results, I believe, in our youth surveys.”

Maybe. Or maybe today’s parents are pushovers who give into their children’s every whim. That was the suggestion made by reporter Misty Harris when she wrote about Bibby’s latest work in the Vancouver Sun yesterday.

Harris interviewed Don Procyk, a father in Calgary, who works as a private investigator and who takes pride in his close relationship with his teen sons. He says it is a result of the fact that he simply pays more attention than his own parents did.

His 14-year-old son Alex, on the other hand, while agreeing that he was a good kid with a good father, hinted that others his age were happy with their parents for different reasons. “Their parents let them do whatever they want,” Harris quotes the boy as saying. “They’ll buy them seven pairs of jeans, let them stay out all night without a care for what they’re doing, (and) they don’t pay attention.”

Whatever the reason, Bibby believes — but can not conclude with scientific certainty, because he knows of no parallel research — that results are likely the same in the U.S. as in Canada.

Do you see improvement in the relationships between parents and teens lately? And is it because today’s parents are really onto something? If so, what is it that we’ve learned?