



Secrets from friends and parents: Longitudinal links with depression and antisocial behavior



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Secrecy
Friendship
Parenting
Depression
Antisocial behavior

Keeping secrets from parents is associated with depression and antisocial behavior. The current study tested whether keeping secrets from best friends is similarly linked to maladjustment, and whether associations between secrecy and maladjustment are moderated by the quality of the friendship. Adolescents ($N = 181$; 51% female, 48% white, non-Hispanic, 45% African American) reported their secrecy from parents and best friends, the quality of their parent–adolescent relationships and best friendships, and their depression and antisocial behavior at ages 12 and 13. Keeping more secrets from best friends was associated with more depression, but not with more antisocial behavior, when controlling for earlier adjustment, secrecy from parents, and the quality of the friendship. For girls associations between maladjustment and secrecy were conditioned by the quality of the relationships and whether secrets were kept from parents and friends. Discussion argues for expanding the study of secrecy in adolescence beyond the parent–child dyad. © 2013 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keeping secrets is typically expected to be harmful for the secret-keeper (see Finkenauer, Engles, & Meeus, 2002). Although no one is expected to share everything about their lives with everyone they meet, keeping secrets in close supportive relationships may be particularly problematic. In adolescence, parent–child relationship and friendships are often close supportive relationships (e.g., de Goede, Branje, Delsing, & Meeus, 2009), yet adolescents are known to keep secrets from both parents and friends (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2002; Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013; Merten, 1999). Keeping secrets from parents predicts greater depression and antisocial behavior problems (Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005; Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Meeus, & Finkenauer, 2010; Laird & Marrero, 2010), but it is unknown whether keeping secrets from best friends also predicts maladjustment. The purpose of the current study was to determine whether keeping secrets from best friends is associated concurrently and longitudinally with depression and antisocial behavior.

In contrast to non-disclosure, which may be a passive failure to share information with another (see Bumpus & Hill, 2008), secret-keeping requires the active withholding of information from another person (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). As such, keeping secrets may be difficult and stressful and secret-keeping is thought to increase the likelihood of experiencing stress-related or other psychological problems (Pennebaker, 1989, 1997). Although some researchers postulate that withholding secrets from parents may promote a sense of autonomy for the adolescent and be a part of their healthy development (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2002), the majority of research has emphasized the negative aspects of keeping secrets from parents. Keeping secrets from parents during adolescence is associated with more depression, antisocial behavior, and loneliness (Finkenauer et al., 2002; Frijns et al., 2005; Keijsers et al., 2010; Laird & Marrero, 2010). Although studies have shown that

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adolescents do keep secrets from their friends (Merten, 1999; see also Dolgin & Kim, 1994), and that having a secret not shared with anyone predicts psychosocial problems that are relieved when the secret is shared (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009; Frijns et al., 2013), we are not aware of any studies that have directly tested whether keeping secrets from best friends is associated with maladjustment. Generalizing from previous studies documenting links between secrecy and maladjustment, adolescents who report keeping more secrets from their best friends are expected to experience more depression and antisocial behavior problems than adolescents who keep fewer secrets from their best friends.

Keeping secrets from parents and best friends

Keeping secrets from parents and best friends may be linked to negative psychosocial outcomes through several different processes and each process suggests a unique pattern of multivariate associations linking secrecy and outcomes. Keeping secrets from parents and friends may severely restrict adolescents' access to instrumental and emotional support (e.g., Frijns et al., 2005), particularly in reference to the topic kept secret. To the extent that secret-keeping is linked to negative outcomes through the inability to access social support, secrecy from parents and secrecy from best friends are likely to have unique additive or interactive effects on depression and antisocial behavior. Specifically, if parents and best friends are independent sources of social support, secrecy from parents and secrecy from best friends may be additive in their associations with psychosocial outcomes. However, if parents and best friends can serve as independent sources of social support (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000), such that an adolescent who does not have access to support through one relationship can rely instead on the other relationship for support, secrecy from parents and secrecy from best friends may interact to predict psychosocial outcomes such that poor outcomes will only occur when adolescents keep secrets from both parents and best friends.

Secret-keeping also may be an indicator of a dispositional tendency to keep secrets (see Larson & Chastain, 1990) or of difficulty trusting others. To the extent that keeping secrets from parents and friends originates in an adolescent's tendency to be secretive or distrustful of others, secrecy from parents and secrecy from friends are likely to have redundant effects, such that secrecy from friends should not be uniquely associated with depression and antisocial behavior after controlling for secrecy from parents (and vice-versa).

Finally, keeping secrets may be an indicator of involvement in undesirable behavior that the adolescent wishes to hide from parents or friends (Bakken & Brown, 2010; Smetana, Villalobos, Rogge, & Taspoulos-Chan, 2010). However, it is likely that the nature of the behaviors that an adolescent wishes to hide from parents may differ substantially from the nature of the behaviors that an adolescent wishes to hide from a best friend. For example, behaviors or interests that may expose one to social ridicule may be more likely to be kept secret from friends than from parents. In contrast, involvement in common forms of adolescent misbehavior, such as smoking or drinking alcohol, may be kept secret from parents but not from best friends. To the extent that secrecy is used to hide misbehavior, secrecy from parents but not from best friends may be associated with maladjustment.

Secrecy and relationship quality

An adolescent's decision to keep a secret from an individual is likely influenced by the quality of the relationship with the individual. Adolescents, and adolescent girls in particular (Keijsers et al., 2010), experiencing lower quality parent–child relationships are more likely to keep secrets from their parents than adolescents experiencing higher quality parent–child relationships (Laird & Marrero, 2010; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). It is also likely that adolescents with lower quality friendships are more likely to keep secrets from their best friends (Dolgin & Kim, 1994; Merten, 1999). To the extent that secret-keeping is a reflection of the quality of the relationship, keeping secrets from parents and best friends may not be associated with negative psychosocial outcomes when controlling for the quality of the parent–child relationship or friendship. However, it is also possible that secrecy is a more proximal contributor to negative psychosocial outcomes than relationship quality and that secrecy accounts for the link between relationship quality and the outcomes. Furthermore, it is possible that the links between secret-keeping and outcomes are moderated by relationship quality. For example, in the context of a high quality relationship, secrecy may be more strongly associated with negative outcomes because the secret-keeper experiences additional stress from keeping the secret, or, in contrast, secrecy may be less strongly associated with negative outcomes because the high quality relationship compensates for the effect of keeping the secret.

In summary, the purpose of the current study was to test secrecy from best friends as a concurrent and longitudinal predictor of depression and antisocial behavior problems during early adolescence. Analyses tested whether keeping secrets from parents and best friends were redundant, additive, or interactive predictors of depression and antisocial behavior. For both secrets from parents and secrets from best friends, analyses tested whether keeping secrets was a unique predictor after controlling for relationship quality and also tested whether keeping secrets interacted with relationship quality to predict depression and antisocial behavior. Because previous studies have documented sex differences in secret-keeping (e.g., Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009), psychosocial outcomes, or in the links between secret-keeping and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Keijsers et al., 2010), analyses controlled for sex and tested sex as a moderator of all associations.

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